

The People of Kurokawa who Preserve Local Delicacies

The food served at the Ogi Festival, held annually in February to celebrate a lunar new year and pray for a plentiful upcoming harvest, is considered vital to the celebrations. The dishes are traditional and the flavors faithfully preserved, having been passed down from generation to generation in Kurokawa from 500 years ago.

For the people who attend the festival, these traditional dishes are a special feast to be enjoyed alongside the performances of noh given through the night. Central dishes are *shimi-dofu* (roasted and frozen tofu) and *kiriae* (assorted vegetables), which is served in the shape of the six-eyed crest of Kasuga Jinja Shrine. *Kiriae*'s ingredients include ostrich fern fronds and walnuts as well as other edible wild plants collected during the year by young shrine parishioners. *Kiriae* is served with green soybeans that are finely chopped and seasoned with soy sauce or miso. Pickled plums, *natto* (fermented soybeans), cowpeas, and pickled vegetables are served to complete the meal.

Due to the abundance of tofu served during the festive period, the Ogi Festival is known colloquially as the Tofu Festival. Tofu is prepared both as an offering to the deities and as the highlight of all the dishes. The most famous dish served is *shimi-dofu* (roasted and frozen tofu).

The special meal served during the Ogi Festival plays a major role in passing down the important, traditional culture of Kurokawa.

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Kurokawa Noh is designated an Important Intangible Cultural Property of Japan. It has been passed down from generation to generation by farmers in the local area as part of the religious rituals they observe, supported by belief in the local guardian deities (known as Ogi-sama) residing in Kasuga Jinja Shrine.

Performers of Kurokawa Noh are divided into two troupes: *kamiza* (upper) and *shimoza* (lower). For the Ogi Festival, the largest event held annually in Kurokawa, the deities are invited to the houses of local elders, one representing *kamiza* and one representing *shimoza*. Noh is dedicated to them and performed as an offering to them through the night. *Shimi-dofu* (roasted and frozen tofu) is prepared by hand as the Ogi Festival approaches, to be served to guests and noh performers at the festival banquet. Preparations are carried out by the relatives of those officiating in the festival.

In total of 10,000 pieces of tofu are skewered and roasted over a hearth. Those helping to roast the tofu range from very young children to the elderly.

[*Background conversation*]

Firewood is placed carefully on the hearth and people sit around the blazing fire, using pieces of cardboard, towels, hats, and work gloves to protect themselves from the heat. Bamboo sticks are used to signal those on the opposite side of the hearth when the tofu in front of them is almost ready.

Everyone enjoys the lively atmosphere.

Historically, the method of eating *shimi-dofu* has differed according to troupe membership. Even today, in the lower troupe (*shimoza*), hot seasoned soup is poured over cold tofu.

[*Background conversation*]

In the upper troupe (*kamiza*) the *shimi-dofu* is served hot and eaten after dipping it in a sauce made from soy sauce, sake, walnuts, seaweed, and *sansho* pepper.

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The Ogi Festival is the largest annual festival of its kind to be held at Kasuga Jinja Shrine. Its success is due to the performances of Kurokawa Noh and the dedication of residents in festival preparations. Every aspect of the festival has a long history, from the rituals conducted and performances of Kurokawa Noh presented to the unique dishes served at its banquet.

The ingredients and preparation of the dishes are deeply connected to the natural environment of Kurokawa. The traditional foods are also intertwined with local Shinto rituals and Kurokawa Noh. All these aspects of the Ogi Festival share more than 500 years of history.

The dishes have been carefully hand-prepared by a variety of people including residents and their relatives as well as those involved in the running of the festival. With the cooperation of everyone in Kurokawa, the unique dishes of the Ogi Festival will continue to be preserved alongside Kurokawa Noh.