**Tochio Aburage Deep-Fried Tofu**

A deep-fried tofu product from Nagaoka called Tochio *aburage* is characterized by its particularly large size, crispy outer skin, and fluffy inner texture. Each block of Tochio *aburage* is approximately 20 centimeters long, 10 centimeters wide, and 3 centimeters thick, which is much bigger than other similar products. Those who are familiar with Japanese cuisine may notice that the word *aburage* is a variant of *abura-age*, a common term for deep-fried tofu.

*Aburage Origin Stories*

*Aburage* is thought to have originated in Tochio, an area in the northeastern part of Nagaoka, during the Edo period (1603–1867). How and why it was created is unknown, but some believe that a priest from nearby Akiba Shrine asked a tofu maker to come up with a special souvenir for the shrine’s numerous pilgrims. According to another story, *aburage* was developed as a snack to pair with sake during meetings related to horse trading in Tochio, which was one of the three largest horse markets in Echigo Province (present-day Niigata Prefecture). At the time, it was common for horse owners and merchants to discuss business and reach verbal agreements over food and drink, rather than to sign written contracts.

*Production*

Tochio *aburage* is deep-fried once to make it expand and a second time to make the outside crispy. First, blocks of firm, high-quality tofu are deep-fried at approximately 110 degrees Celsius for 15 to 20 minutes. This way, the tofu cooks slowly and greatly increases in size, which creates the distinctly airy, spongey inner texture. Next, the blocks of tofu are moved to vats where oil is heated to about 175 degrees Celsius and are deep-fried for just a few minutes, producing the characteristically crispy outer skin. The cooked *aburage* blocks are then removed from the vats, skewered on rods, and placed on a rack to cool and drain excess oil. Each shop uses its own tofu recipes and deep-frying techniques, resulting in slightly different flavors and textures.

*How to Enjoy Aburage*

Tochio *aburage* can be eaten freshly fried at tofu shops, ordered at restaurants that offer regional cuisine, or purchased precooked and reheated at home. At establishments with eat-in options, *aburage* is sliced into bite-sized strips and served with toppings such as soy sauce, miso paste, or flavored salts. When purchasing packaged *aburage* to prepare at home, it is recommended to reheat it in a frying pan to maintain the crispy outer texture. Please note that packaged *aburage* should be kept refrigerated and consumed within about five days.