

Dining in Kamikōchi

Sampling country cuisine—with dishes featuring fresh, local ingredients topping the menu—is an appealing part of any visit to rural Japan, and Kamikōchi is no exception. Here the cuisine revolves around wild mountain vegetables and char (*iwana*), a medium-sized freshwater fish that flourishes in the Azusa River.

One of the most popular river fish among Japanese anglers, *iwana* are found in regions across Japan. The name means “rock fish” after the boulder-strewn mountain streams they inhabit. In Kamikōchi, *iwana* are most often served salted and grilled, a dish known as *iwana shioyaki*. The traditional means of preparing it is to skewer the whole fish on a long stick, then push one end of the stick into the ash surrounding the fire in a sunken hearth known as an *irori*. Standing this way, occasionally rotated for even cooking, they grill slowly for around forty minutes. Local cooks also smoke the fish in a wicker basket suspended over the fire and then add them to sake, creating the rustic alcoholic drink *iwana kotsuzake*. Fresh *iwana* is also excellent served raw, and *iwana* sashimi is included in the multi-course meals at some Kamikōchi lodging facilities.

Sansai, edible wild plants from the mountains, are another local specialty. The young shoots of three types of fern are staples of *sansai* cuisine: Asian royal fern (*zenmai*), ostrich fern (*kogomi*), and bracken (*warabi*). Japanese spikenard (*udo*) is a crunchy vegetable similar to celery that is often served with vinegared miso. Butterbur (*fuki*) stems are frequently simmered in soy sauce and mirin (cooking sake), then served with bonito flakes.

Sansai can be served as tempura, boiled and mixed with a dressing (*aemono*), added to simmered dishes (*nimono*), or made into pickles (*tsukemono*). They are the topping for buckwheat noodles in the dish called *sansai soba*, and some establishments offer simmered and chilled *sansai* as side dishes with sake.