

CELEBRATIONS AND FOOD

Food is a major part of social gatherings and special occasions in Obama. In addition to its essential function of keeping the body healthy, it can have a ritual role, as participants give thanks for the source of nourishment, and a social role, as it brings people closer together. Furthermore, it can give people a sense of connection to the land or sea from which it came. Obama has a number of rituals that celebrate the region's close relationship with its food.

In early spring, a divination ritual called Kamojinja no Oikemono is held at Kamo Shrine. Rice crackers and seven varieties of seeds, tubers, and fruits are buried in a wooden box. After a year underground, the box is unearthed, and the contents are examined and used to predict the success of the year's harvest.

Gion Matsuri is a summer festival held annually in Obama. The festival has its origins in Kyoto and was traditionally held to drive away demons and evil spirits. It is customary for people who carry the elaborately decorated portable shrines (*omikoshi*) around town to fortify themselves by eating an energy dish called *gawara mame* (made of soybeans, wakame, and smartweed leaves). *Goku* (rice wrapped in wild rice leaves) is also commonly eaten during the festival period to ward off evil and sickness.

Bon celebrations are held in August in honor of ancestors who have passed away. Various dishes and *dango* rice dumplings are prepared as offerings to the deceased. In some coastal communities around Wakasa Bay, the food offerings were traditionally sent out to sea on colorfully decorated boats.

Shrine parishioners gather to pray for a safe harvest at the end of summer during an event called Sakagoto. Men communally drink sake and eat a snack made of dried squid and kombu, which is believed to bring good luck. This social ritual deepens the bonds between members of the community.

Autumn is celebrated with harvest festivals known as Aki Matsuri at shrines throughout the region. People give thanks for abundant crops at this time. Offerings such as grilled sweetfish and ears of rice are made to the gods. Salted edamame, daikon radish leaves, and sweet potatoes are some of the traditional foods that may be eaten.

Between November and February, special offerings are made throughout the region to the mountain goddess and her 32 children for Yama no Kuchi. Offerings vary slightly from mountain to mountain, but tend to include rice dumplings (*dango*) and tangerines. The *dango* for Yama no Kuchi are unique because they are made, not with steamed rice, as is common practice but with rice flour, and some places soften the rice by adding sake.