**Food Culture of Aizu-Wakamatsu**

Japan’s traditional food culture highlights the use of seasonal ingredients, affected by the region’s climate and agricultural practices. The geographic features of Aizu are ideal for growing rice and vegetables, and the heavy winter snow and seasonal temperature differences are said to enhance the flavor of produce. Fresh seafood, however, was very difficult to obtain in the past, as the region is surrounded by mountains and located far from the sea. Dried seafood therefore became an important source of protein. It was brought to Aizu along the Agano River via the *kitamae-bune* ships plying a major shipping route in the Edo period (1603–1867).

Japan rapidly industrialized following the end of shogunate control of local domains, and the development of a national railroad system made transporting foodstuffs from other areas easier. The people of Aizu, however, have continued to cherish their traditional dishes, along with more recent additions to regional food culture. The following are just a few examples of the filling and flavorful dishes on offer in Aizu-Wakamatsu.

*Local flavor*

Perhaps the best-known example of traditional Aizu cuisine is *kozuyu*, a soup made from dried scallop stock and seasoned with salt and soy sauce. Enjoyed for centuries, this hearty dish contains *satoimo* (a variety of taro potato), carrots, various mushrooms, ginkgo nuts, and small balls of wheat gluten called *mamefu*. It is often served on special occasions, such as festivals and weddings, and also at restaurants year-round.

The beautifully presented dish known as *wappa-meshi* is a feast for the eyes as much as the palate. *Wappa* is a round container made from a thin sheet of wood, shaped into a lunchbox. In the past, it was used by woodsmen when they went out to the forest. It is thought that a local restaurant came up with the idea of filling the container with a mix of seasonal dishes, including cooked vegetables and seafood, and naming it *wappa-meshi* (meal in *wappa*).

Miso *dengaku* is made by covering small slabs of fried tofu with a paste of red miso and sugar, and then roasting them. Traditionally the tofu is placed on wooden skewers and cooked over an open flame.

Sauce-*katsudon* consists of a bowl of rice topped with a layer of shredded cabbage and a crispy fried pork cutlet, followed by lashings of tangy sauce. This dish has been a local favorite since the early 1900s, and it is said that each restaurant has its own signature sauce.

A relative newcomer to Aizu-Wakamatsu’s culinary scene is curry-*yakisoba*, which was introduced around 1950. It combines two very popular dishes: Japanese-style curry and stir-fried noodles (*yakisoba*). Curry-*yakisoba* is filling yet inexpensive.

Those with a sweet tooth will want to try some *wagashi* (traditional Japanese confectionary), which typically include ingredients such as sweet bean paste, rice cakes, and walnuts. A cup of green tea is the perfect accompaniment.