

## Sagicho Festival

The Sagicho Festival is a colorful and dramatic celebration with more than four centuries of history. The festival is held annually in Omihachiman to mark the advent of spring and features parades of 8-meter-high floats, which are decorated with figures of the year's Chinese zodiac animal sign. These decorations are notable for being made entirely out of edible items, such as beans, grains, fish flakes, and kelp. The use of food for the decorations symbolizes gratitude for the previous year's harvest and prayers for the success of the current year's crop.

Lively groups in colorful coats carry the floats about the town and engage in trials of strength called *kenka*, in which pairs of floats are pushed against each other until one topples over. In the festival's fiery climax, the floats are burned as offerings to the deities, and participants dance around the flames. Some of the participants who carry the floats wear flamboyant clothing and gaudy makeup and dye their hair in bright colors—a tradition said to have been initiated by the warlord Oda Nobunaga (1534–1582). Nobunaga is credited with starting the festival in nearby Azuchi to celebrate the building of Azuchi Castle, his stronghold.

Sagicho festivals are held throughout Japan in January and usually involve burning New Year's decorations on a bonfire to bid farewell to the deities believed to visit homes carrying blessings for the holiday season. The Sagicho festival started by Nobunaga and celebrated in Omihachiman was originally held in the first month of the lunar calendar, which is early spring in the solar calendar. The festival date was fixed to March after Japan adopted the solar calendar in the late nineteenth century.

Today, the Sagicho Festival is an expression of both community pride and Omihachiman's mercantile heritage: each float is made and carried by residents of a specific neighborhood, and the flamboyant appearance and large scale of the floats were traditionally made possible by the wealth of the town's merchant families. The festival, which has been named a National Intangible Folk Cultural Property, takes place over two days on the weekend closest to March 15. At other times of the year, reproductions of the decorations are displayed at the Omihachiman Heritage Museum and in the Former Ban House.