

## Tsuruoka Food Preservation

In 2014, Tsuruoka was designated the first UNESCO Creative City of Gastronomy in Japan. One of the reasons for achieving this designation is the city's usage and rich history of *sansai* (wild mountain vegetables and mushrooms) in its cuisine.

Tsuruoka is located in the Shonai region of Yamagata Prefecture where the Dewa Sanzan (three sacred mountains of Dewa: Mt. Haguro, Mt. Gassan, and Mt. Yudono) are located. The Dewa Sanzan is a spiritual center of *yamabushi* (mountain-wandering ascetic monks) who are practitioners and followers of Shugendo, a highly syncretic religion dating from 1400 years ago.

For centuries, *yamabushi* have trained and traveled in sacred and remote places in the mountains. Soon after beginning the practice, they became adept at surviving on the wide variety of edible wild plants they found around them. At first, they ate only those that could be consumed raw, but these items became scarce in winter. To ensure they could spend the colder months in the isolated areas, the monks learned how to prepare and preserve what the mountains had to offer. Techniques such as salting, sun-drying, and pickling were memorized and handed down over the centuries, resulting in a range of dishes using the ingredients. Today's *shojin ryori* (ascetic cuisine) is the current step in the evolution of these dishes.

The preparation and preservation process for most mountain vegetable ingredients is time- and labor-intensive. After harvesting, inedible parts need to be removed before the salting, pickling, or sun-drying. The regional *gassan dake* (Mt. Gassan) bamboo shoot is widely regarded as the most difficult *sansai* ingredient to source as it is available for only one month a year. Once harvested, it is cleaned, prepared, and most often bottled. It is a vital ingredient in *shojin ryori*.

*Itadori* (Japanese knotweed, *Reynoutria japonica*) is also usually salted as the astringent taste and sourness would be too strong. Before use, it is de-salted and added to stir-fried dishes.

There are other unique local ingredients. Horse chestnuts (*tochi-no-mi*), for example, are added to glutinous rice to make a popular snack called *tochimochi*, (pounded rice cake). Every fall, a small group of women trek up the mountainside to harvest horse chestnuts from trees estimated to be about 350 years old. After covering themselves from head-to-toe as protection from bees and snakes, the women gather the fallen fruit and return home with as much as 15–20 kilograms of the nuts in handmade woven bags, handed down from mothers and mothers-in-law. They then begin the laborious preparation of the nuts for use in *tochimochi*, a process that can take up to two weeks. In the past, locals had to forage for horse chestnuts as they are able to keep for long periods of time without fear of spoiling. It is a way for the locals to ensure that they have sufficient food to sustain through the harsh winters. However, in order to eat it, they had to process and prepare the chestnuts to remove the toxins to get them edible. Today, there is no need to worry about the lack of food during the winter. Therefore, *tochimochi* today is eaten as a delicacy.

The steps required include:

- Soaking in water to kill insects (two days)
- Sun-drying for storage (up to seven days)
- Soaking in water to prepare for peeling (three days or more)
- Peeling
- Boiling
- Adding ash and mixing with water to remove astringency
- Washing the ash from the mixture
- Steaming with glutinous rice
- Mixing the chestnuts with the rice and pounding to make the mochi

The *tochimochi* are typically filled with sweet red-bean paste. They can be found year-round in many places throughout the region.

Residents of Tsuruoka lead in the traditions of *sansai* preparation and preservation.