

food forum

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THE JAPANESE TABLE

Food Byways: The Sugar Road

by Masami Ishii

This third installment of our current Feature series traces Japan's historical trade routes by which various foods were originally conveyed around the country. This time we look at how sugar came to make its way throughout Japan.

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Food Byways: The Sugar Road

From Medicine to Sweets

According to a record of goods brought to Japan from China by the scholar-priest Ganjin (Ch. Jianzhen; 688–763), founder of Toshodaiji Temple in Nara, cane sugar is thought to have been brought here in the eighth century. Sugar was considered exceedingly precious at that time, and until the thirteenth century it was used solely as an ingredient in the practice of traditional Chinese medicine.

In Japan, the primary sweeteners had been maltose syrup made from glutinous rice and malt, and a sweet boiled-down syrup called *amazura* made from a Japanese ivy root. But by the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century, sugar was being used as a food ingredient here: it is mentioned in a *teikin orai* (a textbook on wisdom for daily life) dating from that time that describes *sato yokan*, a jellied sweet made with red beans and *sato* (sugar). An illustrated scroll titled *Shichiju ichiban shokunin uta-awase* (“Seventy-one poetry matches on 142 artisans”), dating from the late fifteenth to early sixteenth century, depicts *sato manju*, steamed buns filled with red beans and sugar. From these early examples, it seems that sugar had come to be used in making jellied sweets and steamed buns, and thus its varied uses gradually spread throughout society.

Sweets from the West

When missionaries from Portugal and Spain began coming to Japan in the late-sixteenth century, they introduced *nanban-gashi* sweets, including *konpeito* (Portuguese: *confeito*) and *kasutera* (castella sponge cake). When Nagasaki port opened to trade in 1571, some 100 kilograms or more of sugar began

to be imported annually, and it was eventually disseminated throughout the towns of Hakata and Kokura in what is known today as Fukuoka Prefecture in northern Kyushu island. As sugar made its way into various regions, different ways of using it evolved. Reflecting this history, in the 1980s the Nagasaki Kaido highway connecting the cities of Nagasaki and Kokura was dubbed “the Sugar Road.”

After Japan adopted its national seclusion laws in the early seventeenth century, cutting off trade and contact with much of the world, Nagasaki became the sole trading port through which sugar and other goods were imported from overseas. By the eighteenth century, the quantity of sugar imported on Dutch ships was between 500-1,000 tons annually—and this rose to over twice that amount, if we include sugar imported on Chinese ships. As a result of the increase in sugar imports, a special storehouse was built in Nagasaki from which sugar was shipped to wholesale warehouses in Osaka and then distributed around the country.

Along the Sugar Road

The culture of sugar in Japan continued to flourish in many ways. In Nagasaki, sugar was used to prepare dishes served in meals; however, sugar was better matched to making diverse sweets that were rooted in Western influences. Following along the sugar road, we find *kasutera* in Nagasaki, a baked cookie called *maruboro* in Saga, and a golden *fios de ovos* confection from Fukuoka known in Japanese as *keiran somen* that is made of threads of egg yolk cooked in sugar syrup. It is unsurprising that the founders of two of Japan’s leading makers of sweets were both born in this area.

The culture of sugar did not linger in northern Kyushu alone, but spread along the distribution routes to Osaka and Edo (now Tokyo). The confection known as *taruto* (Dutch: *taart*), for which the city of Matsuyama in Ehime Prefecture on the island of Shikoku is famous, is in fact is a kind of moist sponge roll filled with sweet bean paste. This style of cake originated when the lord of the Matsuyama domain, in charge of guarding the city of Nagasaki, ordered his men to learn how to make Western-style sweets. Originally, the wrapped filling was jam, but bean paste was later substituted to reflect local tastes, as occurred in many cases following on the introduction of Western sweets.



Japan's "Sugar Road"



Clockwise from top left: *maruboro*, *keiran somen*, *konpeito*, *taruto* and *kasutera*

Domestic Production

The production of sugar in Japan itself was long in coming. In the early seventeenth century, it is said that someone from Amami (today part of Kagoshima Prefecture) brought back the method of making *kurozato* (an unrefined, dark brown sugar) after being shipwrecked in China. The manufacture of white sugar required advanced refining technology, but the eighth Tokugawa shogun Yoshimune (1684-1751) encouraged the cultivation of sugar cane, and by the end of the

eighteenth century, domestically produced white sugar had widely circulated in the market. Most notably, in Shikoku's Sanuki and Awa provinces (present-day Kagawa and Tokushima prefectures, respectively), refining techniques were advanced enough around the 1800s to produce the fine, white *wasanbon* sugar that is still prized today as an ingredient in high quality Japanese confectionery.

Meanwhile, great quantities of sugar appear to have circulated in Japan not only through the regular import markets, but also on the black markets. Domestic production, which started in the early eighteenth century, helped increase availability and this probably added impetus to its general consumption. In the late eighteenth century, sugar became so

popular that ordinary people began to sprinkle it on foods such as cooked rice or *udon* noodles.

Today, Japan imports some 1.3 million tons of sugar annually. As these imports have increased through the years, sugar has slowly come to influence and redefine Japanese cuisine through its use as a day-to-day seasoning in ordinary cooking, as well as its appearance in an infinite variety of sweets—not only in Western-style pastries and cakes, but in contemporary and traditional Japanese confectionery. ◆



Manufacturing *kurozato* during the Edo era (1603-1867) in Amami, an illustration from the book *Nihon sankai meibutsu-zue* (1797). Courtesy National Diet Library digital archives



Wasanbon sugar

cover

Illustration of Dejima in Nagasaki port. During Japan's national seclusion, the tiny island of Dejima was the only area where the Dutch were allowed to live and to trade. *Tokan rankan-zu-emaki* (1801). Courtesy Nagasaki Museum of History and Culture

Author's profile

Masami Ishii was born in 1958. He graduated from Tokyo Gakugei University in 1980 from which he later received his Masters degree in Japanese language education in 1984. Prof. Ishii specializes in Japanese literature and folklore, and he has been teaching at Tokyo Gakugei University since 1993. He has authored many books and publications such as *Tono Monogatari-e-no-Goshotai* (An introduction to tales of Tono) and *Mukashi-banashi-to-Kanko—Kataribe-no-Shozo* (Folktales and travel—a portrait of a storyteller).



Japan's Evolving Train Stations



Tokyo Station's GRANSTA shopping arcade offers a variety of foods including *bento* lunchboxes and prepared dishes.

Stations are now a lifestyle destination

Major train stations in Japan have changed drastically in recent years. Pass through the wicket and find not just your train, but busy shopping centers where you can buy almost anything including souvenirs, clothing, household goods—and food. Grab a quick lunch before boarding, buy prepared dishes for dinner before heading home, visit a restaurant for a full-course meal or a glass of wine: any convenience you might imagine is right at the station.

The Japanese rail system became well established during the late nineteenth century; today, rail-development efforts concentrate on those areas immediately surrounding major urban stations, where information, activities and commerce are increasingly concentrated. Until recently, train stations were no more than transportation hubs; today they are multi-use lifestyle destinations that integrate commercial and office facilities, hotels, apartments, shops, restaurants and other services.

In 2012, Osaka Station underwent significant redevelopment and has become, in effect, a small city within an enormous complex comprising a hotel, clinic, cinemas and over 200 stores and restaurants that all interconnect with

the station building. The rail station itself was updated with enhanced safety features and a renovated facade.

After five and a half years, the renovation and preservation of Tokyo Station's Marunouchi Station Building, designated an Important Cultural Property, was completed in October 2012, faithfully reproducing the historic building as it appeared after its construction in 1914. Here, besides countless convenience stores and souvenir shops, many station businesses now feature on-site kitchens that produce freshly made foods. Some of these include small outlets of well-known restaurants, including some of Tokyo's most famous ramen noodle shops. These have become hugely popular, as have the shops of several major confectionery companies where, thanks to their in-house kitchens, visitors can observe preparations and enjoy a condensed factory-tour experience, then sample just-made goodies. The seasonal merchandise and exclusive goods sold at these shops are a tremendous draw, and so these days the train station bustles not only with travelers, but with curious—and hungry—shoppers and visitors of all ages. ●



Osaka Station



Ohagi and Botamochi



Azuki red beans

During the days of the autumnal and the spring equinox, Japanese hold memorials and pay their respects to their ancestors, a Buddhist observance known as *Ohigan*. *Ohagi* and *botamochi* are traditional sweets served at these times; *ohagi* is served exclusively during the autumn, and *botamochi* in the spring. Both are similar sweets which are named in reference to seasonal flowers—the *hagi*, or Japanese bush clover, which appears in fall, and the *botan*, or peony, which blooms in spring.

Ohagi and *botamochi* consist of steamed glutinous rice that has been pounded until only half the grains remain, then hand-formed into round balls before being coated in thick, sweet azuki red bean paste. Various types of azuki paste may be used, including chunky sweet *tsubuan*, as well as strained *koshian* paste; other coatings include *kinako*,



Ohagi and *botamochi* coatings include (from left) : *tsubuan*, *koshian*, sugared ground sesame and sugared roasted soy flour.

sugared roasted soy flour, and sugared ground sesame.

Because *Ohigan* is based on the lunar calendar, the dates shift slightly each year. Each seven-day observance comprises the three days before and after the official holidays of both Autumnal Equinox Day, which falls on September 23 this year, and Vernal Equinox Day, which falls on March 21 of next year.

Offerings of *ohagi* and *botamochi* were intended to console ancestral

spirits; traditionally it was believed that the red color of the azuki beans purified and averted misfortune. In the spring, *botamochi* are considered a form of prayer for fertility; in fall, *ohagi* represent gratitude for the blessings of the harvest. These sweets have been prepared in households for centuries; today they continue to be made at home, but are also available at traditional Japanese confectionery (*wagashi*) stores. ◆

DELECTABLE JOURNEYS

Nagano Oyaki

In the past, Nagano Prefecture's mountainous terrain and harsh winter climate limited the region's rice production. Farmers instead chose to cultivate wheat and buckwheat (soba), and for generations have used flour made from these grains as the basis for many local dishes. One of these is *oyaki*, a savory dumpling made from wheat and buckwheat dough, stuffed with various vegetables seasoned with soy sauce or miso, or filled with sweet azuki red bean paste. They are then grilled or steamed, depending on local and personal tastes. The "yaki" of the name *oyaki* means "to grill," since they were originally simply grilled on an open hearth. *Oyaki* are usually made at home to enjoy as either a meal or a snack. Ingredients and preparations may differ widely, but whatever its form, the flavors of the humble *oyaki* are straightforward, best characterized by fresh local pickles, eggplant, mushroom, pumpkin and other local produce.

Nagano





OYAKI DUMPLINGS STUFFED WITH EGGPLANT

The dough for *oyaki* dumplings is easily made by hand, with no need for tools such as a rolling pin. This recipe uses a trio of complementary fermented foods for the seasoning—miso, soy sauce and balsamic vinegar—which, with the basil, give this Japanese snack a Western flair.



● Japanese eggplant

Makes 10 dumplings 155 kcal Protein 4.4 g Fat 3.3 g (per dumpling)

Oyaki dough

- 150 g (5.3 oz.) cake flour*
- 120 g (4.2 oz.) bread flour*
- 1/2 t baking powder
- 1 t granulated sugar
- 1/8 t salt
- 1 1/2 t vegetable oil
- 2/3 C (160 ml) water or more

Seasoned filling

- 3-4 Japanese eggplants, stems removed, total 300 g (10 oz.)**
- 2 T Kikkoman Soy Sauce
- 2 T *shinshu* (Nagano) miso
- 1 1/2 T honey
- 1 t granulated sugar
- 1 T balsamic vinegar, microwave 40 seconds at 600 watts until slightly thickened
- 1/4 medium-sized onion, roughly chopped 55-60 g (2 oz.)
- 1 T and more vegetable oil
- 10 basil leaves, roughly chopped
- 6-7 shelled walnuts, finely chopped, 10 g (.35 oz.)

1 To make *oyaki* dough, in a bowl stir together the cake flour, bread flour, baking powder, sugar and salt.

2 Drizzle in the vegetable oil, then pour in water a little at a time; knead until the mixture is the consistency of bread dough: not too stiff and so that it just clings a bit to the bowl. Adjust by adding water as necessary. Lightly flour the surface of the dough and set aside for 30 minutes in a bowl covered with plastic wrap.

3 For the filling, cut eggplants lengthwise and then into 5 mm (1/4 in.) slices. Soak in water for about 15 minutes, then drain.

4 Mix the soy sauce, miso, honey, sugar and simmered balsamic vinegar, then set aside.

5 Heat 1 T vegetable oil in a pan over medium heat and sauté the onions until transparent, then add drained eggplants and stir until slightly wilted. Add basil leaves. Lower the heat slightly, add the seasoning mixture and stir to avoid scorching until the liquid is almost evaporated. Turn off the heat, add walnuts and allow to cool.

6 Divide both the dough and the filling into 10 portions. Flour palms, take one piece of dough and form a ball. Stretch the dough into a 10 cm / 4 in. circle, place one portion of the filling in the center, bring edges together, press to seal (see photos).



7 Immediately place *oyaki* sealed side down in a non-stick frying pan over low heat and lightly brown both sides. Alternate between making dumplings and browning them until all dumplings are done.

8 Steam all grilled dumplings together for 10 minutes. Serve hot.

* As an alternative to cake and bread flour, a total of 270 g (about 2 1/4 C) sifted all-purpose flour may be substituted.

** If using large eggplants, cut lengthwise into quarters then slice into 5 mm (1/4 in.) pieces.

Note: For accurate measurements, please weigh all ingredients.

Recipe by Michiko Yamamoto



KARUKAN STEAMED CAKE WITH BLUEBERRIES



◆ Japanese yam

大和芋

Makes 16 slices 115 kcal Protein 1.8 g Fat 0.2 g (per piece)

- 1/3 C (70 g) dried blueberries
- 5/6 C (200 ml) water
- 1 t Kikkoman Soy Sauce
- 1 1/2 C (200 g) Japanese non-glutinous rice flour (*ryoshinko*)
- 1 t baking powder
- 1 1/2 C (200 g) *kurozato*, powdered dark brown sugar
- 1/2 C (100 g) grated Japanese yam*
- 1 T granulated sugar
- 2 egg whites

Square cake pan 18 cm x 18 cm (7 in. x 7 in.) or round pan 20 cm (8 in.) diameter.

1 Soak dried blueberries in mixture of water and soy sauce for 30 minutes. Drain and reserve separately the soaking water and blueberries.

2 Sift Japanese rice flour and baking powder together. Set aside.

3 In a food processor, blend grated Japanese yam (see photo) and dark brown sugar. Add the reserved soaking water and mix. Pour into a bowl.



4 To this bowl, add in the mixture of rice flour and baking powder, stir and set aside.

5 In a different bowl, add sugar to egg whites and whisk until stiff. Fold whipped egg and blueberries into the yam mixture and stir well.

6 Place a sheet of baking paper on the bottom of cake pan and pour in the cake batter; steam in a steamer over high heat for 30 minutes, or until a wooden pick inserted in the center comes out clean.

7 Let cool, remove the *karukan* cake from the pan, peel off baking paper and cut into 16 pieces.

* If unavailable, Chinese yam may be substituted. If using Chinese yam, adjust amount of water as this variety has a higher moisture content.

Note: For accurate measurements, please weigh all ingredients.

1 C (U.S. cup) = approx. 240 ml; 1 T=15 ml; 1t=5 ml

Recipe by Kikkoman Corporation



Renovations at Manns Wine Komoro Winery

Kikkoman has introduced new tastes to the world through the traditional Japanese seasoning of soy sauce, and has delivered new flavor experiences to Japan as well, including wines produced by Manns Wine Co., Ltd., a member of the Kikkoman Group. One of the Manns Wine's wineries, the Komoro Winery, is located in the city of Komoro in eastern Nagano Prefecture, which has an ideal climate for viticulture.

The Manns Wine premium SOLARIS series evolved from the desire to produce a great wine using 100% domestically grown grapes that would compare with renowned wines from around the world. It is made mainly at the Komoro Winery. To produce the best wine in Japan, with its high rainfall, the company concentrated not only on grape variety, but also on where and how the grapes were grown, harvest amount and wine-making techniques. The name SOLARIS refers to the Latin word for "sun" and, as seen in the Manns Wine logo, grapes are regarded as gifts of the sun. The



SOLARIS wine

SOLARIS name symbolizes the Manns Wine stance on quality; that is, to make wines using only the highest-quality grapes. Manns Wines are highly acclaimed not only in Japan, but around the world, and have won numerous awards in global wine contests.

At the Komoro Winery is a 3,000-*tsubo* (about 10,000m²) Japanese garden, Bansuien, created over the span of nearly a decade. The garden's name reflects the winery's wish that everyone (*ban*) be captivated (*sui*) by the beauty of this garden (*en*), and be elated (*sui*) by the taste of its wines. Bansuien features some 170 plant species, including a century-old Zenkoji grapevine, which traces its origins to one of Japan's most famous temples. Visitors can enjoy a variety of different views and experience the seasonal wonders of a Japanese garden.

Situated within Bansuien, the winery's authentic Japanese tearoom (*chashitsu*) and its underground wine cellar, both used to welcome special guests, were recently renovated. The winery updated the tearoom while still retaining much of its original appearance and provided chairs and tables to accommodate those guests unaccustomed to sitting with folded

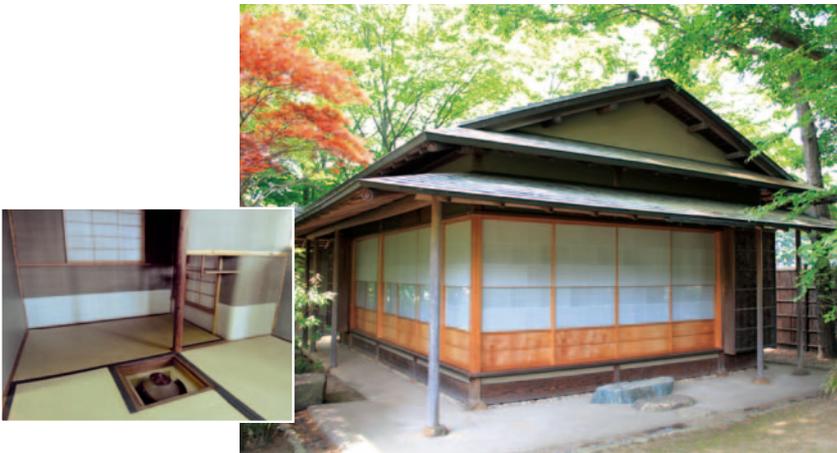


Underground wine cellar

legs in comfort. As the tearoom is part of the winery, grape motifs were integrated into its decor.

Rather than imitate a traditional European cellar, Komoro's new underground cellar is modern and subtle with a Japanese design. Great care has gone into lighting placement and illumination to provide greater focus on the wines themselves; in its exclusive tasting room, chandeliers designed as grape clusters project shapes of the fruit onto the walls.

Komoro Winery embodies Kikkoman's hope to produce the highest-quality wine and deliver a taste experience transmitted through a delicate blend of Western culture and Japanese tradition. With its premium Japanese wines and beautiful Japanese garden, the winery is set to usher in the season of *nouveau*. ●



Interior and exterior views of the tearoom



Bansuien Japanese garden