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PLEASURES OF
THE JAPANESE WINTER

CONTENTS

Features

7

Traditional Winter Events in Japan

An interview with Ogawa Naoyuki, a professor in the Faculty of Literature at Kokugakuin University



10

The Sounkyo Onsen Icefall Festival

A festival is held in snowy Sounkyo, Hokkaido in which artworks formed naturally from ice are illuminated at night.



12

The Burning of New Year's Decorations

Introducing the remarkable Matsutaki Matsuri ("Pine Burning Festival") held at Oosaki Hachimangu Shrine in Sendai City, Miyagi Prefecture

14

Kitakata Ramen: Hot Noodles for a Cold Winter's Morning

Fukushima Prefecture's Kitakata ramen is a local cuisine so loved that it is eaten for breakfast as well as lunch and dinner.



16

A Garden of Winter Peonies

In Taito City, northeastern Tokyo, a spectacular display of winter peonies can be enjoyed at the Ueno Toshogu Peony Garden.



Also

4

PRIME MINISTER'S DIARY

24

POLICY-RELATED NEWS

Preserving *Washoku* for Future Generations

26

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

A New Replacement Material for Plastics

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On the cover: Ojiya Fusen Ikki in Ojiya City, Niigata Prefecture



18

Colorful Hot Air Balloons Flying Over Snowfields

Ojiya Fusen Ikki is a winter festival in which colorful hot air balloons float above a snowy white landscape.



20

Ishikawa Wintertime Sushi

Ishikawa Prefecture attracts many visitors in winter who come to enjoy sushi with seasonal seafood toppings.



22

Japan's Internationally Important Wintering Habitat of Cranes

Izumi City in Kagoshima Prefecture is one of the world's major wintering sites for cranes.



THEME FOR **FEBRUARY:**

PLEASURES OF THE JAPANESE WINTER

Winter in Japan is marked by a wide variety of spectacular events, both traditional and modern, while foods as diverse as sushi and ramen are at their most delicious. In this month's issue of *Highlighting Japan*, we introduce some of the many distinctive pleasures of the Japanese winter.

28

MY WAY

Sharing the Charms of the Hakuba Valley

30

INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

Supporting Market-oriented Agriculture in Ethiopia

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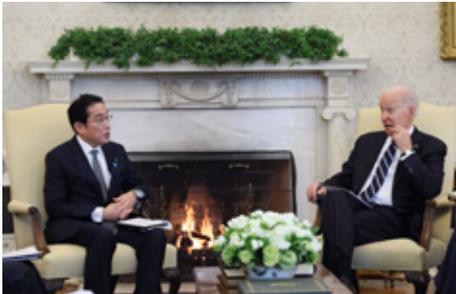
On the cover: Ojiya Fusen Ikki in Ojiya City, Niigata Prefecture
Photo: Courtesy of Niigata Prefectural Tourist Association

EDITORS' NOTE

Japanese names in this publication are written in Japanese order: family name first, personal name last.

JAPAN-U.S. SUMMIT MEETING

On January 13, 2023, Mr. Kishida Fumio, Prime Minister of Japan, who was visiting Washington, D.C., held a Japan-U.S. Summit Meeting with the Honorable Joseph R. Biden, Jr., President of the United States of America. The overview of the meeting is as follows.



Japan-U.S. Summit Meeting

At the outset, Prime Minister Kishida expressed his pleasure to meet with his close friend, President Biden, on his first visit to Washington, D.C. as Prime Minister of Japan in the new year 2023. In response, President Biden welcomed Prime Minister Kishida's visit to the U.S. and stated that the partnership between the two leaders and the Japan-U.S. Alliance are stronger than ever.

Prime Minister Kishida stated that as Japan and the U.S. face the most severe and complex security environment in recent years, Japan will fundamentally reinforce its defense capabilities, including the possession of counterstrike capabilities, and substantially increase its defense budget, based on the new National Security Strategy and other documents released last December, and President Biden reiterated his full support. Prime Minister Kishida expressed his high appreciation for the U.S. National Security Strategy released last October, and President Biden reiterated his unwavering commitment to the defense of Japan. The two leaders then welcomed the national security strategies of the two countries are aligned with each other and renewed their determination to further strengthen the deterrence and response capabilities of the Japan-U.S. Alliance, including seeking to create synergies in the implementation of the strategies. The two leaders instructed to further deepen concrete consultations regarding Japan-U.S. cooperation on the security front, taking into account the discussions at the Japan-U.S. Security Consultative Committee ("2+2") on January 11.

The two leaders exchanged views on the regional issues as follows, based on the viewpoint that any unilateral attempt to change the status quo by force in the Indo-Pacific region, especially in East Asia, must not be tolerated.

(1) The two leaders concurred on continuing to work closely together in addressing issues related to China. The two leaders also confirmed the

importance of cooperating with China on shared challenges. Furthermore, the two leaders reiterated the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and encouraged the peaceful resolution of cross-Strait issues.

(2) The two leaders concurred on continuing to work closely together between Japan and the U.S. as well as among Japan, the U.S., and the ROK toward the complete denuclearization of North Korea in accordance with the UN Security Council resolutions on strengthening regional deterrence, including security cooperation among Japan, the U.S., and the ROK, and on responses at the UN Security Council. Prime Minister Kishida also asked for continued understanding and cooperation of the U.S. for the immediate resolution of the abductions issue, and once again gained full support from President Biden.

(3) Regarding Russia's aggression against Ukraine, the two leaders concurred on continuing to strongly promote sanctions against Russia and support for Ukraine in close coordination with the G7 and other like-minded countries. They also reaffirmed their views that Russia's nuclear threat is absolutely unacceptable, and Russia should never use nuclear weapons under any circumstances.

Prime Minister Kishida explained that, at the G7 Hiroshima Summit, he would like to demonstrate the G7's vision and determination to uphold the international order based on the rule of law and also discuss the Indo-Pacific substantially. In addition, Prime Minister Kishida stated that as the Prime Minister of Japan, the only country to have ever suffered atomic bombings during war, he hopes to join with the G7 leaders, including President Biden, in sending a pledge from Hiroshima to the world that humanity will never repeat the scourge of nuclear weapons. The two leaders then concurred on working together toward a world without nuclear weapons, while taking into account the severe security environment. Furthermore, the leaders shared the view that it is important for the G7 to work in solidarity in such areas as the global economy, including energy and food security, economic security, and global issues such as climate change, health and development. The leaders reaffirmed their commitment that Japan and the U.S. will work closely together toward the success of the G7 Hiroshima Summit.

The two leaders shared the view that the Japan-U.S. economic relations were elevated to a strategic stage in 2022, with the launch and progress of the Japan-U.S. Economic Policy Consultative Com-

mittee (the Economic "2+2") and the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF). The two leaders then concurred that, with Japan holding the G7 Presidency and the U.S. holding the APEC Chair this year, the two countries will lead the international community toward sustainable and inclusive economic growth and maintaining and strengthening a rules-based, free and fair international economic order, while also utilizing this year's Economic "2+2." In addition, Prime Minister Kishida once again conveyed Japan's thoughts on the U.S. credits for clean vehicles. Furthermore, the two leaders shared the recognition that U.S. engagement in the regional economic order is becoming increasingly important, and concurred on cooperating for the progress of IPEF negotiations. Prime Minister Kishida, meanwhile, conveyed Japan's position on the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), from a strategic perspective. The two leaders also concurred on promoting DFFT (Data Free Flow with Trust).

The two leaders concurred on strengthening supply chain resilience among like-minded countries to handle economic security challenges, including economic coercion. The two leaders also confirmed their commitment to cooperate to promote and protect critical technologies, including semiconductors as well as biotechnology, quantum and AI technologies and to strengthen cooperation on supply chains and others. Furthermore, the two leaders shared the importance of working toward strengthening energy security.

The two leaders concurred on further promoting Japan-U.S. cooperation in the area of outer space.

The two leaders shared the recognition that commitment to a free and open international order based on the rule of law has never been more important. Prime Minister Kishida then stated that he will strengthen efforts to realize a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)". In response, President Biden expressed his support for Prime Minister Kishida's initiatives and reiterated the unwavering U.S. commitment to the region. The two leaders concurred that Japan and the U.S. will continue to promote endeavors to realize a FOIP to ensure the peace and prosperity of the region and the international community.

The two leaders reconfirmed unprecedented Japan-U.S. cooperation, rooted in the shared vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific and a peaceful and prosperous world, and guided by the shared values, including the rule of law, and issued the Joint Statement of the United States and Japan.

Peonies and their protective *warabotchi* coverings under a light fall of snow
Photo: Courtesy of Ueno Toshogu Peony Garden



Pleasures of the Japanese Winter



Sushi topped with *gasuebi* shrimp and their green-colored eggs
Photo: Ishikawa Prefectural Tourism League



A tunnel of illuminated icicles
Photo: Courtesy of Hokkaido Tourism Organization

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inter in Japan is marked by a wide variety of spectacular events, both traditional and modern, while foods as diverse as sushi and ramen are at their most delicious. In this month's issue of *Highlighting Japan*, we introduce some of the many distinctive pleasures of the Japanese winter.



Traditional Winter Events in Japan



Ogawa Naoyuki, a professor at Kokugakuin University
Photo: Courtesy of Ogawa Naoyuki

WE asked Ogawa Naoyuki, a professor in the Faculty of Literature at Kokugakuin University, about traditional winter events in Japan.

When do Japanese people perceive winter to be?

It depends on the region, but I think many people consider the period of low temperatures between December and February as winter. With the solar calendar currently used in Japan, the start and end of winter is not defined. But in the old calendar (lunisolar calendar)¹ used by Japan in the past, winter was determined to be from October to December with spring set from January to March. Winter in the old calendar equates to around the end of October to the middle of January in today's calendar. Also, as a standard for the changing of the seasons, the *nijushi-sekki*² (Twenty-Four Solar Terms) used with the old calendar set winter as being from *ritto* (start of winter) on around November 7 in the modern calendar until the day before *risshun* (start of spring) around February 4. The season of spring begins on *risshun*, as the cold gradually eases up.

Annual seasonal events were held by people in Japan based on this old calendar and the *nijushi-sekki*. These traditions are still passed down today in homes and communities.

Please tell us about the events that are held in winter.

In Japan, a variety of events are held at the start of January for *shogatsu* (the start of the new year). For example, people decorate the entrances to their homes, apartment

buildings, and company buildings with decorations for the new year, including *kadomatsu* and *shimekazari*, to welcome Toshigami-sama, a deity of the new year who brings happiness. *Kadomatsu* act as markers to welcome Toshigami-sama into the home, typically made with three bamboo stems of differing lengths surrounded by pine branches. Pine and bamboo are auspicious plants that represent long life. *Shimekazari* are meant to indicate a sacred place to welcome the Toshigami-sama deity. There are a variety of shapes, but one example would be a sacred rope made of rice straw with a long, white paper called a *shide* hanging down from it. Some people also decorate with *kagami mochi* rice cakes as an offering to Toshigami-sama. *Kagami mochi* usually comprise two pieces of dried and hardened round mochi stacked on top of one another.

In the old calendar, the time around the full moon on January 15 was called *koshogatsu* (the little new year), and in this season, events were held in farming and fishing villages to wish for a bountiful catch and harvest for the year. For example, *tori-oi* is an event in which children walk from house to house in their town singing a song to drive away harmful birds that damage crops. By driving away harmful birds at the start of the year, people hope to avoid damages during the actual farming period. Some people attach small, round red and white mochi called *mochibana* (mochi flowers) to tree branches as decorations. These are considered to resemble rice stalks and silk cocoons. There are also regions in Japan that hold *dondo-yaki*, where new year's decorations are burned to ward off disaster (see pp. 12-13). *Dondo-yaki* is said to originate from *sagicho*, a ceremony to



A mikan orange atop *kagami mochi*
Photo: shige hattori / PIXTA

burn *kissho*, or documents used in rituals, on January 15, which started in the imperial court during the Heian period (late 8th century to late 12th century).

What kinds of foods are eaten at winter events?

Rice has been the most important food for Japanese people since ancient times. Many traditional events were held to pray for a bountiful rice harvest. That is why food made with rice is often eaten at traditional events. For example, mochi is generally eaten during shogatsu. It is thought that by eating mochi, you receive power from Toshigami-sama. *Zoni* is another food eaten during shogatsu. It is a soup flavored with soy sauce or miso and filled with vegetables, mochi, and other ingredients. And on *kagami-biraki* on January 11, though the date differs according to region, the *kagami mochi* that was used for decorations is broken and eaten, such as by putting it in *shiruko*, a soup of boiled red beans and sugar.



Eho-maki sushi rolls
Photo: masa / PIXTA

During *setsubun* held around February 3, the day before the start of spring, *mamemaki* is performed, where beans are thrown to ward off disaster. On this day, *eho-maki* is eaten. This is a roll of sushi rice filled with egg, cucumber, and other ingredients wrapped in seaweed. It is said that if you eat this sushi in silence without cutting it while facing the *eho*, or direction that is deemed good for the year, you will have a good year, your wishes will be granted, or you will be in good health.

What kinds of traditional performing arts are performed in winter?

One example would be *kagura*ⁱⁱⁱ dedicated to the deities. There are around 4,500 *kagura* groups in Japan today. For example, there are more than 200 groups in Miyazaki

Prefecture, and a variety of types of *kagura* have been passed down by local residents. There are also nearly 300 groups in Hiroshima Prefecture where the G7 Summit will be held this year in May, and many groups actively hold public performances.

Some of the groups perform publicly year-round at shrines and other venues. However, *kagura* was originally performed mainly in winter. It is thought that *kagura* originated as a part of the *mitamafuri* ritual held in November in the imperial court from the 10th century. As our energy weakens during this season of shortened daylight hours, it was believed that through *kagura*, people could be energized by the power of the deities to get them to the year's end. *Kagura* later spread across Japan from the 13th century. It is also thought that as it spread, it came to be performed in other seasons to pray for an end to disease and for a bountiful harvest.

Dengaku is another traditional winter performing art to invoke a bountiful rice harvest. There are some forms of *dengaku* where women sing and dance to an accompaniment of traditional Japanese flute and drum while actually planting rice during the rice-planting season in spring, but winter *dengaku* only mimics the work of planting rice. For example, *Itabashi no Ta-asobi* has been passed down in Itabashi City, Tokyo, and it is a form of *dengaku* that depicts a year's rice cultivation through words, songs, and movements. In *Nishiure no Dengaku* from Hamamatsu City, Shizuoka Prefecture, *dengaku*, *kagura*, *noh*, and a variety of other performing arts are performed all night long, from moonrise to sunrise. All of these examples of *dengaku* are designated as Important Intangible Folk Cultural Properties of Japan.

New year's eve, new year's day, *koshogatsu*, and other events held in winter are found among the events for



Oga no Namahage of Oga City, Akita Prefecture
Photo: oganavi



A dance impersonating a deity named Saiho at the Niino no Yuki Matsuri festival held at a shrine in Anan Town, Nagano Prefecture
Photo: Courtesy of Ogawa Naoyuki

raiho-shin deities inscribed as “Raiho-shin, ritual visits of deities in masks and costumes” in UNESCO’s Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. In these events, people wearing bizarre masks and impersonating *raiho-shin* deities visit homes, pray for a good harvest, ceremoniously cleanse evil, and persuade children to be good people. Some examples include the Koshikijima no Toshidon of Satsumasendai City, Kagoshima Prefecture, the Oga no Namahage of Oga City, Akita Prefecture, and the Noto no Amamehagi of Wajima City, Ishikawa Prefecture.

Are there any regions to pay special attention to in regards to traditional winter performing arts?

Miyazaki Prefecture is active in preserving and passing on *kagura* traditions. *Kagura* is held at night from November to January in Takachiho Town and other parts of northern Miyazaki Prefecture, and performances are also held from February to May during the day in central and southern Miyazaki, including Miyazaki City. The most appealing aspect of Miyazaki Prefecture’s *kagura* is its diversity. Unique *kagura* in each region are passed down.

The Minami-shinshu region in southern Nagano Prefecture is also an active area for *kagura*, *dengaku*, and other traditional performing arts. For example, during the Toyama no Shimotsuki Matsuri festival held in Iida City in December, *kagura* is dedicated at shrines by offering hot water boiled in iron pots to the deities. During the Niino no Yuki Matsuri festival held at shrines in Anan Town in mid-January, a variety of performing arts, including *dengaku* praying for a bountiful harvest, are performed throughout



A *kagura* performance in Takachiho Town, Miyazaki Prefecture
Photo: Courtesy of Ogawa Naoyuki

the night.

An important feature of these prefectures’ efforts is the fact that local governments, companies, and residents work together to preserve and pass on local traditions. Miyazaki Prefecture and the Minami-shinshu region have established systems to encourage workers to take time off to participate in and appreciate traditional performing arts.

Regions across Japan are facing the issues of declining birthrates and an aging and shrinking population. In rural areas, it is important to maintain personal connections to create sustainable local communities. *Kagura* and other traditional performing arts play a major role in this. People of all ages participate, from children to seniors. These performing arts are an opportunity to connect people from a variety of generations.

I hope that overseas visitors coming to Japan in winter will see the *kagura* and *dengaku* unique to each region. Performers’ movements, practiced over many long hours, are truly beautiful. I am moved to tears by the sight of people dancing for themselves, for those in the community, and for the deities. 7

Interview by SAWAJI OSAMU

- i The old calendar (lunisolar calendar) was created based on the cycles of the waxing and waning of the moon (29.5 days) and the sun, and it was used in Japan until 1872. A leap year of 13 months was set up every two or three years. There is about a one month difference between the old calendar and the modern calendar.
- ii Devised in ancient China, the *nijushi-sekki* (Twenty-Four Solar Terms) divides the year into the 24 segments of the sun, giving names to seasons once every 15 days or so.
- iii For more about *kagura*, *dengaku*, and other traditional Japanese performing arts: <https://www2.nij.jac.go.jp/dglib/contents/learn/edc27/en/index.html>

Illuminated ice artworks at the Sounkyo Onsen Icefall Festival in Kamikawa, Hokkaido
Photo: Courtesy of Hokkaido Tourism Organization



The Sounkyo Onsen Icefall Festival

A festival is held in snowy Sounkyo, Hokkaido in the winter in which artworks formed from ice are illuminated at night, creating a magical spectacle.

SATO KUMIKO



THERE are three large, famous events to enjoy in the winter in Hokkaido: the Sapporo Snow Festivalⁱ, the Asahikawa Winter Festival, and the Sounkyo Onsen Icefall Festival. While the events in Sapporo and Asahikawa involve the creation of snow sculptures, the event in Sounkyo is characterized by the use of nature in creating ice artworks of different kinds. These artworks, numbering around 30 in total, are formed and then grow from multiple icicles, sometimes to as big as 50 meters wide and 13 meters tall. Around 120,000 visitors come each year to see this powerful, extraordinary spectacle.

Sounkyo, located in the town of Kamikawa almost exactly in the center of Hokkaido, is part of the Daisetsuzan National Parkⁱⁱ. Located in the upper part of the Ishikari River, the longest river in Hokkaido, the Sounkyo gorge features around 24 kilometers of precipitous cliffs

Fireworks explode over the festival venue
Photo: Courtesy of Hokkaido Tourism Organization



Illuminated ice artworks
Photo: Courtesy of Sounkyo Tourism Association

carved out by the flow of the river over a long period of time. The area is also famous for its hot springs that supply the Sounkyo Onsen hot spring resort.

Nakajima Shinichi, executive director of the Sounkyo Tourism Association, says that “the temperatures in this area drop below -10°C in February and with wind chill it can feel like -20 . This is why tourists mainly visited in the summer. But we also wanted tourists to come in the winter. With that in mind, a group of young men from the Sounkyo shopping district held an event with artist Takenaka in 1976, and this is how the Icefall Festival started.”

Takenaka Toshihiro (1931-2002) was a sculptor based in Eniwa City, Hokkaido, and at the time was working on ice-covered tree sculptures by spraying trees with water and letting them freeze. Takenaka’s sculpted ice-covered tree exhibition held in Sounkyo was well received, and since then, it has been held each year as the Icefall Festival. The number of visitors has increased each time, and the event has grown in scale to the point that nowadays the event is held from the end of January until early March, at a special venue next to the Ishikari River. This year

will mark the 48th time the event has been held.

Nowadays, the ice artworks are planned and created by an executive committee made up of local residents. Preparations begin in autumn of the preceding year. Once the theme for the festival has been decided upon, work on constructing the logs that will become the molds for the ice artworks begins in early November. From December, water taken from the Ishikari River is sprayed onto the completed framework and the hanging icicles slowly increase in size. The artworks are complete in about one and a half months.

“Parts that are to become pathways and stairs are cut with chainsaws, but we generally do not alter any of the completed ice artworks. We want visitors to enjoy the sight of the rough ice made by nature in the cold of nature,” says Nakajima.

An icefall generally refers to a waterfall that has frozen over. The name “Icefall Festival” given to this ice sculpture event in Sounkyo was derived from the way the ice artworks express this natural phenomenon.

When the white ice artworks made

from the clear waters of the Ishikari River are illuminated, a multi-colored, fantastical scene emerges. The fireworks launched in the frozen night during the festival are also famous. Many tourists stay overnight to enjoy the Icefall Festival.

“The Icefall Festival has become a very important event for local residents, as it has been held continuously without any cancellations, held even during the coronavirus outbreak with infection prevention measures in place,” says Nakajima.

The number of overseas tourists was also increasing before the coronavirus outbreak, and visitors enjoyed the Sounkyo ice artworks that had an impact different from that of the snow sculptures of the snow festivals. There are also events related to the local area held on the weekends during the festival, including Kamikawa Ainuⁱⁱⁱ drum performances. An additional charm of Sounkyo lies in the fact that there are hot springs to visit and warm the body after enjoying the festival. 



A tunnel of illuminated icicles
Photo: Courtesy of Hokkaido Tourism Organization

i See *Highlighting Japan* January 2022, “The Sapporo Snow Festival” https://www.gov-online.go.jp/eng/publicity/book/hlj/html/202201/202201_02_en.html

ii See *Highlighting Japan* September 2022, “The Autumn Leaves of Mt. Asahidake, Hokkaido” https://www.gov-online.go.jp/eng/publicity/book/hlj/html/202209/202209_02_en.html

iii The indigenous people around the northern region of the Japanese archipelago, particularly Hokkaido, are called the Ainu people, and in the Kamikawa Basin at the foot of Daisetsuzan, there lived a people called the “Kamikawa Ainu”.

Dondo-yaki, the burning of new year's decorations, at Oosaki Hachimangu Shrine



The Burning of New Year's Decorations

The Matsutaki Matsuri (Pine Burning Festival) at Oosaki Hachimangu Shrine in Sendai City, Miyagi Prefecture is a festival at which new year's decorations are ritually burned on a large scale.

KATO KYOKO

THE start of the new year is called *shogatsu* in Japan, and since ancient times, it has been a period for households to welcome in Toshi-gami-sama, the deity of the new year who brings happiness in such forms as bountiful harvests and the

Hadaka-mairi, the “naked” shrine visit, at Oosaki Hachimangu Shrine



All photos: Courtesy of Oosaki Hachimangu Shrine

promise of many descendants.

It is believed that Toshigami-sama comes down from a high mountain at the start of the year, so people across Japan clean their homes at the end of December in the hope that the deity will visit. There are also customs to display special decorations for the new year. Placed near the entrance to the home are *kado-matsu* ornaments made from pine or bamboo and *shimenawa* ropes made by twisting rice straw, which indicate that the home is pure and a suitable place for Toshigami-sama to visit. These new year's decorations are then collected in temple and shrine precincts, and next to rivers, and burned on *koshogatsu*, or "little new year"ⁱ, on the set date of January 15 in many areas. In some areas, the fire and smoke rising up from the fires is a send-off for Toshigami-sama as he returns to the high mountain, and in some regions, it is held as a sacred event known as *dondo-yaki* (burning of new year's decorations).



Aerial view of the *gojinka*

Oosaki Hachimangu Shrine was built in Sendai, Miyagi Prefecture, in 1607, and the Matsutaki Matsuri ("Pine Burning Festival") held there is a sacred event in which new year's decorations are ceremonially burned. Local people refer



to these large-scale events in Sendai as Donto-sai.

Oosaki Hachimangu Shrine's Matsutaki Matsuri usually begins at sunset on January 14. "The fire meant to return Toshigami-sama back to the heavens is called *gojinka*, or sacred bonfire. If you come in contact with the smoke, it is said that you will enjoy sound health. We also pray for business prosperity and family safety," says Onome Inami, the *negi*, or senior priest, at Oosaki Hachimangu Shrine.

At dusk, when the new year's decorations, ornaments and amulets entrusted to the temple and piled up some five meters high burst into flames, the smoke rises high into the heavens creating a mystical scene. Shrine visitors approach the fire with the new year's decorations, ornaments and amulets that they have brought with them and throw them in to the flames. This sacred bonfire for sending off Toshigami-sama burns continuously for two or three days. Before the coronavirus outbreak, some 100,000 visitors would visit the shrine during this period.

One important event held during the

Matsutaki Matsuri at Oosaki Hachimangu Shrine is the *hadaka-mairi* (naked shrine visit), in which thousands of near-naked men brave the freezing cold night to visit the shrine. The men hold bells in their right hand and lanterns in their left. This *hadaka-mairi* traces its roots back to the Edo period (early seventeenth century to mid-late nineteenth century) and a mid-winter ceremony when *toji*ⁱⁱ sake brewers prayed for good health and prosperity in business.

These days everyone is able to participate in the *hadaka-mairi* including women, who wear upper garments and other clothes over the traditional attire for the naked festival. Priest Onome explains, "The festival may look different depending on the times, but the spirit of the worshippers and the act of praying remain the same. If you visit during the festival, I think you will feel awed by the mystique of the blazing flames and sense the purifying and healing power that the flames hold." 

i A new year's event centered around January 15. January 1 is called *ooshogatsu*, or "big new year."

ii A *toji* is the head brewer responsible for managing the sake brewing process.



A bowl of Kitakata ramen with a variety of toppings
Photo: mikeko/PIXTA

Kitakata Ramen

Hot Noodles for a Cold Winter's Morning



The "City of Storehouses" covered in snow
Photo: takahiro/PIXTA

Fukushima Prefecture's Kitakata ramen is a local cuisine so loved that it is eaten for breakfast as well as lunch and dinner, and may be best enjoyed in the cold of winter.

YANAGISAWA MIHO

RAMEN is one of Japan's national dishes. There are many ramen varieties all across Japan that can only be eaten locally. Situated in the northwest of Fukushima Prefecture is Kitakata City, famous for Kitakata ramen, which people often say is one of the three best types of ramen¹ in Japan.

The broad, slightly curly noodles are a distinguishing feature of this variety of ramen. The noodles are made by mixing in more water than usual and letting the dough rest thoroughly, giving the noodles a chewy body. The soup is a soy-sauce based broth that is

typically made from pork bones and *niboshi* (dried sardines). This combination of noodles and soup produces an exquisite flavor.

Kusuyama Keiichi, chairman of the Kitakata Tourist Product Association, says that “locals have their own favorite Kitakata ramen shops out of the many shops in the city which they visit frequently.”

It is said that Kitakata ramen began in a food stall about 100 years ago, and after that, shops specializing in the ramen increased. About 50 years ago, the name “Kitakata ramen” became well-known nationwide. The fermented food production industry for soy sauce, miso and sake prospered in Kitakata for centuries and many storehouses for the produce were built in the city. Kitakata became known as the “City of Storehouses” among people who were touched by the local scenery of storehouses. Visitors to Kitakata spread the word, saying “the storehouse scenery is great, but what’s more, the ramen is delicious!” and the city became popular. The popularity of Kitakata ramen grew during a time without social media simply because so many people were impressed with the taste of the ramen.

One way that local people enjoy this variety of ramen is as *asara* (morning ramen). While most ramen shops and other restaurants in Japan usually open just before lunchtime, many Kitakata ramen shops open in the morning. There are various opinions as to why. Some say it was because workers finishing a nightshift at one of the factories in the city ate ramen as breakfast, while others say it became a favorite for casual breakfasts for workers finishing their early morning farm work. Still others say that in the past many people arriving in Kitakata early in the morning by night train warmed themselves up with ramen. Regardless of the reason, many people still come for morning ramen just as in the past, some driving through the middle of the night from far away.

You can enjoy morning ramen throughout the year, but “slurping down the hot ramen on a winter’s morning is especially good,” says Hanami Sakae, an official of the Kitakata City Tourism Promotion Section. “I often head to a ramen shop after shoveling snow in the morning. If a shop becomes popular, a line will form in the morning, even in winter.”

The Aizu region, where Kitakata is located, sees heavy snowfall of over one meter on average, and in a normal year, the area is blanketed in snow from the end of December through the end of February. The sheer pleasure of eating hot Kitakata ramen in the shivering cold of winter explains why this variety of ramen is so loved in this part of Japan. **■**



A simple bowl of Kitakata ramen
Photo: Courtesy of Kitakata Tourist Product Association



Kitakata ramen topped with spinach
Photo: paylessimages2/PIXTA



Kitakata ramen topped with *chashu* (braised pork)
Photo: paylessimages2/PIXTA

ⁱ The Japanese mass media often state that Sapporo ramen from Sapporo, Hokkaido, Hakata ramen from Fukuoka, Fukuoka Prefecture, and Kitakata ramen are the three best types of ramen in Japan.



A Garden of Winter Peonies

Peonies are normally considered a spring flower, but their flowering time can also be adjusted to winter, from January to late February. In Taito City, northeastern Tokyo, a spectacular display of “winter peonies” can be enjoyed at the Ueno Toshogu Peony Garden.

SASAKI TAKASHI

PEOONIES are deciduous shrubs native to northwestern China which were brought to Japan around 1,300 years ago. The peony was considered the “King of Flowers” in Tang Dynasty China because of the unusually large (10 to 30 cm) and fragrant flowers that bloom from the small bush. The plant was originally cultivated for its root bark which was used in medicine, but about 500 years ago peonies became popular as ornamental garden plants in Japan, and in recent years, numerous varieties have been developed through selective breeding to produce flowers of many different shapes and colors.

“The standard varieties of peonies are called ‘spring peonies’ and they bloom from April to May. There are also varieties that also bloom in early winter, which are known as ‘cold peonies,’” says Ono Shingo, director of the Ueno Toshogu

Peony Garden.

“However, these cold peonies are easily affected by weather and each bush produces only a few small flowers. To make up for these shortcomings, ‘winter peonies’ have been developed to bloom early in the year,” says Ono. To achieve this, varieties of peonies that bloom in the spring are kept in a dormant state at low temperatures to delay their normal blooming period by around eight months. The flowers produced are large and elegant just like spring peonies. Using this bloom-delay technique, it is possible to enjoy vivid flowers in winter, a season with the fewest natural flowers.

Ueno Toshogu, located in present-day Ueno Park in Taito City, northeastern Tokyo, was built in 1627 and enshrines Tokugawa Ieyasu (1542-1616), the first shogun of the Tokugawa Shogunate (1603-1867). The Peony Garden is a Japanese *kaiyu*-style garden (circuit-style garden) built in a corner of the shrine grounds. It opened in 1980 as a symbol of friendly relations between Japan and China. The garden is busy with visitors during the Spring Peony Festival from early April through early May as well as from January 1 through to late February when the winter peonies are in bloom. Since 2020 the garden has put in place countermeasures to prevent the spread of the new coronavirus. During this Winter Peony Festival, which is

All photos: Courtesy of Ueno Toshogu Peony Garden



Red winter peonies under their protective *warabotchi* covering



Pink winter peonies

being held for the 41st time in 2023, 160 plants of 40 varieties, mostly from Japan and China, are on display.

“When peonies are exposed to the cold, their leaves become damaged, so we cover the bushes with protective *warabotchi* structures that we make from straw. We have to cover the plants completely when there is cold rain, wind, or when the temperature drops, so we have to pay attention to the weather forecast during this season,” says Ono.

According to Ono, while winter peonies require such careful attention, the flowers bloom for up to a month thanks to the low temperatures. Spring peony flowers by contrast bloom all at once as temperatures quickly rise during the blooming season, and the petals fall off quickly in around five days. It

rarely snows in Tokyo during the winter peony season, so when it does and the snow piles up, the spectacle of large, colorful flowers of red, pink, white, and yellow blooming beneath snow-covered *warabotchi* is particularly enchanting.

From early in the new year, when the winter peonies are in bloom, wintersweet and early-blooming plum trees can also be enjoyed in the garden. By February, with the peonies still in bloom, the weeping plum trees, early-blooming cherry trees and forked-stem adonis are also coming into flower. Though it is still bitterly cold, the colorful atmosphere of the garden grows little by little as spring approaches, and it is a pleasure to see the changes that add yet more color to the flowers of the winter peonies. 🌸

Peonies and their protective *warabotchi*



Colorful Hot Air Balloons Flying Over Snowfields

As winter turns to spring, a festival in Japan's snow country fills the clear blue sky of Ojiya City, Niigata Prefecture with brightly colored hot air balloons floating above the snowy white landscape.

KATO KYOKO

LOCATED almost in the center of Niigata Prefecture, on the Japan Sea coast of northern Honshu, Ojiya City is known as one of Japan's foremost high-quality rice producing areas and as a region of heavy snowfall. First held in 1977, Ojiya Fusen Ikki (Ojiya Hot Air Balloon Festival) is a spectacular event that takes place here over two days and features colorful hot air balloons floating above a snowy white landscape. Although Ojiya City has a population of just 33,000 or so (as

of April 2022), prior to the coronavirus outbreak the local hot air balloon event attracted tens of thousands of visitors from Japan and overseas. This year the event will take place on February 25 and 26.

When the Ojiya Hot Air Balloon Festival began, hot air balloons were becoming increasingly popular in Japan, with a growing number of enthusiasts around the country making and flying their own balloons.

“Hot air ballooning in Ojiya City began

in the mid-1970s. In winter, the rice fields are blanketed in thick snow, so hot air balloons have plenty of space in Ojiya City to land safely. This is how Ojiya City came to be regarded as the perfect location for hot air ballooning.” So says Ogino Ryuta, Tourism Manager of the Ojiya City Tourism Exchange Section.

“The first time the locals saw a hot air balloon descend on a snowfield they were astonished at the strange craft, and it quickly became a hot topic of conversation. This led the president of a company

All photos: Courtesy of Niigata Prefectural Tourist Association



Ojiya Fusen Ikki in Ojiya City,
Niigata Prefecture

in Ojiya City that manufactured the world's largest firework, the Yonshakudama firework (a type of firework shell measuring 120 cm in diameter), to spearhead an initiative that would engage the local community. That's how Ojiya Fusen Ikki started."

The *ikki*ⁱ of Ojiya Fusen Ikki means acting together for a single purpose. The



A line of hot air balloons illuminated at night

name of the event conveys the desire of the locals to work together to get through the winter's heavy snowfall and safely greet the spring, says Ogino.

At this year's Ojiya Fusen Ikki the organizers are offering ridesⁱⁱ in hot air balloons decorated with Ojiya's specialty of colorful "swimming jewel" Nishikigoi carp. In addition, hot-air balloons flown by teams of enthusiasts from Niigata Prefecture and other parts of Japan will take part.

Another popular attraction every year is the "glow balloon" festival, a magical illuminated spectacle of hot air balloons held on the first day of the event. At night, orange flames appear over the snowfield as the burners of five to eight hot air balloons are lit in time to music or on command. A large firework display behind the balloons creates a spectacular show, drawing cheers of delight from the crowd.

Says Ogino, "Ojiya City is one of Japan's leading rice producing areas. As well as this event, I hope people will come and enjoy the many delicious types of winter food and drinks, such as freshly brewed sakeⁱⁱⁱ, new soba^{iv}, and a variety



Hot air balloons over snowfields

of ramen."

As winter gives way to spring, the hot air balloons drift slowly above the Echigo Plain against the backdrop of the mountain range, floating in the southerly winds above Ojiya. Ojiya Fusen Ikki has become an important event for the local community that announces the arrival of spring. 

i The Japanese term *ikki* can signify both a united uprising of farmers against their feudal lords and working together in unified harmony.
ii Passengers selected by lottery with priority given to Ojiya City residents.
iii Sake brewed from rice harvested in the most recent autumn and available for drinking in winter
iv Japanese soba made from buckwheat seeds harvested in the most recent autumn



Sushi topped with *buri* (front right) and other seafoods from Ishikawa Prefecture
Photo: Kanazawa City

Ishikawa Wintertime Sushi

Ishikawa Prefecture is located near the center of Honshu facing the Sea of Japan. In the winter months, the area attracts a large number of visitors who come to enjoy sushi with seasonal seafood toppings.

SAWAJI OSAMU

ISHIKAWA Prefecture has a coastline extending over approximately 580 kilometers, with the Noto Peninsula in the northern area jutting out into the Sea of Japan.

The sea of this region is one of Japan's foremost fishing grounds. Here the cold current from the north and the warm current from the south intersect, forming plankton-rich waters which attract fish and shellfish from both cold and warm sea areas. Due to the diverse topography of the fishing grounds, including deep and shallow waters and rock reefs, many varieties of fish and shellfish can be caught.

These abundant fishery resources have given rise to the development of a culinary culture in Ishikawa Prefecture that uses fresh seafood. One of the most popular types of cuisine is

sushi.

“What sets Ishikawa sushi apart is the variety of ingredients used,” says Teranishi Masaaki, chairman of the Ishikawa Sushi Store Environmental Sanitation Association. “Particularly during the winter months, many varieties of seasonal seafood are available, and customers travel from all over the country to enjoy them.”

One of the seasonal sushi toppings in winter in the Hokuriku region, which includes Ishikawa Prefecture and the neighboring prefectures of Toyama and Fukui, is *buri*, or yellowtail. Buri migrate over a wide area of Japanese waters, arriving in Ishikawa Prefecture from late fall to early winter. The *kanburi*, or winter yellowtail, caught in the Sea of Japan during this season is renowned for its rich fatty flavor. Kanburi caught on the coast of Ishikawa Prefecture in set nets¹ from November through February that weigh 7 kilos or more are certified by the Ishikawa Fisheries Cooperative and sold under the brand name “Tennen-Noto-Kanburi” (Natural Noto Yellowtail). Sushi topped with Tennen-Noto-Kanburi is a special wintertime treat.

Sushi topped with *gasuebi* shrimp and their green-colored eggs
Photo: Ishikawa Prefectural Tourism League



Other well-known Ishikawa wintertime sushi toppings are *kano-gani* crab and *kobako-gani* crab. *Kano-gani* crab is the male snow crab and the catch season is November through March. Its thick legs are packed full of meat used for sushi. *Kobako-gani* crab is the female snow crab. Around half the size of the *kano-gani* crab, inside its carapace are orange-colored immature eggs called *uchiko* and brown granular eggs called *sotoko*, both of which are edible. The fishing season for *kobako-gani* crab is limited to around six weeks from November through December in order to conserve the species, so the flavor can only be enjoyed for a very brief period in winter.

Amaebi shrimp is another well-known sushi topping, but the rarer *gasuebi* shrimp is now becoming increasingly popular. Caught along with *amaebi*, brown *gasuebi* have been regarded as less attractive than the beautiful red *amaebi*. Since they also do not keep fresh for as long, they used to be an exclusively local delicacy. This situation has changed in recent years,

however, as their reputation for being sweeter and richer in flavor than *amaebi* spread beyond the prefecture. As a result, *gasuebi* are now more expensive than *amaebi*. “Ishikawa also offers a variety of other seafood in winter, such as cod, squid, and sea cucumbers,” says Teranishi.

Sake brewing is another longstanding tradition of Ishikawa Prefecture, dating back centuries. The Noto Toji originating in Oku-Noto area make up one of Japan’s four great *toji* guildsⁱⁱ and work in many sake breweries in Ishikawa Prefecture. Sake pairs perfectly with sushi. Ishikawa sake that pairs well with *kanburi* and *kobako-gani* crab sushi is served at many sushi restaurants. There is no better time to enjoy this sake and sushi combination than the cold of winter. **7**

i Set net fishing is a passive fishing method that uses a net anchored in the ocean to catch migrating fish that enter the nets.
ii Head brewer responsible for managing the sake brewing process. The four great *toji* are said to be the Noto toji, Nanbu toji (Iwate Prefecture), Echigo toji (Niigata Prefecture), and Tamba toji (Hyogo Prefecture).



Buri caught in Ishikawa Prefecture
Photo: Ishikawa Prefectural Tourism League



Kano-gani crab caught in winter in Ishikawa Prefecture
Photo: Ishikawa Prefectural Tourism League

Japan's Internationally Important Wintering Habitat of Cranes

Izumi City in Kagoshima Prefecture, located on the southernmost tip of Kyushu in the southwestern part of the Japanese archipelago, is one of the world's major wintering sites for cranes. The sight of over ten thousand cranes in Izumi City is a distinctive winter attraction.

SASAKI TAKASHI

A LONG the coast of Izumi City in the northwestern part of Kagoshima Prefecture stretches a vast expanse of paddy fields on land reclaimed from tidal flats. Each year in October, more than ten thousand cranes fly from Siberia and northeastern China to winter here. The area is Japan's largest crane wintering grounds and one of the most important wintering habitats of cranes in the world. The sight of cranes foraging for food in the peaceful rice fields and wheeling gracefully through the air with outstretched wings is a distinctive Izumi City winter attraction.

"Cranes are said to have first migrated to Izumi in the late seventeenth century,

when the daimyo, or the feudal lord, who ruled the area at that time began the land reclamation work," says Hori Masanobu, Director of the Izumi Municipal Crane Museum "Crane Park Izumi" and Head of Izumi City Ramsar Promotion Office. "The rule was that only the shogun and daimyo were allowed to capture cranes back then, so the practice of hunting them was strictly prohibited."

When the era of samurai rule came to an end in the second half of the nineteenth century and the ban on hunting cranes was lifted, it is said that for a time not a single crane came to Izumi. However, in 1895 the crane was designated a legally protected species, followed by its designation as a protected national

monument in 1921 and as a special natural monument in 1952, after which the number of cranes migrating to the area steadily increased.

"The Kagoshima Crane Protection Society has been responsible for the protection of cranes in Izumi since its formation in 1962. The cooperation of local farmers and youngsters has been crucial to the success of these activities," says Hori. "An example is the crane count survey by a junior high school "Crane Club." Over a period of more than 60 years since the survey was first conducted in 1960, members from three generations of some families have taken part in the initiative—parents, children, and grandchildren. Also, in the eastern reclaimed land where the cranes roost, rice cultivation has been brought forward. So instead of the rice being harvested in October as would normally be the case, the rice harvest for human consumption is now completed in August. This means that come October when the cranes arrive, the rice plants

Cranes fly in from Siberia and northeastern China to winter in Izumi City, Kagoshima Prefecture
Photo: hitorikun/PIXTA

will have grown again from the stubble left after the first harvest, providing the birds with a good source of food.”

Today, Izumi City contains a Wildlife Protection Areaⁱ of 867 hectares. During the winter months, the Kagoshima Crane Protection Society rents some of the rice fields from farmers in this area and adds shallow water to create secure nighttime artificial roosts. A member of the Society is responsible for monitoring the area and carries out tasks such as feeding the cranes in the early morning.

Over the years, these initiatives have borne fruit, as evidenced by the fact that more than ten thousand cranes have flown to Izumi for twenty-six seasons straight from 1997 through 2022. Cranes that can be typically observed here are the endangered hooded crane and white-naped crane. Almost 90 percent of the approximately 16,000 global population of hooded cranes gather here. To date, of the fifteen species of crane in the world, seven

species and one hybrid species have flown to Izumi. The Izumi Wintering Habitat of Cranes (478 ha) was listed as a wetland under the Ramsar Conventionⁱⁱ in November 2021. In November of the following year, Izumi City and Niigata City became the first municipalities in Japan to be certified as Ramsar Sites under the Ramsar Convention.

“I’ve heard that crane sightings in places such as Siberia where they spend their summer are rare due to the vastness of the land. Places like Izumi where you can observe so many cranes in close proximity to human habitation are exceptional. That’s why in winter many bird-watchers on group tours come to Izumi from overseas,” says Hori.

Beloved by locals and domestic and overseas tourists alike, the cranes spend almost six months in the mild climate of Izumi giving their wings plenty of rest, before migrating in the months of February and March to more northern lands. 🏠



White-naped cranes
Photo: westwind/PIXTA



Hooded cranes
Photo: taka/PIXTA



Adult and young endangered Siberian cranes
Photo: taka/PIXTA

ⁱ An area where capture of wildlife is prohibited in order to increase the wildlife population

ⁱⁱ The Ramsar Convention is a treaty for the conservation of important wetlands and their fauna and flora. Ramsar wetlands are wetlands designated in accordance with the international criteria stipulated by the Convention.





Preserving *Washoku* for Future Generations

A range of initiatives are being undertaken in Japan to preserve and pass on to future generations “*Washoku*” (Japanese cuisine), which is inscribed on UNESCO’s Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. We introduce some of those initiatives along with the regional cuisine of Miyazaki Prefecture, which will host the G7 Agriculture Ministers’ Meeting in April 2023.

SAWAJI OSAMU

“**W**ASHOKU, traditional dietary cultures of the Japanese” was inscribed on UNESCO’s Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity almost a decade ago in December 2013. Japan’s proposal to UNESCO asserted that *Washoku* is a dietary culture as a social practice based on the Japanese spirit of “respect for nature.” Broadly speaking, “*Washoku*” has the following four distinctive characteristics.

(1) A Rich Variety of Fresh Ingredients and Respect for Inherent Flavors

Japan is a country that extends over a long area from north to south and is rich in nature such as oceans and mountains as well as countryside. Each region uses its own rich variety of local ingredients

rooted in the communities, and cooking techniques and utensils that help to bring out the full flavor of these ingredients have been developed.

(2) Nutritional Balance that Supports a Healthy Diet

A diet based on “one soup three dishes” (*ichiju-sansai*)ⁱ is likely to have a good nutritional balance. Making good use of the “umami” of *dashi* soup stockⁱⁱ and fermented food makes it possible to realize a low-animal fats diet. It has helped Japanese people to live longer and prevent obesity.

(3) Expressions of the Beauty of Nature and Changing Seasons

One of the characteristics of *Washoku* culture is that it expresses the beauty of nature and the changing of the seasons by decorating dishes with seasonal flowers and leaves, and using furniture and dishware that match the seasons.

(4) An Intimate Relationship with Annual Events such as New Year

Japanese food culture is formed around its close ties to annual events. People in Japan have deepened bonds with family and community by sharing foods that are blessings from nature and by spending time eating together.

PRESERVING THE TRADITION OF WASHOKU FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS

According to the 2020 “Survey of *Washoku* Culture in the Dietary Habits of the Population” conducted by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF) of the Japanese government, the image of *Washoku* held by some people is “good for one’s health” (48.9%) and “enable one to enjoy in-season produce” (44.9%), while the image held by others is “difficult to cook” (21.4%) and “takes time for preparation and clean-up” (19.5%).

Example of a “one soup three dishes” (*ichiju-sansai*) meal

Photo: gontabunta/PIXTA

MAFF is working with relevant ministries, agencies, and organizations to promote initiatives to preserve Washoku for future generations.

For example, annual training classes are being run for teachers, childcare workers, nutritionists, school dieticians, and others working in settings such as kindergartens and elementary schools to further their understanding of Washoku culture. The aim of the training is to develop key human resources (Washoku Culture Inheritance Leaders) in Japan who will engage in activities to pass on Washoku culture to the young generation and those involved in child rearing.

In addition, events to mark the tenth anniversary of the inscription of Washoku on UNESCO’s Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity will be held in 2023.

In 2020, MAFF launched the website “*Uchino kyodoryouri* (initially in Japanese only)”ⁱⁱⁱ introducing the regional cuisines unique to each of Japan’s 47 prefectures. It functions as a database of information including the history and recipes of some 1,300 regional cuisines that have been selected by each prefecture.

In 2022, MAFF launched the website “Our Regional Cuisines – Beloved tastes and flavors we want to pass on to the next generation”^{iv} to introduce regional cuisines to international audiences. The website is accessible in five languages (English, Simplified Chinese, Traditional Chinese, Spanish, and Thai), helping to disseminate information more widely both in Japan and around the world.

REGIONAL CUISINE OF MIYAZAKI, HOST OF THE 2023 G7 AGRICULTURE MINISTERS’ MEETING

Miyazaki Prefecture in Kyushu faces the Pacific Ocean and has an important role to play as a source of food supply

because it is rich in nature and abundant in fish and agricultural produce. The prefectural capital of Miyazaki City will host the G7 Agriculture Ministers’ Meeting on April 22 and 23. During the meeting, various global agricultural issues including food security will be discussed.

One famous Miyazaki local cuisine is Chicken Nanban. Chicken Nanban is known to have originated in Nobeoka City. It is said that it was first prepared at a Western-style restaurant in Nobeoka City in the 1950s. In the 1960s, the dish became popular as a feast for the occasional family outing, and eventually became commonplace in school lunches, home cooking, and restaurant menus throughout the prefecture. Sprinkle flour (light flour) on chicken, dip in egg mixture, deep fry, and dip in *amazu* (sweet vinegar). After the chicken is floured, it is dipped in the egg mixture to make it easier to absorb the sweet vinegar after frying and to make it more palatable.

Another cuisine popular with locals is *hiyajiru* (dish of cold soup). Passed down from generation to generation, this dish was once a simple way for farmers engaged in strenuous physical labor in the summer months to nourish their bodies and refuel when they had neither the time nor the appetite to prepare something more elaborate. The broth consists of dried sardines ground up with miso paste and thinned with dashi soup stock; ingredients such as perilla leaves, cucumbers, or tofu may be added, and the mixture is served over cold barley rice.

Various efforts are being made by the Miyazaki Prefectural Government to preserve these cuisines for future generations.

For example, *shokuiku*^v teachers such as individuals engaged in the farming and fishing industry, nutritionists, and chefs hold classes for younger generations on traditional knowledge and cook-



Chicken Nanban, fried chicken dipped in sweet vinegar, a regional cuisine of Miyazaki Prefecture, often served with tartar sauce

Photo: MAFF



Hiyajiru, a nutritious dish of cold soup served over barley rice, a regional cuisine of Miyazaki Prefecture

Photo: MAFF



Class run by a *shokuiku* teacher (center) instructing young people how to prepare the local cuisine of Miyazaki Prefecture

Photo: Courtesy of Miyazaki Prefecture

ing methods of regional and traditional cuisines that make the most of local ingredients. **7**

Note: This article has been created with the consent of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF) and the Miyazaki Prefectural Government, based on the materials published by them.

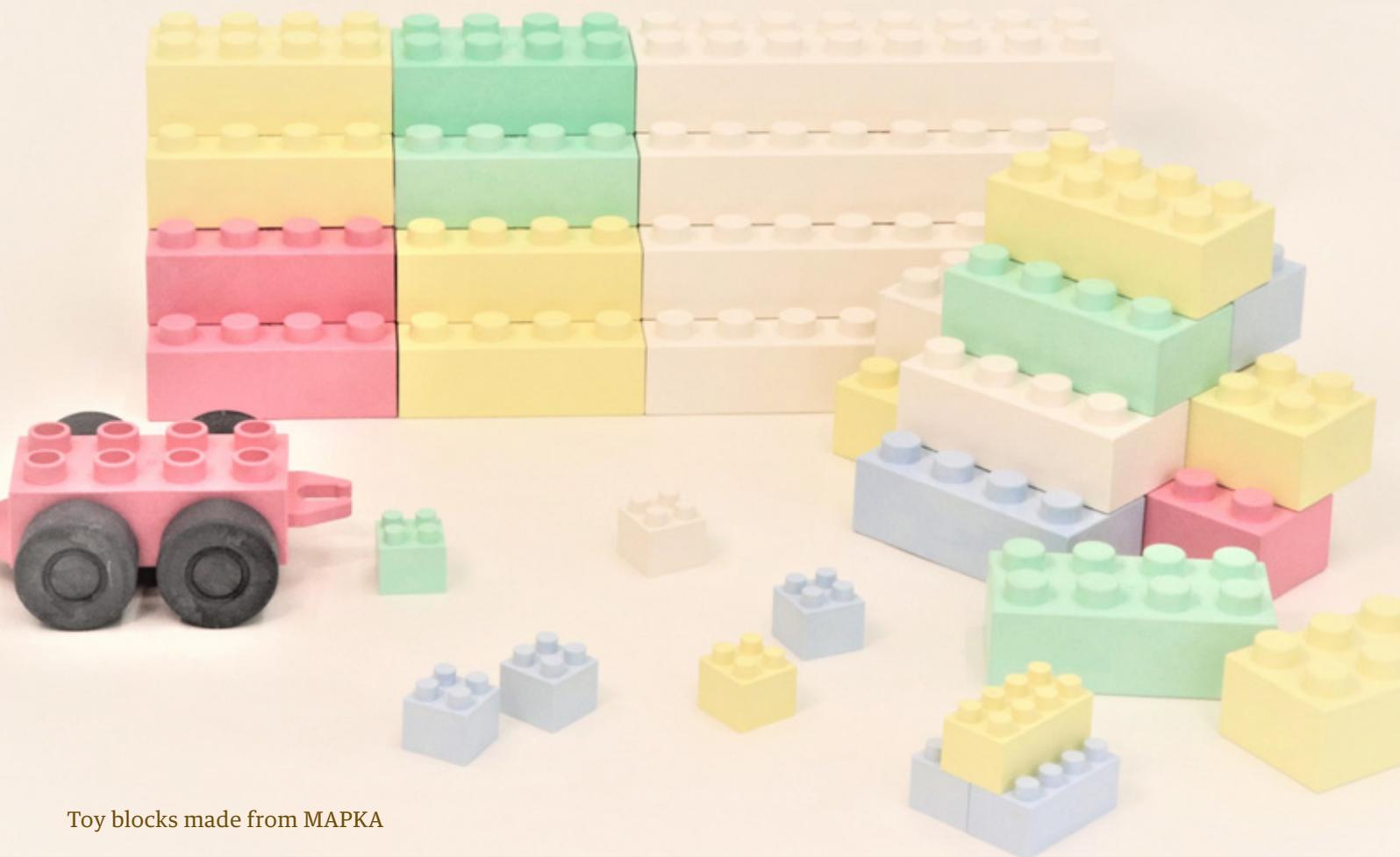
i *Ichiju-sansai* is a meal consisting of rice as the staple food, main dish such as seafood, meat, and other animal products, side dishes such as vegetables, potatoes, and beans, alongside soup and pickles.

ii *Highlighting Japan* June 2022, “The Appeal of *Washoku* Created by *Umami*” https://www.gov-online.go.jp/eng/publicity/book/hlj/html/202206/202206_01_en.html

iii https://www.maff.go.jp/j/keikaku/syokubunka/k_ryouri/

iv <https://local-cuisine.maff.go.jp/en/>

v According to the Basic Act on Shokuiku, *shokuiku* is “the basis of a human life which is fundamental to intellectual, moral, and physical education, to be promoted for the purpose of educating people so that they may acquire knowledge about food and nutrition and ability to choose appropriate food and nutrition for their own sakes through various experiences, thus enabling them to adopt healthy dietary habits.”



Toy blocks made from MAPKA

A New Replacement Material for Plastics

A Japanese company has developed a novel paper powder-based material as a substitute for conventional plastics. Environmentally friendly with excellent performance, the new material is expected to be used in a diverse range of sectors.

SASAKI TAKASHI



PRODUCTS made of plastic are all around us. However, plastics are derived from petroleum so release greenhouse gases when combusted, contributing to global warming. Furthermore, plastic waste that flows into oceans and rivers pollutes water quality and poses a threat to marine life. Measures to counter these

MAPKA made by mixing paper powder and polyolefin resin

adverse impacts of plastic waste present a global challenge.ⁱ

A novel paper powder-based material developed by Eco Research Institute Ltd. (ERI) as a substitute for plastic in response to this situation is generating a great deal of interest. MAPKA is a pelletⁱⁱ produced by mixing paper powder (51% or more by weight) with polyolefin resinⁱⁱⁱ. Paper powder produced from wastepaper is not only a more effective use of paper resources but also signifi-



Food containers made from MAPKA

cantly reduces the use of raw materials derived from petroleum.

“MAPKA was based on a foamed plastic product incorporating paper powder called Earth Republic^{iv}, which we originally developed as a cushioning material for machine parts,” says Matsushita Takamichi, President of ERI. “In order to mass produce Earth Republic, we needed the technology to achieve stable production of paper powder. When the product was first developed, we commissioned more than twenty Japanese paper mill manufacturers to test it, but we weren’t able to achieve satisfactory results. Using existing machines to pulverize the paper made it fibrous rather than powdery. Fibrous paper doesn’t mix well with plastic.”

After more than a year experimenting with different methods, Matsushita happened to walk into a *soba* noodles restaurant where he noticed a stone mortar being used to grind *soba* (buckwheat) flour. This gave him the idea for a new machine based on an entirely new concept of grinding rather than pulverizing paper. After creating the new machine, ERI succeeded in achieving the stable production of fine paper powder with a particle size of 25 to 50 microns (1 micron is one thousandth of a millimeter).

The use of wastepaper generated by

papermaking companies and printing plants to make paper powder enabled ERI to keep the price of Earth Republic lower than other typical foamed plastics. Moreover, such raw materials do not contain additives with a high environmental impact, with most being naturally derived, and producing no noxious gases during incineration.

The technology used to produce Earth Republic was further developed and its application expanded. MAPKA was the result. MAPKA is made by

mixing equal amounts of paper powder and polyolefin resin. Its primary characteristic is that it can be molded into different shapes, just like conventional plastic materials. Since MAPKA has this feature, there is no need to replace or modify conventional plastic molding equipment to make products using the material.

In terms of attributes such as strength and lightweight properties, MAPKA is rated on a par with or superior to conventional plastic materials. In addition, at every stage of the production process, from the extraction of raw materials through to manufacture, greenhouse gas emissions can be cut by 35.1% compared to conventional plastics. Also, MAPKA products can be disposed of as burnable trash.



Forks and spoon made from MAPKA



**Eco Research Institute Ltd. (ERI)
President Matsushita Takamichi**

Moreover, because MAPKA products have a more refined appearance and higher quality feel than regular plastic products, they are more likely to be reused by consumers, which in turn reduces their environmental impact. “The first product we made from MAPKA was containers for food events. Up until that point, disposal of paper food containers that were thrown away at venues had been a significant burden on the organizers. But the superior appearance of MAPKA containers meant that the majority of visitors took them home, greatly reducing that burden,” says Matsushita.

ERI has been the recipient of numerous awards in recognition of its creative manufacturing, including the Monozukuri Nippon Grand Award and the Ministry of Environment’s Cool Choice Leaders Award. Matsushita himself was awarded the Medal with Yellow Ribbon by the Japanese Government in the spring of 2022.

MAPKA outperforms conventional plastics on a range of features, including superior environmental performance, manufacturing cost, and quality. As such, its use is expected to expand beyond food containers and household goods, which have seen strong demand, to a wide range of sectors such as automotive parts, interior finishing materials, household appliance parts, and construction materials. 

i See *Highlighting Japan* August 2020, “A Smart Relationship with Plastic” https://www.gov-online.go.jp/eng/publicity/book/hlj/html/202008/202008_09_en.html
 ii Pellets are plastic granules used as raw materials for molded products.
 iii Polyolefin resin is the most widely used type of plastic (resin) in our daily lives. The two most common types are polyethylene, which is used for plastic bags and tubes for foods such as mayonnaise, and polypropylene, which is used for products such as toys and sporting goods.
 iv Foamed plastic is a type of plastic that contains many small air bubbles.

Sharing the Charms of the Hakuba Valley



David Enright snowboarding in Hakuba

David Enright from Canada is sharing the charms of Nagano Prefecture's Hakuba Valley, a ski resort known for its stunning mountain scenery and abundant high-quality snow, with visitors from around the world.

SATO KUMIKO

HAKUBA Valley stretches along the foothills of Japan's Northern Alps in northern Nagano Prefecture. A popular ski resort with a towering mountain backdrop and high-quality powder snow, Hakuba hosted some of the events at the 1998 Nagano Winter Olympics. Over the last ten years or so, the area has become increasingly well-known among skiers outside Japan, and prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, more than 200,000 overseas skiers visited the valley in the winter.

David Enright from Canada has been introducing the splendor of Hakuba Valley to such foreign visitors for some twenty years. David first came to Japan for a month as a high school exchange stu-

dent in Chiba Prefecture and later had the opportunity to study in Japan for a year. He moved to Hakuba Village in the center of the Hakuba Valley in 1994. The Japanese woman he would later marry introduced David to Hakuba, thinking it might be a good place for him to live given his familiarity with the great outdoors in Canada where he grew up.

"Hakuba Village is surrounded by the majestic Northern Alps. I was impressed that Japan had such amazing mountain scenery when I first visited. More than anything, there were perfect mountains for skiing, which I love, with plenty of quality snow," says David.



David Enright



A back-country skier in the Hakuba Valley



David (left) provides training in avalanche safety

According to David, until about 20 years ago the accepted wisdom was that the mountains of North America and Europe were the best places to go to ski. But now, especially for people from Australia and countries in Asia, Japan is considered a great destination for skiing, as it is closer than North America and Europe and jet lag is not an issue. Moreover, ski resorts such as those in Hakuba Valley have acquired a great reputation for the quality of the skiing. At Hakuba, in addition to ski slopes that can be enjoyed by beginners, there is a long course measuring some 8,000 meters for advanced skiers to enjoy.

David started a private company in 2000, the predecessor of the Evergreen

Outdoor Center, offering avalanche safety training sessions. Simultaneously, he also started a guide business offering outdoor tours and an English-language ski school. The Evergreen Outdoor Center organizes activities such as back-country skiingⁱ and snowshoeⁱⁱ trekking so that visitors can experience something different from skiing on the slopes. Back-country skiing is particularly popular.

“The Hakuba mountains are a place for experienced skiers to do back-country skiing. These mountains are rewarding, as back-country skiing requires one to think about the topography, weather conditions, snow quality, and various other conditions,” says David. “There is also the risk of avalanches, so it is essential to take on this challenge while also ensuring your own safety.”

David holds English-language skiing lessons and instructor courses, as well as avalanche safety training sessions, making use of his Canadian qualifications in avalanche countermeasures. Having encountered an avalanche when he was a child, he understands how frightening they are, and during the ski season, he goes around the field to ensure everyone’s safety, taking precautionary measures if there is any risk of an avalanche.

“Getting out and enjoying nature is

the best way to learn about how great it is,” says David. “In Hakuba, there are high mountains, lots of snow, beautiful marshes and lakes, deep forests, and clean air and water. It is a place to heal your body and mind.”

When the snow has melted after winter, the Evergreen Outdoor Center offers canyoningⁱⁱⁱ, kayaking, and other adventure sports programs for visitors in the green season. David says he hopes to add various programs in the future, like those for children in which they can learn about nature through play. 



Summer canyoning in the Hakuba Valley

- i When back-country skiing, you ski using your own strength in places other than those prepared as ski slopes and without using a ski lift. You traverse the natural snowy mountain with skis or a snowboard.
- ii A walking aid to allow you to walk on top of snow
- iii Canyoning is a type of mountaineering that involves traveling in canyons by walking, climbing, abseiling and swimming, etc.

Supporting Market-oriented Agriculture in Ethiopia

Farmers (seated left) conducting a baseline survey with support from extension officers

The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) is engaged in a project in the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia to increase farmers' income by encouraging them to pay attention to the conditions of the market.

SAWAJI OSAMU

AGRICULTURE in the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia in Africa is a major industry accounting for about 40% of the country's GDP. Agriculture workers make up around 80% of the population. Many of them are small-scale farmers with an average of less than one hectare of farmable land, and these farmers make their living



Farmer representatives conduct a market survey

by producing staple crops that include grains such as teff, sorghum¹, corn, and wheat, as well as potatoes, onions, tomatoes, cabbages, and other vegetables. However, as many of these farmers are not sufficiently managing crop cultivation based on the needs and timing of the high demand of the market, they struggle to raise income.

To respond to this problem, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) started a project in 2017 in cooperation with the Ethiopian government to improve the income of small-scale farmers in two regions by introducing the SHEP (Smallholder Horticulture Empowerment & Promotion) approach. SHEP is one of the market-oriented agricultural extension approaches originally developed through a technical cooperation project by JICA and the Kenyan government that started in 2006. Through JICA's support, the SHEP approach has been introduced in around 30 countries in Africa to date and has spread to around 60 countries worldwide.

"A major objective of the SHEP approach is to change farmers' mindset, from 'Grow and Sell (growing crops for food and searching for buyers later)' to 'Grow to Sell (growing for the market),'” says Saso Fumiaki, chief advisor for JICA's SHEP Project in Ethiopia from 2017 until January of this year (2023).

¹ Teff and sorghum are cereal grasses widely cultivated in Ethiopia. They are usually used to make the crepe-like *injera*, a staple of the country.

Farmers selecting crops and creating planting calendars with the technical support of extension officers (left)

“With the SHEP approach, farmers carry out a series of activities and come to think by themselves about how to make a living through agriculture.”

The key activities are baseline surveys and market surveys. With baseline surveys, farmers from the groups gather, and extension officers support them in understanding the current situation of their farms’ management with regard to the crops being grown, cropping land size, yield, production costs, and net profit. As many farmers do not know exactly how much profit they make through producing and selling their crops, this survey is a chance for the farmers to learn firsthand about the current situation. After that, with market surveys, extension officers and farmer representatives visit the market and collect information from crop vendors such as which vegetables sell at high prices, what the purchase prices are, and what type and quality of crops vendors would like to purchase.



Farmer group representatives and farming material suppliers (right) exchange information at a market linkage forum

“Through market surveys, farmers can learn about the varieties and sizes of crops that sell at high prices in the market, as well as the timing of selling crops and buyers’ needs. On the basis of the results of the market survey, the entire group of farmers discuss and decide on the crops to produce to sell at the market in the coming season,” says Saso. “It is extremely important for farmers to go through these steps of raising awareness, making decisions, and acting on their own, so as to increase their motivation.”

The crops farmers typically choose to cultivate include garlic, potatoes, onions, tomatoes, cabbages, and red peppers. Farmers proceed with planting these crops while receiving technical guidance on the timing of planting and cultivation methods from extension officers.

After that, farmer representatives participate in market linkage forums along with agricultural material suppliers (of quality seeds, pesticides, etc.), vendors, crop processing companies, microfinance institutions, cooperative unions, and other related parties. These forums are opportunities for farmers to exchange information and build networks with other stakeholders in the agricultural business. Accordingly, the forums lead to the purchasing of high-quality seed, diversification of customers, and other results.

The project also focuses on improving the capacities of offi-

cers in charge of local governments and extension officers who support farmers through a series of training programs. Participants in these programs learn about practical agricultural techniques, such as basic cultivation methods for target crops and making compost, how to control pests and diseases, and record-keeping of their income and expenditure to promote better farm management.

These project initiatives have led to an increase in income for many farmers. Comparing the before and after of the net income from the horticultural production of around 1,000 farmers that are a part of this project, it was found that the average income of target farmers from horticulture had more than doubled. This new income contributed to improvements in farmers’ livelihood, being used for educational fees for children, for building new homes, and for the purchase of land, motorbikes as transportation, and agricultural machinery such as irrigation pumps.

“I was surprised when a few years after the introduction of SHEP in Ethiopia, a project target farmer spoke to me about the importance of crop diversification and market surveys just like a businessperson would. I realized that farmers’ mindsets had changed more than anticipated,” says Saso. “Officers in charge of local governments and extension officers, who had been uncertain about the effectiveness of the SHEP approach, came to deeply understand the effects of the SHEP approach after seeing tangible changes in the farmers with their own eyes, and they are now committed to expanding the SHEP approach as a part of their regular extension duties.”

JICA will work to support the spread of the SHEP approach from the current two regions to a wider area in Ethiopia. The SHEP approach will surely make a great contribution to the lives of many small-scale farmers in Ethiopia. 



A cabbage farmer who was part of the SHEP project and whose revenue was greatly improved as a result

A colony of *fukujuso* in Kitakata City, Fukushima Prefecture. AFLO



SEASONAL FLOWERS

Fukujuso *Amur Adonis*



An orange-colored variety of *fukujuso*
Yossy/PIXTA



Yellow *fukujuso*

Amur adonis, or *fukujuso* in Japanese, is a perennial flower in the buttercup family native to Japan that grows widely in deciduous forests in almost every part of the archipelago. The plant grows to a height of 15 to 30 cm and blooms from February to April, signaling the arrival of spring.

Fukujuso is popular for the beauty of its clusters of small yellow flowers, each measuring 3 to 4 cm in diameter. There are colonies of these plants throughout Japan, and during the blooming season many people travel to admire the bright yellow flowers in their natural habitat. Fukujuso is also widely planted in gardens and in pots. Many varieties have been produced through selective breeding over the years, and fukujuso can now be found in many colors besides yellow and with a range of single and double petal formations. In Japanese, *fuku* means “good fortune,” *ju* means “longevity” and *so* means “plant,” so in the Japanese language of flowers, fukujoso means “fortune” or “wealth,” “happiness” and “a long life.”

Reference: *Highlighting Japan*, April 2022, “A Colony of Amur Adonis, Flower of Happiness and Longevity” https://www.gov-online.go.jp/eng/publicity/book/hlj/html/202204/202204_03_en.html.

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