

Snow Country Culture

【Snow Country Diet】

Tōkamachi is famous for its long winters, during which the accumulated snow typically reaches 2 meters in height. It was difficult to gather or grow food during the winter, so residents had to find ways to make their stockpiles last until spring. Until electric refrigeration became common, carrots, daikon, and other vegetables were stored under the snow, wrapped in straw and cedar boughs to protect them from pests. Cedar leaves contain phenol, a mild acid, as well natural oils that mice and other rodents find unpleasant.

To avoid muscle atrophy during long winters with little movement, it was important to consume plenty of protein. Locally caught fish were hung over the hearth to be smoked, and portions could be cut off as required. Fish could also be taken from the irrigation ponds, which were stocked with carp to keep the water clear of algae. These carp are able to survive being almost completely frozen by storing glycogen in their brains. By luring them into a fish trap before the pond froze, a ready supply of frozen fish could be created, and any uneaten carp would thaw and repopulate the pond in spring. Sheep, cattle, and goats were kept in the home during the cold months, and chickens and rabbits were also kept inside and fattened for consumption.

The winter diet included many foods preserved using salt, which kills bacteria by absorbing moisture. To add variety to this salty diet, residents would use sugar, a precious commodity, when preparing meals for guests or for special events.

Come spring, residents foraged for *sansai*, or wild mountain vegetables, which are sweeter than those found in warmer climates. This is due to a phenomenon called “cold sweetening,” in which certain vegetables convert their starches to sugars to prevent their cells from freezing.