

## Nishikigoi

Vibrant *nishikigoi* carp are considered living works of art for their variety of colors and patterns. These ornamental carp originated in Ojiya, from a serendipitous genetic mutation in black carp. Selective breeding since the 1800s has resulted in over 100 varieties, many of which are exported around the world. Prices depend on the patterning and the size of the fish, but a rare *nishikigoi* can cost as much as a house, fetching up to one million U.S. dollars.

### *A chance mutation*

Farmers in Ojiya have bred ornamental carp since the 1800s. They derive from black carp (*Cyprinus carpio*), in which chance genetic mutations gave rise to red patterns on the carp's scales. Farmers in the Higashiyama district of Ojiya continue to systematically breed the carp to produce large ornamental varieties.

### *Nishikigoi gain national recognition*

Keeping rare breeds of ornamental carp was historically a pastime reserved for court nobles in the Heian period (794–1185). It remained an exclusive pastime of the nobility until well into the Edo period (1603–1867). After *nishikigoi* breeding developed in the 1800s, ornamental carp became more readily accessible to anyone with the means. *Nishikigoi* came to national attention in 1914 at the Tokyo Taisho Exhibition, an event that showcased Japan's latest products and technologies. From then on, interest spread throughout the country, and the pastime boomed. Ornamental carp breeding became particularly popular in the 1960s, when Japan's economy was growing rapidly.

### *Nurtured by snow and soil*

The environment in Ojiya is ideal for raising and nurturing strong, healthy carp, with a life expectancy of around 30–40 years. Abundant snowmelt provides pristine, mineral-rich water for raising the fish in terraced hillside ponds. Over the centuries, koi farmers have observed that some types are better suited to sandy soil ponds, whereas others thrive in mineral-rich clay ponds.

### *Types of nishikigoi*

The many varieties of *nishikigoi* are distinguished by their colors, patterns, and scales. The three most popular varieties are Kohaku, Taisho Sanshoku, and Showa Sanshoku, collectively known as the Gosanke ("The Big Three").

Kohaku is a white-scaled carp with splashes of red. It was one of the first ornamental koi varieties to be bred in Ojiya in the 1800s. Taisho Sanshoku emerged during the Taisho era (1912–1926) and resembles the Kohaku, accentuated with black specks. The Showa Sanshoku has the same three colors as the Taisho Sanshoku, but in general black is the predominant color. They were first bred during the Showa era (1945–1989).

Other popular varieties include the metallic gold Ogon and the light blue Asagi. Many are given evocative names like Utsurimono (reflection), Kumonryu (nine-tattooed dragon), and Kujaku (peacock).

#### *Prized traits*

Koi are prized for a variety of traits, including body shape, size, color, shine, pattern, and how gracefully they swim in water. The shape of their body is considered most important. The ideal *nishikigoi* has a spindle-shaped body with well-developed muscles along the spine. Carp that have all of these traits can sell for over ¥100 million (around \$1 million).