

### **Kushigaki no Sato (the Land of Dried Persimmons)**

While the town of Katsuragi produces a bountiful variety of fresh fruit, the area is most closely associated with bright orange persimmons. High in the mountains above the town, the four mountain settlements of Taki, Hirokuchi, Higashitani, and Taira have taken advantage of the ideal climate to produce dried persimmons for over 450 years.

The persimmons are picked, peeled, and sorted by hand, a process that has changed little over the centuries. Then the amber-colored fruits are skewered on a sharp bamboo stick in groups of five or ten (numbers which are considered auspicious) and arranged in long rows to dry. The high altitude and low humidity of this mountain location allows the natural sugars to concentrate as the persimmons dry over the course of several weeks. The result is a healthy sweet treat that was once the preferred hangover remedy of Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537–1598), the feudal lord who unified Japan.

The *kushigaki* persimmons here, however, are not for consumption, but rather are used in the Kansai area as New Year's decorations, placed as offerings on large cakes of pounded rice called *kagami mochi*.

Most visitors make the journey up to the scenic Taira area for the sight of tens of thousands of carefully tended skewered persimmons lined up in orderly rows. Like the traditional way of drying the fruit, the tiny hamlets and orchards where this takes place have changed little over the centuries.