

Spicy Deep-Fried Lotus Root (*Karashi Renkon*)

Karashi renkon is one of Kumamoto's three great local specialties, along with horsemeat sashimi (*basashi*) and sweet-potato dumplings (*ikinari dango*). The dish is made by stuffing a paste of hot mustard and miso into the holes of a lotus root, dunking the root in turmeric-flavored batter, and deep-frying it until crisp. It is served sliced.

The origins of *karashi renkon* are far more exclusive than its modern-day popularity as a snack served with beer or *shochu* (Japanese liquor) might lead one to imagine. In 1632, Hosokawa Tadatoshi (1586–1641), then in his late forties, came to take over the Higo domain, as Kumamoto was then known. Tadatoshi, however, was so anemic that he had trouble performing his duties. A Zen monk recommended that he eat lotus root, which is actually a good source of fiber, minerals and vitamin C. Mori Heigoro, one of the official food purveyors to the daimyo's household, came up with this novel way of cooking the tuber, adding a spicy kick to supercharge its naturally healthy properties. This recipe was passed down for generations as a family secret; Mori's company, which is based in Shinmachi, is still purveying the dish he invented nearly 400 years ago. These days, some people add sweet soy sauce or mayonnaise to their *karashi renkon*, but its crunch and punch are best experienced with no condiments.

Lotus Root for the Masses

Throughout the Edo period (1603–1868), the consumption of *karashi renkon* was a privilege restricted to “people permitted to have a surname and carry a sword” (i.e., the samurai class). It was only when the samurai lost their position in society with the advent of the Meiji era (1868–1912) that ordinary people finally gained access to this secret superfood of the upper class.

In a curious coincidence, the Hosokawa family crest looks exactly like a slice of lotus root. In fact, the design—a central circle surrounded by eight smaller circles—represents the celestial bodies of the universe.