

The Sugar Road

The 228-kilometer Nagasaki Highway, nicknamed the “Sugar Road” for its role in introducing sugar to Japan, 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 transported on the Nagasaki Highway to Kokura, and thence to Kyoto, Osaka, and Edo (present-day Tokyo).

The road prospered as a major route through which goods, technology, and culture from European countries were disseminated throughout Japan, greatly influencing the lifestyle of the wealthy and paving the way for the eventual modernization of the country.

The trade with Europe also made its mark on communities along the Sugar Road. The Portuguese contributed to the food culture of Japan with items that remain popular today, from bread to tempura. Confectioneries such as caramel and castella cakes were also introduced and became part of the Japanese vocabulary. In 1759, bulk imports of sugar began arriving at Dejima and the ingredient was regularly seen along the Sugar Road. The popularity of sugar led to annual imports equivalent to around US\$20 million today.

Fusion Confectioneries

Visitors to Ureshino and other towns along the Nagasaki Highway today will find shops selling sweets that were first developed during the eighteenth-century era of the sugar trade. Western (then called “Nanban”) confections were adapted to Japanese tastes, and this fusion produced distinctive hybrid sweets. A classic example is the castella cake (*kasutera*) thought to have been introduced to Japan by the Portuguese in 1624.

Kasutera evolved into the very popular yellow sponge cake enjoyed throughout the country today.

Another example of a sweet developed in this area is *okoshi*, which is made with white rice, brown sugar, *mizuame* sweet syrup, and baking soda. Because the name of the confection resembles the Japanese word *okosu*, which means to bring good fortune, it is considered an auspicious product.

Yokan is a jelled, sweet bean confection that has been popular since the Edo period and is typically served with green tea. Red and green *yokan*, made from red beans, *adzuki*, and green beans, *uguisumame*, is made in the nearby city of Ogi. The introduction of sugar gave the jelly a crispy texture that is now characteristic of *yokan* from Saga Prefecture.

Marubolo cake, named by combining the Japanese *maru*, meaning round, with the Portuguese *bolo*, meaning cake, is another sweet associated with Saga Prefecture. This is made with white sugar, sesame oil, baking soda, and locally grown wheat flour.

The small, colorful sugar candies known as *konpeito* are also a popular sweet from the region that later spread throughout Japan. Variations on *konpeito* with new flavors and shapes continue to be developed today.