

## OBAMA'S OCEAN & FISH

The waters along the winding ria coast of Obama are bountiful. The rivers and streams flowing down from the mountains into its many inlets bring nutrients from the land to the sea. Seaweed and plankton flourish in these waters, forming the building blocks of a rich marine system. The combination of cold and warm waters in Wakasa Bay further supports this ideal environment for fish and other sea creatures.

The Wakasa willowy flounder (*karei*) and Wakasa horsehead tilefish (*guji*) of Obama are considered luxury products from the region and have earned brand-name status. In landlocked Kyoto to the south, Wakasa willowy flounder has been highly coveted for centuries and is even now presented as a gift to the emperor's household every winter.

The ancient capital of Kyoto was connected to Wakasa Province via a series of routes known as the Saba Kaido ("Mackerel Road" or "Mackerel Highway"). These routes have a history of 1,500 years. Men traversed them on foot carrying baskets full of salted fish, sushi, and other products from Obama strapped on their backs. Some goods changed hands between merchants along the route. Pack animals, such as horses, were sometimes used to transport goods for part of the journey. The route that is believed to be the oldest is also the shortest and the most treacherous. It crosses valleys and mountainous terrain with a peak altitude of 830 meters. It covers approximately 72 kilometers, and is believed to have taken about two days to travel on foot during the Edo period (1603–1868). The ultimate destination for seafood and other marine products from the Wakasa region was usually the Nishiki Market in Kyoto. Accounts from the Edo period show that mackerel and other seafood from the region, known as "Wakasamono," have been highly valued in Kyoto markets for centuries.

Obama was well positioned not only for overland trade routes but also for sea trade. The port was used for trade with China and Korea, and was also a stop for the coastal merchant ships called *kitamae-bune*. These ships traveled back and forth between Osaka and Hokkaido during the Edo period and the Meiji era (1868–1912). *Kitamae-bune* could carry large amounts of cargo long distances and they stopped at a number of ports, influencing food culture throughout Japan in the process. At the time, kelp and herring were among the main products brought into the Wakasa region from northern Japan. Kelp was processed in the Wakasa region and taken to Kyoto. Roof tiles from Wakasa were particularly resistant to the cold, and they were loaded on ships for extra

weight to stabilize them as they sailed back northward. These tiles from Obama can still be seen today on warehouse roofs along Otaru Canal in Hokkaido.