



Kurikinton (mashed chestnut) in its distinctive chestnut shape
Photo: Courtesy of kawakamiya

Nakatsugawa's Chestnut Confectioneries



Nakatsugawa chestnuts
Photo: Courtesy of Nakatsugawa Tourism Association

Chestnuts are a representative taste of autumn in Japan. The nuts grow naturally or are cultivated in many parts of Japan, but Nakatsugawa City in Gifu Prefecture is especially famous for its chestnuts and for the *kurikinton* chestnut confectioneries first made there.

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IN Japan there is the expression “good appetite autumn.” In autumn, various foods such as nuts, mushrooms, fatty fish, vegetables, and fruits whet our appetites.

One of the most popular autumn foods are chestnuts, or *kuri* in Japanese. There is a dish called “chestnut rice” in which boiled chestnuts are cooked together with rice, but most popular are the confectioneries that take advantage



Making *kurikinton*
Photo: Courtesy of kawakamiya



Kuriyokan, soft-boiled chestnuts in a sweet bean jelly
Photo: Courtesy of kawakamiya



Kuridorayaki, a fluffy pancake sandwich filled with kurikinton chestnut paste
Photo: Courtesy of kawakamiya

of the simple sweetness of chestnuts.

In Japan, chestnut trees grow naturally in every corner of the country and are also cultivated, but in particular, the chestnuts harvested in Nakatsugawa City, Gifu Prefecture are famous for their large size and for being of high quality. *Kurikinton* (mashed chestnuts) is well-known as a leading confectionery from Nakatsugawa. Steamed chestnuts are crushed in a mortar to which sugar is added, after which the well-kneaded chestnuts are squeezed with a coarse cloth called a tea cloth. Many people go out of their way and come to Nakatsugawa from afar to buy kurikinton, and at department stores across Japan, the confectionery tends to sell out quickly.

“Nakatsugawa is a mountainous area, and in autumn we harvest many delicious mountain chestnuts. As such, kurikinton appeared at some point in homes as an ingenious way to eat the delicious chestnuts. Nakatsugawa is the birthplace of kurikinton,” says an official of the Nakatsugawa Tourism Association.

But the popularity of the confectionery in the town is not just because it’s the sweet’s birthplace.

In the Edo period (early 17th to mid-late 19th century), as the prosperous post town “Nakatsugawa-juku,” Nakatsugawa welcomed travelers with chestnut dishes and sweets on the Nakasendo Road, which was one of the main roads connecting Edo (present-day Tokyo) and Kyoto. Many haiku poets (*haijin*) and waka poets (*kajin*)¹ visited the town, poetry parties and tea parties were frequently held, and local dishes and confectioneries were served at banquets. “At that time, in response to the elegant and sophisticated requests of cultured individuals with discerning palates, confectioneries that go well with green tea were sought after, as a result of which the quality of kurikinton just kept increasing,” explains the official.

From the early twentieth century, cultivation of chestnuts in Nakatsugawa was introduced to supplement the naturally occurring mountain chestnuts. As the production volume of chestnuts increased, the number of Japanese confectionery shops in the town also increased, and as

they competed for taste and kept seeking to get better through friendly competition, the quality improved further. One reason this simple confectionery made by crushing chestnuts and adding sugar is gaining popularity is the accumulated experience and skill being applied in Nakatsugawa to make full use of the subtle and gentle taste and aroma of the chestnuts.

Furthermore, “The fact that kurikinton was sold as a confectionery only during the autumn harvest season also gave it a rarity value, and it became known nationwide as it was featured in magazines and newspapers,” says the official.

In Nakatsugawa, there are also other chestnut sweets, such as *kuriyokan*, which is soft-boiled chestnuts in a sweet bean jelly, and *kuridorayaki*, which is a fluffy pancake sandwich filled with kurikinton chestnut paste.

Born from the households of mountainous Nakatsugawa, kurikinton has over time become a flavor that represents autumn in Japan. Take a bite of kurikinton and you are sure to get a sense of the Japanese autumn from its soft texture, simple sweetness and subtle aroma. **■**



A variety of Nakatsugawa chestnut confectioneries
Photo: Courtesy of Nakatsugawa Tourism Association

¹ See *Highlighting Japan* May 2022, “Matsuo Basho: The Unparalleled Haiku Poet” https://www.gov-online.go.jp/eng/publicity/book/hlj/html/202205/202205_12_en.html