

Horsemeat Sashimi (*Basashi*)

The practice of eating horsemeat is said to date back to the 1590s, when Kato Kiyomasa (1562–1611), lord of Higo and builder of Kumamoto Castle, took part in the two invasions of the Korean Peninsula led by Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537–1598). When food began running short during the campaign, Kiyomasa kept body and soul together by eating raw horsemeat.

This actually made good sense. Because horses have a higher body temperature than other animals, they have fewer parasites, making every part of them (except the offal) safe to eat uncooked. In Kumamoto, most horsemeat is still consumed raw as *basashi* horsemeat sashimi with garlic, ginger, and soy sauce. Horsemeat also tends to get tougher when cooked, and so an order of horsemeat steak in Kumamoto will be served rare by default.

Horsemeat is a healthy food: it is low in fat and cholesterol and rich in vitamins and minerals. It is, however, a little on the expensive side, because it is not mass-produced like other kinds of meat. Although horsemeat is also eaten in Nagano, Fukushima, and Iwate, Kumamoto is Japan's leading producer.

Horsemeat sashimi is one of the three great local specialties (*sandaimeibutsu*) of Kumamoto, along with mustard-stuffed deep-fried lotus root (*karashi renkon*) and sweet-potato dumplings (*ikinari dango*).