



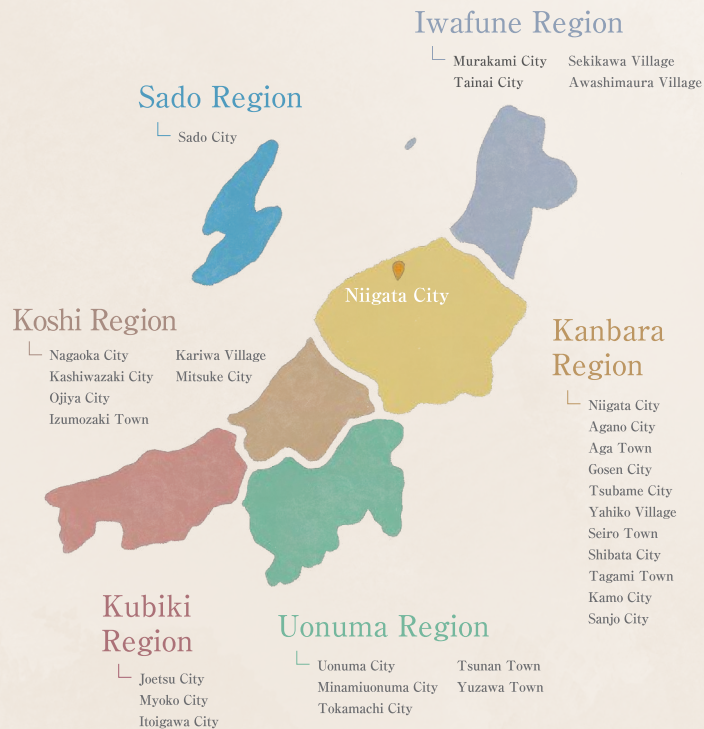
Niigata Food & Terrain

Niigata Prefecture Edition

A Culinary Culture Woven by People and Terrain

There are many reasons why Niigata Prefecture boasts such a rich culinary culture. The region's precious climate and natural environment nurture delicious crops. Its long history as a port town along the Sea of Japan has shaped its food traditions. Generations of people have worked to improve farmland, and have passed down the unique flavors of their communities and households. The ingredients and dishes we enjoy today are the result of this long, evolving journey.

This booklet introduces Niigata Prefecture through the lens of food, dividing it into six distinct regions: Iwafune, Kanbara, Koshi, Uonuma, Kubiki, and Sado. Stretching across a vast area from north to south, Niigata is home to diverse culinary traditions unique to each region. Let's explore the deep connections of culinary culture with the nature and history of Niigata Prefecture!



*Terrain refers to the landscape, nature, climate, and the unique culture of a region.

*The classification of cities, towns, and villages is for reference purposes only.

The History of Niigata's Culinary Culture

Niigata's rich culinary culture has been cultivated over many centuries. This section highlights key historical events that may have influenced its development. Additionally, we introduce the "Food Innovators"—figures who have transformed Niigata's food scene.

Niigata's Food Innovators

Jomon People

Masters of Gathering Nature's Bounty

The Jomon people used pottery for cooking and had a rich diet based on gathering food from nature. Even today, many regions in Niigata cherish the tradition of eating the various gifts from mountains, such as wild mushrooms and wild vegetables. The numerous Flame-Style Pottery artifacts found at archaeological sites reflect the abundance of their food culture.



Uesugi Kenshin

The Warlord Who Studied Military Rations

Uesugi Kenshin, who ruled Niigata and the Hokuriku region, was deeply interested in military food and preservation techniques. It is said that he used Sasa-dango (bamboo-wrapped dumplings) and Kansen-yaki (miso rice balls) as portable battlefield meals. He also practiced Otachimeshi, a tradition of serving freshly cooked rice before battle to boost his soldiers' morale. His famous act of sending salt to his enemy demonstrated his sense of honor, further emphasizing his connection to food culture.



Aoto Buheiji

The Pioneer of Natural Salmon Reproduction

Aoto Buheiji, a samurai of the Murakami Domain, revolutionized salmon conservation. Since the Heian Period, the Murakami Domain had supplied salmon to the imperial court, but overfishing during the Edo period led to a sharp decline in catches. Observing the homing instinct of salmon, Aoto developed a natural hatching and breeding system called the Tane River Method, a groundbreaking approach that helped restore salmon populations.



Echigo Toji

Master Brewers of Sake

A Toji is a master sake brewer. The profession of Echigo Toji developed as a winter job for Niigata's snow-bound farmers. Their craftsmanship and dedication earned them a stellar reputation, making them one of the Three Great Toji Groups of Japan. Their brewing techniques and philosophy continue to be passed down through generations, including at the Niigata Sake School and local breweries.



Sakaguchi Kinichiro

The Father of Fermentation Science

Born in Joetsu City, Sakaguchi Kinichiro was a globally renowned microbiologist who played a crucial role in advancing Japan's fermentation science. His research on miso, soy sauce, and sake brewing scientifically unlocked the secrets of fermentation, significantly contributing to Japan's culinary development. Thanks to his extensive knowledge and publications on sake, he earned the nickname "The Doctor of Sake."



Sano Tozaburo

The Leader Who Transformed Niigata's Farmland

Though it is now covered in rice paddies, the Echigo Plain was once a wetland known as Ashinuma, where people farmed wading through waist-deep water. Sano Tozaburo, a visionary leader from Niigata City, spearheaded formidable drainage projects and land reclamation efforts. His strong leadership enabled the development of a balanced rural-urban region, laying the foundation for modern agriculture in Niigata.



- Jomon Period**
 - People were already living on the Echigo Plain during this time, cooking with pottery.
 - Flame-Style Pottery (kaen-gata doki) discovered in Nagaoka and Tokamachi is Niigata's only National Treasure!
- Yayoi Period**
 - Rice cultivation spread along the Shinano River basin.
- Kofun, Asuka, and Nara Periods**
 - The influence of the Yamato Imperial Court reached Niigata.
- Heian and Kamakura Periods**
 - The Echigo region supplied salmon as tax payment to the imperial court.
 - The development of manor estates led to the creation of many rice fields.
- Muromachi Period**
 - The name "Niigata" is believed to have first appeared around this time.
- Azuchi-Monoyama Period**
 - Ports such as Kanbara no Tsu flourished.
 - Rice from Niigata was transported via the Kitamaebune trade ships.
- Edo Period**
 - Niigata Town thrived as a port city, fostering cultures such as Ryotei (traditional restaurants) and Furumachi Geigi (regional term for geisha).
 - Land reclamation projects led to the rise of Gono (wealthy landowners).
- Meiji Period**
 - Under international treaties, Niigata Port became one of Japan's five major open ports.
 - As a "rice powerhouse" and port town, Niigata sustained many people!
 - Niigata Prefecture had the largest population in Japan.
- Taisho Period**
 - Western vegetables began to be cultivated.
- Showa Period**
 - The Koshihikari variety of rice developed in Fukui turned out to be exceptionally delicious when grown in Niigata!
 - The full-scale production of Koshihikari rice began.
 - Rice planting was mechanized in the 1970s.
 - Niigata's local ramen culture emerged.
- Heisei Period**
 - Niigata launched the Sake-no-jin and Shoku-no-jin food festivals.
 - Washoku (Japanese cuisine) was registered as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage.
 - Flame-Style Pottery and the Kitamaebune trading route were designated as Japan Heritages.
- Reiwa Period**
 - Traditional Japanese sake brewing was inscribed as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage.

Niigata Food & Terrain Map

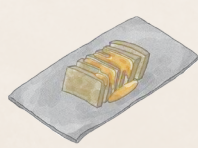
Flavor Rooted in the Land

Niigata Prefecture stretches from north to south and boasts a long coastline, long enough to fit all of Kyushu within it. It is the fifth-largest prefecture in Japan, bordering five other prefectures: Yamagata, Fukushima, Gunma, Nagano, and Toyama. Blessed with diverse natural landscapes, Niigata has cultivated a rich food culture over the centuries. This map highlights the characteristics of each region's landscape together with culinary traditions and local dishes.



Nishime

A dish simmered with grilled Ago (flying fish) broth. Vegetables and tofu are cut into large pieces and cooked thoroughly until almost no liquid remains.



Igoneri

A dish made by boiling and kneading sun-dried Igo (seaweed), then spreading it flat and letting it cool and harden. In Sado, it is often cut into thin strips.

Sado Region

A Bountiful Island Producing Everything from Rice to Fruits

Sado Island features mountains to the north and south, with a central plain in between. In addition to abundant seafood, the island produces rice, vegetables, fruits, dairy products, and more, achieving a high level of self-sufficiency. Historically, Sado was an independent province and has been influenced by Kyoto through cultural figures exiled there, as well as via the Kitamaebune merchant ships. These influences have contributed to the island's distinctive, refined, and elegant food culture.



Nikogori

A dish made by simmering shark skin with soy sauce and ginger, then cooling it to set into a gelatinous texture. Often served as part of New Year's feasts.



Sasa Zushi

A festive dish where vinegared rice is placed on bamboo leaves and topped with colorful ingredients. In some areas, it is also called "mizushi," inspired by the shape of a traditional winnowing basket.



Noppe

A simmered dish made with local ingredients such as vegetables, mushrooms, salmon, and chicken. Ingredients and seasoning vary by region and district.



Kakiae Namasu

A colorful dish made by pickling Kakinomoto (edible chrysanthemum) with vegetables in vinegar. The practice of eating chrysanthemums is common in Niigata and Yamagata.



Sasa Dango

Originally a preserved food that utilized the antibacterial properties of bamboo leaves. It is said to have been made using substandard rice that was not suitable for tax payments.



Kubiki Region

A Crossroads of Eastern and Western Culinary Traditions

Situated at Niigata's westernmost edge, Kubiki features mountains that are close to the sea, resulting in relatively limited farmland. The region has a thriving fishing industry and skillfully incorporates seafood into daily meals. Kubiki has long-standing ties with Toyama and Nagano and historically served as a transportation hub along the old Hokuriku Road. As a result, many Kansai-style dishes are found here, and people eat yellowtail (rather than salmon) during New Year's celebrations. The area is also known for its rare "shark cuisine."

Kanbara Region

A Major Rice-Producing Region Formed by the Shinano and Agano Rivers

Kanbara is characterized by its vast plains, shaped by the Shinano and Agano Rivers. Originally, the area was a wetland called Gama-no-Hara (a field of cattails). Over time, land reclamation projects transformed it into a major rice-producing region. The eastern part, known as Yama-no-Kanbara (mountainous Kanbara), is located along the Agano River, and shares many culinary similarities with Aizu in Fukushima Prefecture. This area is also rich in mountain delicacies such as edible wild vegetables and mushrooms.



Fukashi Nasu

Steamed and chilled eggplant, served with soy sauce and garnished with mustard or ginger. Niigata ranks among the top in Japan for both eggplant acreage and consumption.



Shoyu Okowa

A unique sticky rice dish colored with soy sauce, sometimes containing red kidney beans. It is often served at celebratory events as an alternative to red rice.

Koshi Region

The Heart of Niigata, Where Food Cultures Intertwine

Located in central Niigata, the Koshi region is mountainous, with Tanada (rice terraces) and upland farms. Summers are hot, and winters bring heavy snowfall. Here, culinary traditions shift between eastern and western Japan. For instance, edible chrysanthemums are common in the east but rarely eaten west of this region. A diverse food culture has emerged, blending elements from different areas. Along the Shinano River, fermentation and brewing industries have flourished, and in the past, sake was transported downstream by boat.

Iwafune Region

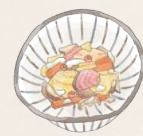
A Land Connected by the "Salmon River" Between Mountains and Sea

Bordering Yamagata Prefecture, Iwafune features a well-balanced mix of sea, mountains, rivers, and plains. The Miomote River, known as the "Salmon River," sees salmon swimming upstream to spawn. The young salmon travel to the Sea of Japan, mature, and return to the river years later. The region has a deep-rooted salmon culture, with over 100 ways to eat a salmon from head to tail. Murakami City is also famous for "the northernmost tea" and "Murakami beef."



Daikai

Iwafune's version of Noppe. Daikai originally referred to a large, lidded bowl, and over time, dishes served in these bowls became known as Daikai.



Izushi

A type of preserved sushi known as Narezushi, made by fermenting salmon and vegetables with rice and malted rice. A must-have dish for New Year's celebrations.

Uonuma Region

A Treasure Trove of Delicious Rice and Vegetables

Located in the mountainous midstream region of the Shinano River, Uonuma is a heavy snowfall area. The proximity to mountains and the snowy inland climate have fostered a unique "snow country" culture. Snow storage techniques, such as Yukimuro (snow cellars) and Yukishita (under-snow storage), enhance the sweetness and depth of vegetables. The sharp temperature differences and abundant snowmelt create ideal conditions for growing delicious rice. While Uonuma shares food traditions with Fukushima and Nagano, it has surprisingly few similarities with neighboring Gunma.



Hegi Soba

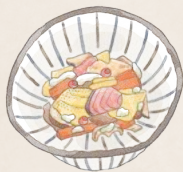
A type of soba noodle made with Funori seaweed as a binding agent. It is said to have originated from using the same seaweed for textile weaving during the winter off-season.



Anbo

A steamed dumpling made from rice flour, filled with sweet bean paste or vegetables. Similar to Nagano's famous Oyaki, which is made with wheat flour.

That's why it's delicious.



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