

The Japanese Immigrants who Enriched Dominican Tables

The Dominican Republic—50 years after Japanese agricultural immigration

Food Culture Researcher and Lecturer at Miyagi Prefecture Agricultural College

Ryoko Endo

For various historical reasons, many Japanese have emigrated abroad. At first, these Japanese were bewildered by the differences between the culture of their new country and their own traditional culture. Then, Japanese culture was typically propagated locally, to eventually fuse with the local culture. The lives of the Japanese emigrants, or *Nikkei*, who moved to the Dominican Republic in Central America, are introduced here, with an emphasis placed on their food culture.

The Dominican Republic

The Dominican Republic is on the island of Hispaniola, the second largest island in the Caribbean Sea, behind only Cuba. It occupies two thirds of the island. The remaining portion is occupied by Haiti, a former French colony. The sun is so strong in the Dominican Republic that you feel as if you could touch it.

The first European who landed on the island was Christopher Columbus in 1492. The port town that is his legacy here has been designated by UNESCO as a World Heritage site. Like other former Spanish cities in Latin countries, the city is divided into an old section and a new section. The country's population is roughly 10 million.



The Dominican Republic

Music and Dance in the Dominican Republic

I visited some Japanese who had settled in the Dominican Republic as agricultural immigrants some 50 years ago. It was a 13-hour flight from Tokyo to New York. The flight from Newark Airport the next morning brought me to Santo Domingo in three and a half hours. As soon as the aircraft touched down on the runway of the Las Américas International Airport, the gateway to the country, there was applause and clamoring on the plane as the passengers showed their Dominican appreciation for a safe landing. The smiles of the locals are one of the best welcomes a visitor can

receive. My immediate impression of the Dominican people was of good cheer and a love for music. And, of course, the tropical sun and deep-blue sea are simply breathtaking.

In the nation's capital of Santo Domingo, people use colorfully painted buses called *guagua* for their daily transportation. They are like moving discos, from which the loud sound of dance music, such as merengue and bachata, emanate. When we see these, we immediately know that we are in the heart of the Caribbean.

People are also truly permissive in terms of time. There are virtually no time schedules, and the passengers get on and off the bus as they please. When you board the bus, you might easily find yourself swept up by the rhythm of the open atmosphere. Music comes from everywhere—from the cars, the houses, on the street and in the shops. Even little children get into the rhythm by swinging their hips. This life full of music is anything but ordinary.

Merengue and bachata are typical Dominican musical genres. Merengue is an upbeat two-four-time rhythm played with a drum, a guitar and an accordion. People dance while swinging their hips to the music. Bachata has a popular rhythm, and is usually played at bars and nightclubs. The current trend on the dance floors is 90% merengue, 80% bachata and 30% salsa.

Dominican Long-Distance Bus Service Although the country has no railway service, convenient long-distance buses operate between cities. Those running from the nation's capital of Santo Domingo to the provincial cities are called *autobuses*. (They are operated by Metro Tours, Caribe Tours, etc.) They are air-conditioned, have a TV, allow a fixed number of passengers and keep accurate time, offering a convenient means of domestic travel.

Japanese Agricultural Immigrants on a Caribbean Island

Let's take a look at Japanese agricultural immigrants in the Dominican Republic. Agricultural immigrants relocating from Japan to the Dominican Republic were recruited



Ryoko Endo

Agriculture and dietary education writer for the Japan Agricultural News and the Rural Culture Association Japan. She has written many books focused on farming and mountain villages.

- Part-time lecturer at Miyagi Prefecture Agricultural College
- Compiled Food Processing Comprehensive List Volume 8 (utilization of local resources)
- Cooperated in data collection and editing for Seibun no shō: Dominika kyōwakoku nihonjin nogyo ijusha 50-nen no michi (50 years of Japanese agricultural settlements in the Dominican Republic)

between 1956 and 1959 in accordance with Japanese government application guidelines. Families qualified for the given conditions came flooding in from throughout Japan. Of these, 1,319 people in 249 families were selected, and they left Japan with dreams of Caribbean agriculture.

After resettling, however, the immigrants were not able to obtain land as was promised in the application guidelines. They were also confronted by political upheavals, droughts, and other hardships. In reaction, the Japanese immigrants went three different ways, some going back to Japan in a group, some resettling in Brazil or Paraguay, and some staying in the country.

Although less than half of all those who moved to the Dominican Republic remained in the country, they made efforts in the development of agricultural technology to suit the local climate, and grew rice, vegetables, coffee, pepper and tobacco. They also found ways to play active roles in commerce, manufacturing, car repair and other endeavors. The Nikkei community is marked by strong ties between members, cultivated through the strong bonds created as they established the Nikkei community. This involved observing Japanese events and festivals, and arranging athletic meets, baseball games and other recreation.

Japanese immigrants are respected by the locals for their diligence and honesty. The old Japanese farmers' spirit of mutual support found in the community system is still alive and well on this Caribbean island.



Jarabacoa settlement, where rice and vegetable growing was prominent. (Property of Japanese Overseas Migration Museum—JICA Yokohama)



Japanese-made garden tractor, brought over by ship (Property of Japanese Overseas Migration Museum—JICA Yokohama)

Japanese Spirit Inherited by the Nikkei Community

The Nikkei community maintained their Japanese spirit from the beginning. Now that it has been half a century since the start of immigration, the assimilation of local customs is progressing. The Japanese community has grown larger during these 50 years since the settlement of the first group. The 40 years old and younger third and fourth generation (*sansei* and *yonsei*) Japanese make up 55% of the Japanese population, and the age of the community is advancing with an increasing ratio of those 60 years or older. The people are living their lives leisurely, surrounded by their children and grandchildren.



Japanese dishes passed down through Nikkei society

Emphasis on education is also a characteristic of the Nikkei community. As parents who did not have educational opportunities were eager to give their children the educations they missed, many of the *sansei* (those in their 30s or older) have attended university. The Dominican educational system is a 6-2-4 system, with 4 to 7 years of university education. Many Nikkei graduate from university, study in Japan, and then take active roles in Dominican society. This is partly because of the educational support provided by the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which have helped in remote areas. By receiving training in their grandparents' home country, the younger Nikkei's understanding and respect towards their ethnic roots have been deepened. With these experiences, the Nikkei speak Japanese in their home and eat Japanese food, thus maintaining and inheriting a Japanese lifestyle.

On the other hand, there are cases where the Nikkei are blending more with local customs. Quite often in this country, families and friends gather for lively potluck dinners. This kind of local custom serves as an opportunity to spread Japanese customs and cuisine to friends of the Nikkei.

The Dominican lunch break is completely different from that in Japan. Dominican people generally take a full 2 hours for lunch. It is the biggest meal of the day for most Dominicans. The working shifts for many companies are either morning only or afternoon only. People go home, have lunch with their family, and have a siesta. During this time, shops and companies are closed, and families and friends can enjoy each other's company.

The Nikkei people living the Dominican lifestyle can give us lessons on the important things in life. These are truly valuable lessons, as communication is becoming difficult in communities and



Enjoying both Dominican and Japanese cuisine

even within families in Japan's graying society.

JICA has a training program that offers opportunities to second (*nisei*) and third (*sansei*) generation Nikkei to come to Japan to gain working experience at a company, or to study at a university. Living in Japan for the first time, they are often perplexed by the differences between what their parents and grandparents told them about Japan and their firsthand experience of social structures, customs and awareness.

One Nikkei person in his 30s who took up the offer of training in Japan noticed something peculiar in his grandparents' home country. He saw persimmon trees loaded with fruit in the front yards of many farmhouses. Though the brightly colored ripe persimmons were tempting, the fruit was left to fall off the trees without being harvested. He thought the fruit should be available for anyone who wanted some, and wondered why no people were helping themselves to it. This is a typical thought for Nikkei youth. In the Dominican Republic, tropical plants, their fruits and root vegetables, such as palm and avocado trees, are abundant and seen everywhere. Regardless of who the owner is, anyone can pick and eat the fruit, and this is the generally accepted practice.



Mr. Toru Takegama,
chairman of the Japanese-
Dominican Association

Answering his question, Mr. Toru Takegama, chairman of the Japanese-Dominican Association, said, "People cannot just help themselves to ripe fruit, even if the owner does not eat it. Japanese culture teaches us that we have to be polite if we want somebody else's persimmons." He occasionally says, "Issei (first generation Japanese) are the foundation, and it is important to pass down the Japanese concepts inherited from our parents to subsequent generations."

The young man's question about uneaten persimmons comes not only from the sense of wastefulness, but from the community spirit of sharing and helping one another that developed among the immigrants in the Dominican Republic. This spirit, as an outcome of family education, has been passed down to the younger generations of Nikkei society.

Japanese language education, which is subsidized by JICA, is also useful in enhancing a student's awareness as a Japanese person. The Nikkei in the Dominican Republic who have



The Nikkei *sansei* (third generation) who will take the lead for the next generation

acquired Japanese language skills are expected to play important roles as bilingual teachers.

Japanese Cuisine Taught by a Grandmother —A Nikkei *Sansei's* Memories

Ms. Emiko Hidaka is a third generation Japanese (Nikkei *sansei*) born in the Dominican Republic. Her grandparents were among the first settlers in Jarabacoa. She treasures what she inherited from her grandparents and parents, and in some ways she is more Japanese than ordinary non-emigrant Japanese. She was raised in a Japanese-speaking environment with Japanese-style meals, and received strict discipline from her grandparents and parents. She wrote about her memories of making Japanese soy sauce.

What I Learned from my Grandmother while Making Soy Sauce —Emiko Hidaka

"My grandmother frequently made soy sauce, miso and tofu. When making soy sauce, you have to stir the mixture every day for several weeks. I used to get paid a little for helping her. When she was melting brown sugar to use it for coloring, she would sometimes give me some caramel on a chopstick. But I also remember being scolded for playing around with my brother while I was supposed to be helping her make miso. My memories are mostly of the fun times together with my grandmother. Now that I have grown up, I realize that each production step was no easy matter."

(Excerpt from *Seiun no sho: Dominika kyowakoku nihonjin nogyo ijusha 50-nen no michi*)

Ms. Hidaka, who lives alone, still enjoys the Japanese rice and vegetables her father grows. She says, "I have never bought rice, as the rice my father grows is delivered to me. He even sends me vegetables such as green onions, napa cabbage, daikon radishes, and even pickled vegetables. Grandmother's tofu, pickled vegetables and fish cooked in soy sauce, father's Japanese rice, mother's sushi rolls, and uncle's vegetables are all contributed. On New Year's Day I never fail to eat *zoni* (rice cake soup)."

Emiko Hidaka

Resides in Santo Domingo.

After graduation from the Systems Engineering Course, Technological Institute of Santo Domingo (INTEC), she studied for 2 years at the Department of Communications Industry, Tokai University, Japan, as a senior JICA researcher. She obtained an MBA degree from INTEC. After returning from Japan, she was a teacher at a Japanese language school. Currently she works for the Central Bank of the Dominican Republic.



Visiting a Japanese Vegetable Farmer

Particularly notable among the contributions that Nikkei immigrants have made to Dominican agriculture are vegetable growing advancements and increased vegetable consumption among the locals. The city of Jarabacoa in La Vega Province is in the central part of the country, at an

altitude of 600 meters. As the climate is mild with a 22°C average temperature, the region is fairly suitable for agriculture. It is a two-hour drive from Santo Domingo. Its undulating geography of mountains and streams is somewhat similar to the scenery around farming villages in Japan. Vegetable farming has been more active in this area than in other Japanese settlements (*colonia*).

When the Japanese settled in Jarabacoa 50 years ago, the Dominican farmers did not customarily grow vegetables, but grew potatoes, beans, cassava and spices for their own consumption. Vegetable farming began spreading after the Japanese immigrants settled. At first, vegetables were grown on the small area of agricultural land provided in the colonia. Eventually, the yield increased, and fresh vegetables were transported to Santo Domingo, Santiago and other major cities every day. The income earned this way helped to maintain daily life for the immigrants.

Vegetable Seeds Loaded on the Ship

The reason Japanese vegetable varieties are grown in the Dominican Republic is thought to be because Japanese immigrants brought the seeds with them when they left Yokohama by ship. They brought farm tools, domestic utensils, clothes, rice, miso and vegetable seeds on board for their own use. At the settlements, until farming got into gear, they made organic fertilizer to use on the small area of land provided, which was carefully cultivated and sown with vegetable seeds. Although the area has little precipitation and constant water shortages, the Japanese vegetable seeds sprouted well enough to feed the Japanese settlers.

Looking back those days, a Japanese settler says, “A great many immigrants boarded the ship bound for Brazil and the Dominican Republic. They must have taken quite a lot of seeds with them, as a representative from the nursery company came to see us off at Yokohama Port.” Today, they say that Japanese settlers have enriched Dominican tables. In the course of becoming vegetable growing experts, they used the Sakata seeds they brought from Japan to grow and widely sell Japanese vegetables such as tomatoes, cucumbers and eggplants, as well as daikon radishes



Japanese farmers in Jarabacoa displaying their harvest



A variety of cabbage seeds sold by Sakata Seed Corporation around 1960. The seed packet is one used in the Showa 50s (1975-1984). (Property of Sakata Seed Corporation)

and leafy vegetables.

Whenever they returned to Japan for visits, they brought back even more seeds, and the vegetable varieties increased to include a different variety of daikon radishes, spinach, green onions, perilla, long eggplants and luffas. Of these vegetables, there was particularly large demand for tomatoes, as tomato sauce is used for salads and soups that go with Dominican meat dishes.

This was how Japanese vegetable farming practices, which started out as small-scale, dry-field farming in one area, eventually spread to the local populace. The immigrants call Japanese vegetable seeds *Sakata-no-Tane*, after the name of the distributor. (*Sakata-no-Tane* (Sakata Seed Corporation) was called *Sakata Shubyo* around 1960.)

Even a simple seed packet with Japanese characters on it brought back warm feelings for the settlers' homeland, something familiar in their new Spanish-speaking environment. The threads of the pioneering story thus started to come together.

Teaching Others How to Cook Japanese Vegetables

The Japanese settlers' achievements as vegetable growers were eventually acknowledged by the Dominican government. To arrive at this point, the wisdom of Nikkei women was fully exploited. Their target was to teach Dominicans, whose diet did not normally include raw vegetable consumption, how to eat fresh vegetables, and to make the practice popular. For vegetable sampling, they started out with a simple menu of salt sprinkled on Japanese vegetables, lightly pickled vegetables similar to *asazuke*. Then, oil and pepper were mixed to make an instant dressing for vegetables. This kind of vegetable marketing, done from the backs of two-wheeled carts, must have worked to help Nikkei people blend in with the local community. Of the vegetables, Japanese tomatoes enjoyed the most popularity.

At supermarkets in Santo Domingo today, the vegetables that Japanese settlers introduced are sold and referred to as oriental vegetables.

Why are they called oriental? Many Japanese cars are on the street, but surprisingly enough they are not thought of as Japanese. Ordinary Dominicans think that Japanese are from the Orient, and that the representatives of oriental things are Chinese. They call Japanese *Chino* (Chinese), by which they mean someone oriental.

The oriental vegetables sold at supermarkets include smaller-sized daikon radishes, gingers and cucumbers, whose green color is darker than those grown locally. When compared to local



A tomato-based stew

cucumbers (*pepino criollo*), Japanese cucumbers (*pepino japones*) have marked differences in shape and taste, and are a better fit for vinegar-based dishes. Chinese-grown vegetables are also sold as oriental vegetables, and these include coriander, basil, Italian parsley, parsley, arugula and green onions.

There are indeed many tomato dishes in the Dominican Republic. Salads, chicken dishes slowly cooked in a tomato-based demi-glace, and pasta are just some of the Dominican dishes that use tomatoes. They also make tomato soup with vegetables and pork, and often use tomato sauce for stewing habichuela beans. Tomatoes have become a vital element for sauce, and used in rice dishes prepared with assorted ingredients. On a side note, the streets of Santo Domingo are now bustling with 2-wheeled carts or bicycles from which Dominicans sell vegetables and fruits.

Vegetables being sold include pumpkins, potatoes, tomatoes and cucumbers, and fruits include oranges, papayas, bananas, melons and acerolas.



Fruits and vegetables at a supermarket

Rice Farming in an Unfamiliar Tropical Region

The staple food of the Japanese is rice. Long-grain rice had long been grown in the Dominican Republic, but it is different from the sticky rice Japanese are accustomed to. When the Japanese settled in the country, farmland was under the control of the Dominican government. Only crops designated by the government were permitted to be cultivated, and these restrictions included rice varieties. The settlers were quite surprised at the way rice was grown in the tropics.

The heads of the first settling families, born in the Taisho era (1912-1926) and the early part of the Showa era (1926-1989), were well aware that rice planting and growing was a Shinto ritual and integral to prayers for a rich harvest, and that it had to be carried out in a respectful manner. This involves sowing seed rice in a seedling box and waiting until the seedlings grow to 12 or 13 cm tall. Then, the seedlings must be replanted at regular intervals on a rice paddy that has been watered and prepared. The Japanese settlers were used to these rice growing procedures, but unexpected hardships awaited them.

A settler looks back, “Under the control of Dominican government, the seedlings delivered from the administration department were 50 to 60 cm tall, tall enough for the ears to come out. We were perplexed, but cut the top half of the seedlings and planted them. The rice paddy with rows of seedlings standing straight up looked like rows of chopsticks.” In those days, rice cultivation was based on a

double-cropping system. However, the Dominican rice plants were as tall as 2 meters, and easily knocked down by wind. A good yield was unlikely.

Another immigrant shared his experiences. He sowed seed rice in the nursery bed and replanted the still-thin seedlings in the paddy. A local farmer advised him to completely drain the paddy after seedling replanting. Confused by the overgrown seedlings he had seen earlier, he argued that Japanese way was to thoroughly flood the paddy after seedling replanting.

The settler thought, “Now we will be able to eat Japanese white rice.” The next morning, however, he found that the seedlings he had replanted were all gone. The locals said it was the work of Florida (wild ducks). The wild ducks that come from the US to winter in the Dominican Republic were found to be responsible in destroying the Japanese seed rice overnight. The overgrown seedlings seemed to suit the locality of the country after all. As the local people say, “Even seedlings from old stumps will grow with a little water once they have taken root.” The settler recalls that he was made to realize that the local rice growing technology had been developed by generations of innovation and nurturing by Dominican farmers.

Cultivar Improvement of Japanese Rice in the Dominican Republic

One Japanese settler who decided to work on rice cultivar improvement was the late Mr. Giichi Tanioka, from Kochi Prefecture. The local rice variety had the disadvantage of not being weather resistant because of its long stem. More importantly, the local rice was not the short-grained variety that Japanese eat. To solve these issues, Mr. Tanioka worked to improve local Japanese rice, and developed Tanioka Rice, which is the root of all Japanese rice in the Dominican Republic. Japanese rice is now alive and well in the Caribbean, in dishes such as *onigiri* rice balls and *natto with rice*.



Onigiri rice balls made with Tanioka rice

Many Japanese settlers had brought limited amounts of Japanese seed rice with them. They stored the rice in paper bags and placed them on upper shelves in the barn so that mice could not get at them. Mr. Tanioka, whose specialty was rice growing, was among this group, and his efforts in developing a Japanese rice that would suit the local climate bore fruit as Tanioka #5.

Dominican rice at the time was as tall as the farmers, easily felled by wind, and often resulted in poor crops. Tanioka #5 rice paved the way in improved rice cultivation. It is a Japanese variety of rice with a short and stout culm, and withstands heavy manuring. Mr. Tanioka was commended for his achievement by Kochi Prefecture during the 25th anniversary of Japanese settlement in the Dominican Republic. He commented, “Tanioka Rice is

characterized by its quality and quantity. Its flag leaf stands straight up, and lodging of rice plants seldom occurs.” (An excerpt from Mr. Tanioka’s interview from the 25th Dominican immigration anniversary memorial journal)

Japanese Sushi Rolls are Truly a Treat for Nikkei People

Sushi is the best known representative of Japanese food, and it cannot be made without short-grain Japanese rice. Sushi rolls are the first food to come to the Nikkei mind when they hear a Japanese dish is being prepared. They are a standard item for sporting events, celebrations at home, and on New Year’s Day. It is fun to watch the women skillfully use Dominican ingredients to make sushi rolls. Characteristic ingredients used for sushi rolls in the Dominican Republic include avocado, and minced ginger to kill avocado’s distinctive smell. Colors from *tamagoyaki* (Japanese omelet), cucumbers and carrots are indispensable. Tuna and canned fish are sometimes used. Here, thinly sliced long green onions are rolled together to erase the fish smell.

A more refined dish in this country, where fish is not abundantly available, is genuine *nigiri-zushi*, which is *sashimi* (a slice of raw fish) placed on top of vinegared rice. Santo Domingo has several Japanese restaurants that serve varied Dominican-style sushi menus. It will not be long before sushi, which is already an international food, will be widely accepted in the Dominican Republic.



Sushi rolls were a feast for Japanese immigrants. Mrs. Ritsuko Takegama uses Dominican ingredients, and is actively passing Japanese cuisine on to the next generation.



This is it! Soy sauce.



Japanese restaurant “Samurai” in Santo Domingo Next-door is the “Pescayama” fish shop, which sells fresh *sashimi* and Japanese foodstuffs. Information on Japanese food in the Dominican Republic is also available.

Basics of Japanese Dishes are Miso and Soy Sauce

We cannot forget about the role of Nikkei people in spreading soy-based foods. Although just one crop was planted on the first settlers’ arable field, soybeans were indispensable for the immigrants, as miso, soy sauce, tofu and *natto* are at the heart of Japanese cuisine. Mr. Takeaki Hidaka, a native of Kagoshima Prefecture and a full-time farmer in Jarabacoa, said, “We needed Japanese rice, miso soup with tofu, and *natto*. Soy Sauce, miso soup, tofu and *natto* my grandmother made were the best meals I ever ate.”

The Japanese soybeans the immigrants brought from Japan were grown for their use in making miso and other food products. At first, the yields were good. However, as there was no demand among the locals for soybean products, they had a tough time making soybeans into a commercial crop.

Today, the Nikkei often purchase *salsa de soya* (soy sauce) sold at supermarkets. Kikkoman soy sauce is labeled as KIKKOMAN Salsa de Soya. In the Dominican Republic, KIKKOMAN has long been used as an oriental sauce for grilled meat.

Dominicans like to eat the rice that is always served with meats such as chicken, pork, goat and beef. Soy sauce also goes well with deep-fried meat. The Nikkei had been making soy sauce for their private use, but eventually soy sauce consumption spread among the Dominicans. The diversity of food culture in this country is largely attributable to the Japanese immigrants.

The flavor of soy sauce is often accentuated by *mirin* or sweet cooking sake to achieve that essential Japanese taste. The local Japanese adopted the use of mildly caramelized sugar with water as a substitute for *mirin*, to recreate the essence of flavor that conveys Japanese cuisine.



Japanese condiments available at Dominican supermarkets

Caribbean Fish with Grated Daikon Radish and Soy Sauce

Few Japanese can feel truly satisfied without access to fresh fish. Among the first wave of immigrants were fishermen who began coastal fishing in Manzanillo Bay near the border with Haiti. However, the island of Hispaniola was originally an island of coral reefs, and rests on a shallow continental shelf that does not provide the best habitat for fish to grow. Having no fish to catch, the fishermen either became farmers or returned to Japan. Dominican fishing today is mainly small-scale coastal fishing on wooden canoes or small boats. Only about 1,500 people, roughly 5% of the working population, are engaged in the fishing industry, and this

includes both full-time and part-time workers. No wonder not a lot of fish are available at the supermarkets.

It has been over 10 years since the start of a fish-proliferation ocean



Caribbean fish

farm project to create an artificial reef for fish, and fish caught there are now starting to be seen in supermarkets (although in small quantities). Still, fish varieties and fish dishes have recently been increasing.

One immigrant looked back at the past and said, “We caught many fish at the nearby river and pond when we settled. Not even knowing the names of the fish, we ate them for dinner. At a wedding immediately following our settlement, fish from the pond were served. They made an excellent Japanese dish when broiled and then seasoned with soy sauce. We used to drop lines to catch fish for dinner.” Grated daikon radish is an indispensable accompaniment to broiled fish in Japan. At first, Japanese daikon radish was grown to serve that purpose.

Dominican supermarkets do not sell as many varieties of fish as are available in Japan. Caribbean fish are available at fish restaurants near ports, although there are few varieties. Familiar Caribbean fish on restaurant menus include cuttlefish, octopus, prawns, crab, lobster and conches. A small amount of greater amberjack and striped horse mackerel sometimes come in. As they are rather bland tasting whitefish, much of the flavoring is added during cooking. Hopefully, the Japanese way of eating fish—broiling it and eating it with grated daikon radish—will be adopted and enjoyed by the locals as well.

Dominican Staple Rice Dishes

The staple of Dominicans is long-grain rice. The most prominent rice dish is *La Bandera Dominicana* (the Dominican Flag), consisting of white rice, red bean stew, meat and salad. They eat it every day. Unlike in Japan, the rice is cooked with oil added to salt water. When steamed, it becomes soft, and can be enjoyed with raw egg, as is customary in Japan. However, when cold, it becomes dry and its texture is different from



La Bandera refers to the Dominican flag.



Dominican stew, *Sancocho*

Japanese rice. In that case, though, it can still be stir-fried.

Another rice dish we often see is *paella*, the Spanish rice dish. Chicken, pork, pumpkin and other ingredients are mixed together and cooked, sometimes in a tomato base. Naturally, the Japanese immigrants have gotten used to these Dominican rice dishes. But they often skillfully add condiments such as green onions, *mitsuba* or honeywort, ginger and perilla as secret ingredients.

The Second Staples are Bread and Fruits

In this country, bread is second to rice in popularity, but still widely eaten. At bakeries, bread with butter, raisins or nuts is sold at reasonable prices, and hearty hot sandwiches using hamburger buns with meat, ham or tuna are also popular.

Ketchup and mayonnaise are often added. One sandwich sells at around 30 pesos.

Bread similar to French bread is quite good (around 8 to 10 pesos). The immigrants often eat thinly sliced avocado sandwiched between two slices of bread or



Coconut water

“Coconut water is like a blood transfusion. It has no artificial sweeteners and is good for our health.” The locals bring their own containers to fill with coconut water during the harvest. It has fewer calories than milk, no cholesterol, and is rich in nutrients.

crackers. Avocado is healthier than fat-rich butter, and avocado trees are often seen in people’s front yards. Dominican avocados are larger than those sold in Japan, and become ready to eat when the skin turns dark green. They are eaten, after peeling, with some salt and lemon, or in a salad. Other Nikkei people like to eat avocado like sashimi, with soy sauce and horseradish, and to use it as an ingredient in sushi rolls, which are also popular in Japan.

The Dominican Republic being in the tropics, there is naturally a variety of fresh seasonal fruits available at reasonable prices.

These fruits are enjoyed as juice or in a shake. Houses often have pineapple, melon, papaya and mango trees in their yards, and passion fruit is common.

After immigration, the Japanese worked to grow *platano* (plantain), which is a cooking banana that cannot be eaten raw.



Platano, the cooking banana, is not sweet and is similar to potatoes. It is usually peeled and cooked, most often boiled in salt water and eaten with meat. In another cooking method, sliced *platano* is deep-fried until tender (without batter), mashed flat, and then refried. It tastes much like sweet potato tempura.

They bought banana roots from the locals and raised the trees for 10 months before harvest. *Platano* and rice are two staples, and their cultivation should be profitable.

Rare Dominican Coffee

The areas allocated to the Japanese immigrants are in a suitable environment for coffee cultivation, with an average low temperature of 17°C, an average high of 25°C, and less annual average precipitation than in flat land. Although the harvest is relatively small, Dominican coffee is recognized around the world for its high quality and scarcity.



Dominican coffee

Growing Dominican Coffee

Dominican coffee is not as well known in Japan as it could be, due to its small harvest. Immediately after settling, the Japanese immigrants planted coffee on steep mountainsides and narrow hillsides made of limestone and coral reef. Coffee plants could not be readily identified as they were entwined with other plants. As they were essentially cultivating a wasteland, other trees and plants had to be mixed in. The immigrants persistently worked at carefully removing vines from the coffee plants to reveal the coffee cherries.

Mr. Hatsu Tabata, a 92-year-old man from Kagoshima Prefecture, prepared this land little by little and is still a coffee farmer. His farm is on the mountain slopes 1,200 to 1,400 meters above sea level, in the Agua Negra district in the western part of the Dominican Republic, near the Haitian border. Coffee cherries here are hand-picked, as has been the traditional method, and the coffee seeds are sun-dried. His farm is well known as a Japanese immigrant success story. The coffee growing in this district is incomparable to other varieties, as it is grown in the distinctive climate of the piedmont, yet in the tropics. (His coffee is mentioned in *All About Coffee*, a compilation of coffee information around the world.)

Coffee blends in seamlessly with the lives of the locals. Along any side-street off the busy main thoroughfare in Santo Domingo, it is common to see people playing chess while drinking coffee, or simply drinking coffee under the shade of a tree while the world passes by. These are typical scenes in the languorous pace of daily Caribbean life.



Enjoying coffee under the shade of a tree



Flamboyant (flamboyant) a familiar tree to the Dominicans

Proliferation of Japanese Food in the Dominican Republic Sparked by the Nikkei

In October, the first crop had just been harvested on Mr. Takeaki Hidaka's rice field in Jarabacoa, and the second ears of rice *hikobae* were shining in the bright sun. Rice in the tropics grows quickly. Around this time, a generational shift can be seen through rice ears.



Hikobae at the Hidaka Farm in Jarabacoa

"I would prefer to grow second ears with care, so that a couple of bales can be harvested." Mr. Hidaka's ideas may reflect his expectations of the next generation. The Chinese characters for *hikobae* literally mean "the birth of a grandchild." As with *Daphniphyllum macropodum*, whose old leaves fall off after new leaves come out, it is an expression of generational shift throughout both East and West.

Dominican supermarkets in the cities sell Japanese vegetables, and seasonings such as miso and soy sauce, although in small quantities. Japanese people who settled in the Dominican Republic 50 years ago built the foundation for Japanese food by growing soybeans to make miso, soy sauce and tofu. Although their soybean production was too limited to enrich the grain market, they made basic seasonings, used them for local ingredients, and passed them on to the next generation. The proliferation of Japanese food in the Dominican Republic, which started with the immigrants' first steps 50 years ago, is now about to bear fruit.



Statue of Japanese Agricultural Settlement in the Dominican Republic erected at Santo Domingo Port, where Japanese immigrants first stepped onto the island. Sculptor: Hokuyu Narahara

References

Seiun no sho: Dominika kyowakoku nihonjin nogyo ijusha 50-nen no michi (50 years of Japanese agricultural settlements in the Dominican Republic)
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