

Shodoshima Olives: Mediterranean Vibes

Olive farming in Japan has a relatively short history, but it is one in which Shodoshima figures prominently. The first recorded appearance of the fruit on the archipelago came in 1594, when a Christian missionary presented a cask of olives to the warlord Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537–1598), the de facto ruler of Japan at the time. Growing olive trees on a large scale was attempted only three centuries later. In 1908, after Japan's victory over Russia in the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905), the two nations concluded a treaty that granted Japanese fishermen the right to operate along the Russian coast in the Sea of Okhotsk and the Bering Sea. At the time, olive oil was used as a preservative to keep fish caught in such remote waters from rotting during the journey back to port.

As the longer distances traveled by Japan's fishing fleet created a sudden demand for such oil, the government initiated an olive-farming experiment in the three prefectures of Kagawa, Kagoshima, and Mie. Only Shodoshima in Kagawa, which has a relatively warm and dry climate similar to that on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, passed the test. More farms were established, and the island gradually became known as the olive capital of Japan. Shodoshima currently produces about 90 percent of all olives grown in Japan. There are four main cultivars: Mission, which was the type originally planted in the early 1900s, Manzanillo, Lucca, and Nevadillo Blanco. Harvest season is from mid-September to November, after which most of the olives are either brined or pressed into oil. October 10 is "freshly pickled olive day," when the first fruits of the season, preserved in brine for 10 days, go on sale.