

Sasa Dango Dumplings

Some of the most popular traditional confections from Niigata Prefecture are *sasa dango*: steamed, chewy *dango* (rice flour dumplings) that come wrapped in *sasa* bamboo leaves. The sweet but not excessively saccharine treats are made from Niigata's renowned rice, mugwort, and red bean paste. Long before confectioneries began producing *sasa dango* in large quantities, many Niigata residents made them at home, using bamboo leaves for their antiseptic properties to prevent spoilage. Some families continue the practice to this day.

Sasa Dango Production

To make *sasa dango*, crushed mugwort leaves are kneaded into a rice flour-based mixture, resulting in a sticky, jade-colored dough with an herbal taste. The dough is then used to cover a ball of sweet red bean paste. Next, the resulting dumpling is wrapped in several bamboo leaves and securely tied with a string of sedge (a grass-like plant). While typical *dango* are spherical, *sasa dango* are cylindrical. Both the shape and the tying method are reminiscent of straw bales that were historically used to store and transport rice. The tied *sasa dango* are steamed in batches, which infuses the dumplings with subtle flavors from the bamboo leaves. To eat *sasa dango*, untie the sedge string and peel back the leaves, like a banana, to reveal the green, chewy dumpling inside.

Seasonal Associations

Sasa dango are traditionally associated with spring, when mugwort is in season. In Niigata Prefecture, there is a long-standing custom of eating *sasa dango* for the early May celebration of Tango no Sekku (also known as Children's Day). This is notable because in many other regions, the preferred Tango no Sekku confection is oak leaf-wrapped *kashiwa mochi*. Although *sasa dango* consumption remains highest in spring, they are now available throughout the year and are a popular gift from Niigata in any season. Please note that *sasa dango* kept at room temperature should be eaten within two to four days (depending on the shop where they were made).