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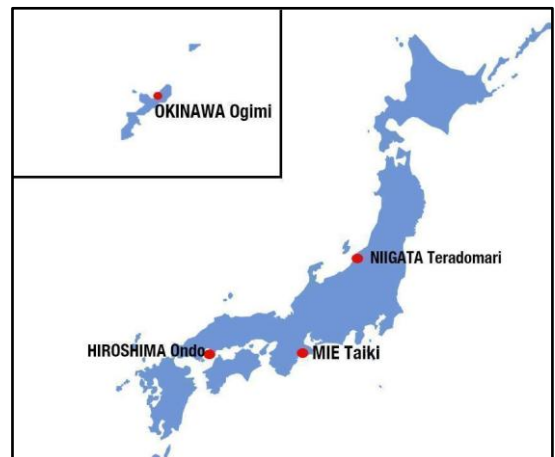
The Washoku Way: Exploring Slow Food Narratives across Japan



©Choji Nakahodo

This issue of Japan Tourism Spotlight focuses on washoku. Simply put, the term means Japanese cuisine. Digging deeper, however, washoku is defined by UNESCO as “traditional dietary cultures of the Japanese” and recognized as an intangible cultural heritage in 2013.

The difficulty in pinning down a precise definition of washoku reveals its allure and complexity. Beyond sushi, ramen, and matcha desserts that tend to represent the global Japanese food boom, there are layers to washoku that remain largely undiscovered. These layers are woven from generations of local



traditions, cultural practices, and an essential spirit of respect for nature. Each prefecture, city, town, and village offers a unique culinary identity that inhabitants proudly claim as their hometown DNA. We explore the charms of washoku by reviewing the diverse food cultures of such local communities across Japan.

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1. Culinary journey in Taiki town, home of Matsusaka beef



Nestled in the mountains of south-central Mie Prefecture, bound by the Kumano-nada Sea in the south and fed by the crystal-clear Miyagawa and Ouchiyama rivers, the quiet town of Taiki is a gastronomic treasure waiting to be found. Its mild climate and fertile plains and forests blessed it with bountiful food resources: fresh sea fish hauled at the local port, ayu (sweetfish) from the rivers, and mushrooms and vegetables.

But the jewel of this culinary crown is Matsusaka Beef — a wagyu legend prized for its exquisite marbling and umami flavor profile that melts in the mouth. It is one of Japan's most prized and luxurious types of beef.

How the beef is produced explains its premium price. It comes from certified Japanese Black heifers raised exclusively in the Matsusaka area. They are fattened via a nutrient-rich diet like rice straw and grains, and some farmers even incorporate beer into their diet to stimulate their appetite. The prized cows are also massaged with shochu to improve their blood flow. The exclusivity — only registered cows raised according to strict standards are allowed to be shipped — ensures its world-renowned quality.

Symphony of flavors: Sukiyaki and kamado-cooked rice

Matsusaka beef can be enjoyed in various ways, such as a western-style steak or grilled Japanese-style as yakiniku. But in Taiki, the recommended way to taste the premium beef is to prepare sukiyaki along with locally harvested fresh vegetables.

For an authentic and rustic countryside dining experience, visitors should stay at traditional farm inns. Guesthouses like [Sawa and Furusato-mura \(Hometown Village\)](#) offer a farm-to-table Matsusaka beef sukiyaki experience. The itinerary activities allow guests to experience rural life: collecting spring water, visiting pastures, gathering shiitake mushrooms and vegetables, and the main event, cooking sukiyaki using Matsusaka beef and the gathered local ingredients.

In Taiki, no sukiyaki feast is complete without the local staple, kamado-cooked rice. The grains are cooked in pots on top of a kamado, a traditional ceramic stove that uses firewood lit manually using a blowpipe. The result is fluffy and fragrant rice cooked to perfection. The simplicity of the rice perfectly complements the complex richness of sukiyaki, creating a symphony of flavors.

Sweet escape: Spend slow days catching sweetfish



The chill and quiet vibes of Taiki town make it ideal for activities like ayu (sweetfish) catching. The slow-moving, shallow, clear water of the Miyagawa River is perfect for ayu angling, even for beginners. Ayu caught in Taiki are branded as “Nobori-ayu (Climbing ayu),” and have been offered to the Ise Jingu — the most revered shrine in Japan — for centuries.

One can fish on their own or join a group of friendly locals to catch this delicious river fish. In the scenic Kasaki Valley, there’s a program allowing visitors to experience the traditional ayu fishing method guided by a master angler. Afterwards, the caught ayu can be cooked by coating them in generous amounts of salt, skewering, and grilling over glowing charcoals. Against the backdrop of the picturesque mountains, feasting on this local treat is truly an immersive experience. The ayu-fishing season runs from May to October.

[Ayu Tourism](#)

A gastronomic pilgrimage along the ancient trail

The Kumano Kodo Iseji, an ancient trail linking the Kumano mountains to Ise Jingu, crosses through Taiki. The Taiki Town Tourism Association is planning to launch by March 2026 a three-day, English-guided gastronomic pilgrimage along the trail. Combining the spiritual pilgrimage with local food culture and experiences, the Kumano Kodo Iseji Gastronomy Journey will include a visit to Ise Jingu, a stay at an inn along the Kumano Kodo trail with a Matsusaka beef sukiyaki dinner, a guided trek over the trail, and another stay at a local inn [Izuho](#) featuring ayu dishes. Another inn [Mikuniya](#) serves buri (Japanese amberjack) dishes, while vegetarian and halal food options are available upon request at Sawa and Furusato-mura (Hometown Village), Izuho and Mikuniya.

[Taiki Town Tourism Association](#)

[Visit Matsusaka](#)

2. Ogimi village diet: Serving the ingredients for a long, happy life



Located in the northern part of Okinawa Prefecture's main island, roughly a 90-minute expressway drive from the prefectural capital city of Naha, Ogimi is a village where time seems to tick slowly. Surrounded by jade-green forests and turquoise seas, this remote village holds the secret to a long and healthy life.

Ogimi is known as the "village of longevity." As of the latest count, 16 of the village's approximately 3,000 residents are centenarians — a remarkable figure, even in Japan, where 99,763 centenarians live among a population of 124 million, according to official statistics. That means there are 5.3 centenarians per 1,000 people in Ogimi, as opposed to 0.8 per 1,000 nationwide. A monument was erected in 1993 by the Federation of Ogimi Village Senior Citizens Club to celebrate their unique feat. A plaque reads: "At the age of 80, I'm still a child. When God comes to call me at 90, I tell him to wait until I turn 100. Let's keep going strong as we get older. ... If you appreciate longevity, come to our village!"

Blue Zone and Ogimi's recipe for longevity

Ogimi is one of the five original “Blue Zones,” places recognized for having the healthiest and longest-living populations (often past 90 years old). The term was coined by Dan Buettner, a National Geographic explorer who led a study in Okinawa, investigating the lively, senior populations of the island. What followed is an inspiration to seek the secrets of longevity worldwide.



So, what is the key to Ogimi’s vivacious villagers? A healthy diet, a healthy lifestyle, and a healthy sense of purpose in life, or “ikigai” in Japanese. The diet of the community plays a big role in their longevity. The villagers eat all-natural; their sources of nutrients are fruits (papaya, mango, star fruit), and green and yellow vegetables (goya, shima rakkyo, purple sweet potato), all harvested from fertile Okinawan soil.

The meals pulse with life from vegetables rarely found elsewhere in Japan, such as nigana, kandaba, and handama. As an island village, the sea provides an abundance of fish and seaweed. Other protein sources include tofu and legumes, which are consumed at about 1.5 times the rate of, for example, a farming community in Akita Prefecture, according to the Ogimi village website. This high intake of protein — believed to build immune cells — gives the villagers a healthy life.



Makachikumisore (left) and Chojuzen ©Emi no Mise

In [Emi no Mise](#), a restaurant founded in 1990, the wisdom of long life is served on one plate, which they call “Chojuzen (Longevity meal).” Served washoku-style with multiple small servings, this traditional dish is the epitome of the Ogimi diet: all-natural, home-cooked, and prepared fresh with care and at an unhurried pace. Makachikumisore, for example, is an exquisite menu that features 15 different elements, such as leaves with tofu, fried papaya, and miso soup. The

restaurant also serves other meals prepared farm-to-table style, such as goya champuru — Okinawan bitter melon stir-fried with tofu, eggs, and pork — and mochi made of shikuwasa, a seasonal citrus.

To truly absorb Ogimi's sights, sounds, and flavors, guests can immerse themselves in the village's homestay programs, in which locals rent out their homes to tourists for short stays. They are managed by the Ogimi Marugoto Tourism Association, a nonprofit organization serving the village's tourism activities. Dozens of guesthouses are available to allow guests to experience the relaxed and slow-paced life in the village. Visitors can participate in the morning chores, spend the day socializing with the lively senior locals, and enjoy hearty meals in the evening, potentially followed by a Ryukyu dance performance, if available.

Agri-adventure travel tour being planned

The Ogimi Marugoto Tourism Association is planning to launch a group tour in March 2026 designed to learn the lifestyle and “ikigai” of the Ogimi residents through hands-on experiences of village life. During the three-day Agri-Adventure Travel in Ogimi, visitors, accompanied by English, French, or Chinese-speaking guides, will visit a farm for harvesting and experience making traditional sweets, interact with the villagers through cultural activities, trek through the World Heritage-listed Yanbaru forests, stay at the villagers' houses for dinner and cultural exchanges, and participate in other activities.

[The Secret of Okinawa Longevity](#)

[Ogimi Tourism \(PDF\)](#)

3. Teradomari: A port town of artisanal spirit and culinary legacy



Banya-jiru © Teradomari Tourism Association (left): ©Teradomari Regional Town Development Council

Known as the “Kamakura of the Sea of Japan,” Teradomari is nestled along the coastal area of Niigata Prefecture. It had once thrived as a port town during the Edo period for Kitamaebune, merchant ships that sailed between Osaka and Hokkaido along the coast, buying and selling goods at various ports. It also served as a religious hub with many temples offering aid to travelers. Today, Teradomari bills itself as a town of sea, fish, and history, where the scent of fresh seafood mingles with historical sites, shrines, and temples.

One of Teradomari's major attractions is its Fish Market Street, which is lined with about a dozen seafood shops, each displaying an array of fresh catches from the Sea of Japan, including squid,

scallops, and seasonal fish. As one strolls through the market, the lively banter of vendors, the smoky aroma of grilled seafood skewers, and the vibrant colors of fresh produce create an exciting buzz.



Pairing umami with craftsmanship

For those eager to dig deeper into the town's rich heritage, the Teradomari Regional Town Development Council has curated a three-day model tour to let visitors immerse in the area's artisanal spirit and taste its culinary legacy. Actual tours can be arranged based on this [plan](#) or customized to suit individual preferences via [Villa Voix](#), a rental villa that will serve as a hub for the activities to be experienced during the tour.

The aim of the model tour is to let participants trace the connection running through the area's rich seafood, its fishermen's skills, chefs who elevate these ingredients into refined culinary experiences, and the iron tools from the neighboring Tsubame-Sanjo area that support these crafts. The Kitamaebune ships had brought not only commerce but also the iron used to make the versatile Makiri knives used by fishermen. These knives, essential for filleting fish and cutting thick ropes, demand sharpness, durability, and expert craftsmanship, honed by artisans in Tsubame-Sanjo.

Under the plan curated by the council, tour participants can experience crafting their own frying pan at a blacksmithing workshop using Tsubame-Sanjo iron. They can also experience shinkei-jime — a swift nerve-cutting technique to kill and keep fish fresh — under the guidance of fishermen. Other experiences include preparing Banya-jiru — a traditional fisherman's stew — while listening to stories of life on the coast, and observing a bustling morning fish auction.

In addition, the itinerary features a one-of-a-kind culinary experience helmed by a Michelin-starred chef within the comfort of Villa Voix. By pairing local sake and Niigata wines with premium fish that are characteristic of the area, the flavors of the region are brought to life in each dish, reflecting the deep connection between the people and the sea that sustains them.

With its market streets, historic temples, and coastal landscapes, Teradomari is more than a port town — it is a destination where Japan’s maritime culture, craftsmanship, and culinary traditions converge.

[Enjoying the Charms of Teradomari](#)

4. Tracing Hiroshima’s oyster tradition



Kakimeshi ©Hiroshima Prefecture

For some travelers, this could be a little-known fact about Hiroshima: it is the oyster capital of Japan. According to government data, it produces about 20,000 tons of oysters each year, accounting for 60 percent of the nation’s oysters, thanks to nutrient-rich waters off Hiroshima Bay. The prefecture’s reputation as an oyster producer has also gained international acclaim, highlighted by the first export of Japanese oysters to the EU in 2023.

Although oyster cultivation in Hiroshima is said to date back centuries, significant growth only came after World War II, when oyster racks became widely used, turning the activity into a thriving industry. Today, bamboo oyster rafts floating in the waters off Hiroshima Bay form a permanent fixture of the landscape.

The allure of “Kakimeshi” oyster rice

For visitors, the taste of this tradition is perhaps best experienced in “kakimeshi,” Hiroshima’s beloved oyster rice. In this comforting dish, oysters are gently simmered in a soy-based broth, then layered over rice so every grain soaks up their deep umami. Simple yet profoundly flavorful, kakimeshi tells the story of both the sea that nurtures the oysters and the people who devote their lives to cultivating them. While the dish is mostly eaten as a fishermen’s side dish or home-cooked meal, some restaurants, including [Kakiya](#) in Miyajima and [Kanawa](#) in Hiroshima City, put it on the regular menu, along with raw, roasted, and fried local oysters.

Ondo town, a part of Kure, south of Hiroshima City, is a major base of oyster farming in the prefecture. The Ondo Oyster Festival is held at a local pier around February each year — during the prime oyster harvesting season — in which various oyster dishes are served and fresh raw oysters sold, providing a chance for visitors to fully enjoy this treasured winter treat.

[Ondo – Savor Japan](#)

The father-son duo committed to the Ondo brand oysters



Photograph by Kazuyuki Nakano
Image courtesy of Hiroshima Tourism Association

Ondo town in Kurahashi Island, linked to the Kure mainland by bridges, is a location where one could spot those ubiquitous rafts. In this scenic town, Kurihara Suguru is a third-generation farmer who runs Ondo Kaisan Co. with his father Fujio. The father-and-son duo exemplifies the generations of dedication to oyster farming in the area.

Their farm's commitment to quality begins with its strategic location in the prefecture-designated "clean water area" of the Seto Inland Sea, an

environment celebrated for its pristine waters and abundant nutrients. This setting provides the ideal conditions for cultivating oysters that are both flavorful and sustainable.

In 1988, the Kurihara family created the Kakimusume brand, which translates as "oyster daughters," symbolizing their hope for their oysters to be nurtured by the sea and in return, for their cultivation efforts to protect the waters in the bay. "Tasty oysters are nurtured only in rich waters, and the brand name reflects our sense of mission to protect the beautiful local sea into the future," Kurihara says. The branding initiative was also the Kuriharas' way of expressing their determination to vouch for the quality of their produce and the wish to directly convey the value of their oysters to consumers.

Kurihara, who started working in the family business when he was 13, says the Kakimusume oysters are notable for their sophisticated and lingering tastes. He attributes their distinct flavor to the seaweed and mineral-rich waters off Ondo. This is in contrast to the waters within the Hiroshima City area that are dense with mountain-based mineral content flowing through its rivers into the sea. He also highlights that the varied flavors and peak seasons even within Hiroshima Prefecture are a key to its premium quality oysters.

To scientifically analyze the secrets to the distinct tastes of Ondo oysters, Kurihara has worked with universities and other institutions to collect data on the local sea conditions, such as how sea currents from four directions converge off the town, creating the mineral-rich waters and ensuring an optimum environment for oyster farming.

The research was meant to establish the scientific grounds for the tastiness of local oysters, so that they can be sold as a globally competitive brand, he said. With the advances in freezing technology, oysters from around the world are now available in Japan. For the Ondo oysters to not only be competitive against imports, but also chosen by the international market, there needs to be a convincing logic behind the distinct flavors of the local product, Kurihara says.

Beyond production, Ondo Kaisan welcomes visitors to experience the craft of oyster farming firsthand (during the February-March period). Guests can try their hand at oyster shucking, guided by the Kuriharas, gaining insight into the skill and care required to handle these delicate bivalves. They can take home the oysters they have shucked, and this hands-on experience allows visitors to connect directly with the farm's traditions and Hiroshima's rich oyster heritage.

Oysters have historically been an extremely important ingredient in Japan's food culture, Kurihara points out. They have been eaten by the inhabitants of this archipelago since ancient times, given that their shells are found in shell mounds dating back approximately 10,000 years. Trade in dried oysters was recorded in Heian Period (794-1185) official documents, and oyster farming in the Hiroshima coasts is believed to have begun as early as the Muromachi Period (1336-1573). Oysters have long been cherished as an auspicious foodstuff, as seen in their use in traditional New Year dishes, he notes.

[Ondo Kaisan \(in Japanese\)](#)

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