

This and That from the Food Cultures of the World

Part 13: Dried *Nori* and the History of *Nori* Farming

We imagine the typical Japanese meal as being comprised of steamed white rice, dried *nori* with soy sauce, pickled plums, and *miso* soup. This issue introduces the history of dried *nori*, a necessary ingredient in Japanese cuisine, and the story of the development of *nori* farming technologies, based on the research and discoveries of a British algologist, which made it possible for everyone to enjoy *nori*.

Nori Becomes a Levy Item

During the Asuka and Nara periods (mid-6th to late-7th centuries), *nori* was imported from China (Tang Dynasty). In 701, Japan's first code of ethics, the *Taiho Ritsuryo*, or Taiho Code, was compiled. One of its edicts says that *murasaki nori* was one of the eight varieties of seaweed, and one of twenty-nine marine products, that could be used as currency in paying tribute taxes. This shows us that *nori* was already being produced throughout Japan by the beginning of the 8th century.

The Emergence of Asakusa *Nori*, an Edo Specialty

Until around the Tensho era (1573–1592), and before the beginning of the Edo period, *nori* grew wild in the waters off of the Asakusa district. However, with the expansion of Edo, reclamation of the Asakusa coastline reduced the area in which *nori* could grow. It was then that technologies for farming *nori* were invented, and *nori* farmed near Shinagawa, and Omori, where the mild current of Edo bay (currently Tokyo bay) made these areas optimal for *nori* farming, was transported to Asakusa for processing.

In those days, *nori* farming was based on the theory that spores float-

ing in the sea attached to rocks along the coast, spent the summer in this state, and then grew into *nori* buds at the beginning of fall. Therefore, nets, or poles of bamboo or other wood, were placed in the water for the *nori* buds to attach to and mature. The mature *nori* was then hand picked. This method was very natural, but did require a little human interference.

As Edo prospered and its population increased, the demand for *nori* increased, and the locally produced *nori* became available throughout Edo as *Asakusa nori*. The streets of the Asakusa district were lined with wholesale *nori* dealers, and were extremely crowded whenever the local market was held. During the Kyoho era (1716–1736), a method taken from the production of recycled Asakusa paper that allowed the square sheets of *nori* that we know today to be produced was first applied. This new development led to the creation of *norimaki*, or rice rolled in *nori*. This new food became extremely popular with the people of Edo, and was often sold at food stalls, making it a "fast food" of the day.

It wasn't long before *Asakusa nori* became a well-known specialty of Edo and presented to the Imperial court in Kyoto. By the Tenpo era (1830–1844), *Asakusa nori* was known throughout the country as an Edo specialty. On a side note, the size of squares of dried *nori* was standardized in Japan, around 1970, at 21 × 19 cm (8.3 × 7.5 in.).

Dried *Nori* Becomes a Staple Japanese Food

With little knowledge of the lifecycle of *nori*, the very natural farming methods initiated during the Edo

period continued until after World War II. However, in 1949, Dr. Kathleen Mary Drew-Baker (1901–1957), a British algologist, shed light on the mysterious lifecycle of *nori*. *Nori* spores burrow into the shells of marine animals, where they grow and mature into black filaments from early spring to early fall, and are then dispersed to float in the sea. This discovery led to the development of artificial seeding techniques, which revolutionized and stabilized the *nori* farming industry. Now *nori* can be farmed in places where no natural farms had previously existed, and mass production is now possible.

Fifty percent of Japan's *nori* is farmed in the Ariake Sea off of Kyushu. Today, a statue in Sumiyoshi Shrine, overlooking the Ariake Sea, stands in commemoration of Dr.



A statue dedicated to Dr. Kathleen Mary Drew-Baker stands on the grounds of Sumiyoshi Shrine in Uto, Kumamoto prefecture. (Courtesy of the Kumamoto Prefecture Sumiyoshi Federation of Fisheries Cooperative Associations)

Drew-Baker's incredible contribution to *nori* farming. In addition, April 14th has been set aside by those involved in the *nori* industry as the day of the Drew Festival, and in 2001, they celebrated the centennial of her birth.

Nori Overseas

China began full-scale *nori* production and export in 1992, followed by South Korea in 1993. Maine, in the U.S.A., began *nori* farming around 1980, and New Zealand began *nori* farming and production in 1990, with exports to Australia shortly after. In Wales, Dr. Drew-Baker's home country, laverbread, made of *nori*, is extremely popular, and is added to all sorts of dishes, or simply served as a garnish.



Illustration depicting *nori* processing and sales. By 1836, when Edo Meisho Zue was published, *Asakusa nori* had already spread throughout Japan. The wooden poles used in *nori* farming can be seen in the upper left of the illustration. (Edo Meisho Zue)

References and assistance

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