

***Okowa*: Hiruzen Comfort Food**

Just one bite of a beloved dish remembered from childhood can bring a sense of well-being and nostalgia. For many people in Hiruzen, that comfort food is *okowa*.

Okowa is a general term for savory rice dishes made primarily with steamed glutinous rice. Many regional versions exist, varying in the type and number of other ingredients cooked together with the rice. In Hiruzen, the customary recipe adds chicken to wild plants (*sansai*), shiitake mushrooms, butterbur stems, burdock root, carrots, chestnuts, and ginkgo nuts. The blend is lightly seasoned with soy sauce to add umami, and the result is a highly nutritious meal that fills and satisfies.

Hiruzen *okowa* is a celebratory dish often prepared for guests and on special occasions such as festivals, birthdays, and graduations. Making *okowa* requires significant time and effort, as the rice must soak for days in advance. Wild plants need to be gathered, and some of the ingredients, like the chestnuts, ginkgo nuts, and butterbur stems, have to be painstakingly boiled, peeled, or soaked. These days, a trip to the supermarket can replace some of those steps, but even so this special dish involves a lot of work. The end result is considered a gesture of love and respect for the lucky diners, which adds another element of pleasure to the meal.

Visitors can try *okowa* at many of the restaurants around Maniwa.