

## Wajima Shio Station Salt Production

Along the rocky west coast of the Noto Peninsula, people labor under the sun on sand-covered plots of land. They are engaged in *agehama* salt production, a method that has been practiced in the area since at least 1596. Japan has few salt mines and salt lakes, and salt must be produced through the evaporation of seawater. Visitors to Wajima Shio Station can join a free tour to watch the process and, for a fee, try some of the salt-making steps for themselves, or make their own flavored salt.

### *The salt fields of Oku-Noto*

The amount of farmable land on the Noto Peninsula being limited, the Maeda family that ruled the region from the late-sixteenth to mid-nineteenth centuries, encouraged salt production. The Maedas controlled the sale of the salt and gave producers the equivalent of 1 kilogram of rice for every 10 kilograms of salt. The Maedas in turn used the salt to pay taxes to the Tokugawa Shogunate that ruled Japan from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries.

As it was difficult for salt-making families to support themselves on earnings from salt alone, they carved out small rice paddies from the slopes they had cleared for gathering wood and in the colder months engaged in fishing and other industries.

### *Agehama-style salt production*

Seawater is carried up in buckets to raised seaside fields (*agehama*), where it is scattered by hand to evaporate in the sun. The resulting salt crystals are dissolved again in seawater to create a concentrated brine, which is filtered and boiled down until a thick layer of salt forms on the surface of the remaining brine. The resulting salt contains around 40 percent sodium and 60 percent chloride and is rich in minerals from the sea.

The most common method of salt production from seawater is *irihama*, a practice of flooding tidal flats that became widespread in the Edo period (1603–1867), especially in areas around the Seto Inland Sea in western Japan. On the Noto Peninsula, the difference between high and low tide is too small for *irihama* salt production. The Oku-Noto area is the only place in Japan where this laborious *agehama* process is still used.

### *Undervalued resource*

In the early twentieth century, the government monopolized the salt industry and moved towards mechanizing the process. Coupled with cheaper imported salt, the large volumes of seawater and days and nights of manual labor required to produce salt by hand, most of the salt farms in Oku-Noto became unprofitable and closed down. By the 1950s, there were only two salt farms left on the peninsula. With increasing demand for artisanal salt in the last few years there are now about 20 makers in the area.

Wajima Shio Station is open daily from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. from March to November (winter hours may be shortened).