

Fish in the Naruto Strait: Red Sea Bream

Red sea bream (*Pagrus major*)

The red sea bream (*madai* in Japanese) has a special place in Japanese culture as the “celebration fish.” Regular sea bream (*tai*) is one of the most popular species for use in sushi, sashimi, and other dishes, while the red sea bream, which has a more striking color and shape, is usually reserved for feasts marking weddings, graduations, and other occasions. This custom is linked to a pun in the prized fish’s Japanese name: *madai* translates as “true sea bream”; when said aloud this can sound similar to *medetai*, meaning “auspicious” or “joyful.”

Red sea bream that swim wild in the Naruto Strait, known as *Naruto-dai*, are considered among Japan’s finest. The ferocious current here, which is the fastest in all Japan, plays a part. Regularly battling currents of up to 20 kilometers per hour is said to cause the fish to develop a series of lumps along the backbone (known locally as “Naruto bones”), and remarkably firm flesh. Naruto’s red sea bream are at their best in spring, when they are spawning. The flesh turns a vivid pink—hence the nickname *sakura-dai*, or “cherry-blossom sea bream”—and is a bit fattier, making it all the more delectable.