

The Sugar Road in Ureshino

The 228-kilometer Nagasaki Highway, nicknamed the “Sugar Road” for its role in the transport of sugar, connected the port of Nagasaki to the city of Kokura in northern Kyushu.

For most of the Edo period (1603–1867), the artificial island of Dejima in Nagasaki harbor was Japan’s only designated point of contact with the Western world. Sugar, a prominent commodity in Europe, was initially used as medicine in Japan before it became a sought-after product for making sweets. It was imported through Dejima and carried along the Nagasaki Highway to Kokura and thence to Kyoto, Osaka, and Edo (present-day Tokyo).

The road prospered as a major route for disseminating goods, technology, and culture from European countries to areas throughout Japan. Such imports greatly influenced the lifestyle of the wealthy and paved the way for the eventual modernization of the country.

Trade with Europe also made its mark on communities along the Sugar Road. The influence of Portuguese food culture can be seen in dishes that remain popular today, from bread to tempura. Confections such as caramel and castella cake were also introduced and became part of the Japanese vocabulary. In 1759, bulk imports of sugar began arriving at Dejima and were regularly seen being carried along the Sugar Road. The popularity of sugar led to annual imports equivalent to around US\$20 million today.

As sugar became available along the Nagasaki Highway, people began to add it to local dishes, which became known for their sweetness. Western-style confections were adapted to Japanese tastes, and unique methods of producing sweets developed out of this fusion. Visitors to towns along the highway today will find shops selling sweets that were first developed during the eighteenth-century era of the sugar trade.

Shiotatsu

Shiotatsu was a popular post town on the Nagasaki Highway where travelers would stop and rest. Although informal lodgings became commonplace in Shiotatsu, they never appeared on maps made in those days. Nevertheless, the old name for the town was Shiotashuku, in which *shuku* means lodging or post town.

The Nishi family opened a sweets shop along the Sugar Road in Shiotatsu in the eighteenth century and produced *ikkoko* and *kinkato*, confections that have both become synonymous with sweets from the Ureshino area.

Ikkoko, a local specialty of Ureshino, looks like a large pancake with a crispy exterior and a soft, airy interior. The snack has a strong, sweet aroma. *Kinkato* is a colorful, decorative sweet made from sugar that enjoyed great popularity in Japan during the Edo period. To make *kinkato*, sugar was pressed into wooden molds to form a variety of distinctive shapes. It was a popular gift for weddings and other celebrations.