



Niigata Food & Terrain

Niigata City Edition

Food Culture is Deeply Connected to Terrain and History

Niigata City is a place where agriculture thrives, with farmland covering nearly half of its area. The region's plains and sand dunes provide fertile ground for growing crops, resulting in abundant rice harvests and a wide variety of vegetables and fruits. Fresh seafood is brought in from the Sea of Japan every day, and the city is also home to a diverse range of fermented foods such as sake, miso, and soy sauce.

However, the journey to the rich food culture Niigata enjoys today has been a long one. Niigata City is part of the Kanbara region, which was once a vast wetland known as Gama Hara (field of cattails). Over generations, the region's ancestors worked tirelessly to reclaim and improve the land for agriculture. Additionally, the history of Niigata as a prosperous port town, thanks to the Kitamaebune trading ships, has greatly influenced its culinary culture.



By exploring the food culture of Niigata City through the lens of its terrain and history, we can uncover fascinating insights. What makes Niigata's food culture so rich? Let's embark on a journey to find the answers!

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

Key Figures Who Shaped Niigata's Culinary History

From the Edo period to the Meiji period, the arrival of Kitamaebune trading ships at Niigata Port brought a wealth of people and goods, fostering the growth of both the restaurant culture and the spirit of hospitality. The key figures in this evolution were wealthy landowners, shipping merchants, farmers, and traditional restaurants called Ryotei. Let's explore how these four groups supported and influenced Niigata's food culture and how their interactions helped it flourish.



Kakiae Namasu

During the Edo period, farmers began cultivating edible chrysanthemums in their gardens and fields. The plants, enjoyed in Niigata and Yamagata, get their name Kaki-no-moto from the belief that chrysanthemums were planted at the "base of fences" (kakine no moto) or "under persimmon trees" (kaki-no-ki no moto).



Tare-Katsudon (Sauced Pork Cutlet Bowl)

Niigata, an early adopter of Western cuisine, saw the birth of tare-katsudon in the early Showa period as a popular street food. The thinly fried cutlets were likely designed for busy merchants who needed a quick meal. Today, Niigata City remains one of Japan's top consumers of pork.

Farmers

The Resilient Producers Who Sustained Niigata's Food Culture

Many rice paddies in Niigata had poor drainage, forcing farmers to cultivate rice while standing waist-deep in water. Wealthy landowners often held banquets to show appreciation for their tenant farmers, introducing elements of ryotei dining culture to rural communities. The farmers' tradition of serving simple yet abundant meals remains a characteristic of Niigata's food culture today.



Noppe

A dish present in every region and household in Niigata, appearing in both everyday meals and celebratory feasts. At banquets hosted by wealthy landowners to show appreciation for farmers, large servings of noppe were placed in communal dishes for guests to share.

Borrowing Land
(Tenant Farmers)



Lending Land
(Landowners)

Wealthy Landowners (Gono)

Powerful Landowners Who Led Rice Cultivation and Supported Cultural Development

These landowners employed farmers as tenants, using their economic power to interact with cultural figures and politicians, thus fostering the growth of banquet and ryotei culture. They also played a role in food distribution and sake brewing. Even on a national scale, Niigata was home to many influential landlords, known as Senchobu Jinushi (landowners with over 1,000 hectares of land).



Sasa Dango (Bamboo Leaf-Wrapped Rice Dumplings)

Originally valued as a preserved food due to the antibacterial properties of bamboo leaves, sasa-dango was said to have been made using substandard rice that could not be collected as tax. After being featured at the 1964 National Sports Festival, in Niigata, it became one of Niigata's most famous souvenirs.

Some People Were Both Landowners and Merchants!

Exchange and Business



Supporting Business Operations



Welcoming Guests



The Culture of Hospitality

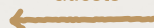
Shipping Merchants (Kaisendonya)

The Gateway to the Outside World at Niigata Port

These merchants ushered in Kitamaebune and other trading ships, conducting business with the cargo they carried. Their establishments became hubs where top-quality products, information, and culture from across Japan converged. While the ships were docked, the merchants entertained sailors at Ryotei. Since the quality of hospitality directly impacted their business, Ryotei developed as significant establishments. Some successful shipping merchants even became wealthy landowners themselves.



Welcoming Guests



The Spread of New Cultures and Information



The Refinement of Culinary Traditions

Traditional Restaurants (Ryotei)

The Unsung Heroes Who Captivated Guests with Fine Cuisine and Entertainment

Ryotei were gathering places for various influential figures, including wealthy landowners and shipping merchants. Through Kitamaebune trade, cultural and informational exchange flourished, elevating the level of hospitality. As a result, Furumachi, Niigata's kagai(geisha district), became one of Japan's three major entertainment quarters. Interestingly, during the Meiji period, Niigata Prefecture had the largest population in Japan, perhaps due to the draw of its rich and enticing food culture.



Farming Villages

Cultural Exchange Through People

Port Towns

A Visual Guide to Niigata's Food and Terrain

While rice farming is a vital part of life in Niigata, people here have also long embraced ingredients gathered from nature, skillfully incorporating them into their daily meals. In this sense, Niigata City's food culture can be seen as striking the perfect balance between the gathering traditions of the Jomon period and the agricultural practices of the Yayoi period.

What kinds of ingredients does Niigata's rich natural environment provide? We have captured them all in this beautifully illustrated guide.

The Climate and Natural Environment of Niigata City

Niigata City's landscape is incredibly diverse. The Shinano and Agano Rivers have carried sediments downstream for centuries, creating dunes where the wind from the sea has shaped inlets and land formations. Intricate, connecting rivers that resemble veins flow across the plains, providing irrigation for rice paddies and farmlands. Fishing thrives in the sea, while seasonal gathering takes place in the mountains. The sandy terrain is home to large-scale vegetable and fruit cultivation. True to its name, Niigata ("New Wetland") is home to 16 lakes, where traditional food-gathering practices continue to this day.

Niigata is often associated with its heavy snow, rough seas, and overcast skies in winter. However, the joy of spring is all the more profound after enduring a long and harsh winter.

Surprisingly, Niigata City enjoys a relatively mild climate throughout the year, with long hours of sunshine in summer. Thanks to this varied climate and environment, a wide variety of delicious crops are grown here.

Mountain Food & Terrain

Savoring the Seasons: Wild Vegetables and Mushrooms

Wild vegetables are foraged in spring, while wild mushrooms are gathered in autumn. People have long taken only what they need, incorporating these seasonal ingredients into their meals.

Plains Food & Terrain

Niigata's Fertile Plains and Rice Cultivation

Once a vast wetland, Niigata's plains were transformed through land reclamation into some of Japan's most productive farmland. Today, Niigata is the country's top rice-producing region.

Plains Food & Terrain

Edamame Growing Along the Rice Fields

Originally grown along the ridges of rice paddies, edamame became a staple crop in Niigata. The city now boasts the largest edamame cultivation area in Japan, but most of the harvest is consumed locally—perhaps due to the local tradition of enjoying heaping baskets of fresh edamame!

Plains Food & Terrain

Fertile Soil Nurturing Le Lectier Pears and Persimmons

Niigata's rich soil supports a wide range of fruit trees. The city is famous for its Le Lectier pears, which were carefully cultivated from French saplings, and its seedless persimmons, known as Hacchin-gaki.

Riverside Food & Terrain

Kawaminato: A Hub for People and Goods

Situated near river mouths, Niigata City took advantage of its calm waters and abundant water supply to develop an active inland shipping trade, becoming a thriving river port.

Riverside Food & Terrain

Salmon Swimming Upstream

Every year from autumn to winter, salmon migrate upstream in the Agano and Shinano Rivers. Niigata has a long history of releasing hatchery-raised salmon to support this natural cycle.

Wetland Food & Terrain

Fishermen's Catch: Carp and Crucian Carp

Wetlands serve as natural food reserves, supporting a long-standing culinary tradition of eating local fish such as carp, crucian carp, river shrimp, and lotus seeds.

Coastal Food & Terrain

Abundant Seafood: Willow Flounder and Nanban Shrimp

The sandy seabed formed by the Shinano and Agano Rivers provides a rich fishing ground where diverse and delicious seafood is caught.

Sand Dune Food & Terrain

Watermelon and Green Onions Grown in Dune Agriculture

Stretching 70 km, Niigata Sand Dunes are the longest in Japan. Their well-draining soil is ideal for growing a wide variety of crops such as watermelons, green onions, and sweet potatoes.

Sand Dune Food & Terrain

Winemaking from Locally Grown Grapes

In recent years, vineyards and wineries have emerged in the sand dunes, and the Kakudahama area is now known as the Niigata Wine Coast.

Matsuhama
Fishing Port

Shinano River

Lake Toyanogata

Niitsu Hills

Lake Sakata

Mt. Kakuda

Shinkawa Fishing Port

Maki Fishing Port

That's why it's delicious.



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