

Preserving Yokote's Traditional Food Culture

Yokote's traditional food culture developed as a response to a simple problem: food supplies had to be made to last through the region's long, snowy winters. The solution to this problem is fermentation, which allows grains and other crops to be preserved for months. In Yokote, the vital ingredient in the fermentation process is *kōji*, which is created by introducing a microorganism called *Aspergillus oryzae* to steamed rice, soybeans, or other grains. The *kōji* can then be used as a starter to ferment other foods, enabling them to last through the long winter season. Vegetables such as daikon, eggplant, or cucumber can be mixed with *kōji* and pickled, and *kōji* can also be combined with soybeans to create miso. Up until the turn of the twentieth century, most households in Yokote had their own specialized storage space for keeping vegetables as they fermented.

The Role of *Kōji* in Traditional Japanese Cuisine

Many of the most popular and well-known Japanese foods are fermented in a process that starts with creating *kōji*. When combined with a grain such as rice, the *Aspergillus oryzae* emit enzymes to break down the starches and proteins contained in the grain. The process continues for days, until the grain forms clumps and begins to emit a distinctive aroma. The finished product can then be combined with other ingredients to create staple Japanese foods such as pickles, miso, sake, and soy sauce. In a process specific to Yokote, residents use as much as two to three times the typical amount of *kōji* when making miso. This increased ratio helps the soybeans to ferment faster, so that the miso is ready for consumption after being stored for only a single year.

The Legacy of *Kōji* in Yokote

The process of fermenting grains, vegetables, and other foods began out of necessity. Although the people of Yokote were surrounded by fertile soil and clean natural water, agriculture was all but impossible during the winter months. To survive the long winters, residents developed and shared preservation techniques that were passed down through the generations to create a distinctive food culture. The people of Yokote also came to use *kōji* as seasoning or as a sweetener rather than simply for preservation. However, in the decades following World War II, Japan's food culture began to shift away from food prepared according to traditional methods, focusing instead on industrially processed foods. As a result, a great deal of generational knowledge about food preservation has been lost.

In recent years, younger residents have been rediscovering traditional food practices and attempting to revive the knowledge possessed by the prewar generations for the sake of generations to come. The municipal government supports revival efforts throughout the region, and some local restaurants have begun holding cooking classes and other community events to share information on fermentation techniques. Initiatives like this help to ensure that current and future generations will be able to carry on the techniques of Yokote's *kōji*-based food culture.