

***Junsai* Picking in Mitane**

Junsai, often called “watershield” in English, is a perennial aquatic plant with edible buds that are considered a delicacy in Japanese cuisine. Its small, round leaves float on the surface of shallow ponds, and the prized buds develop just below the surface. Because edible *junsai* can only be grown in places with excellent water quality, areas fed by runoff from Shirakami Sanchi’s pristine wilderness are ideal for its cultivation. Akita Prefecture is known for producing an overwhelming 90 percent of Japan’s *junsai*, and most of it comes from the town of Mitane.

To pick *junsai*, harvesters sit in a flat-bottomed boat and steer with a pole braced against the bottom of the pond, which is only about 60 centimeters deep. Reaching into the water with one hand, they feel for the buds—a rolled, immature leaf—and pinch them off the main stem. This can be difficult due to the buds’ slippery defensive coating. The buds are collected in buckets and rinsed thoroughly prior to consumption.

Junsai has several recognized health benefits deriving from its high fiber and polyphenol content. In Japanese cuisine, it is commonly added to soups and hot pots, or eaten with a dressing of soy sauce and wasabi. *Junsai*-picking season runs from mid-May through August. Guests who go to one of the many farms in Mitane are guided through the picking process by experienced harvesters and can take home all that they pick.