

Winter Meal Planning: Food Preservation in Tokamachi

With snow on the ground for nearly half the year, survival in Tokamachi has always required planning ahead. Snow-country food culture revolves around storing up enough food for the winter, so strategies such as food preservation and careful use of resources are an important part of everyday life.

One traditional dish exemplifies how seasonal vegetables are used all winter long: *tsukena*, a type of pickled greens that can be found in nearly every household in the Tokamachi area. *Tsukena* is made by pickling *nozawana* greens in salt. *Nozawana* (a member of the turnip family) is planted in early autumn, and the whole crop is harvested around the time of the first snow. The greens are carefully washed and salted, turning them into *tsukena*. Over the winter months, *tsukena* is served as a side dish with meals or as a snack. As spring nears, *tsukena* begins to ferment, giving it an acidic taste. The greens are then removed from their salty brine, rinsed, and simmered. At this point they become a dish called *niina* (literally, “boiled greens”). Through this multi-stage process, Tokamachi residents are able to extend the shelf life of autumn greens until the snow melts.

Long-term, cyclical food-storage strategies are common in snow country. A key example is carp cultivation, once a common way to ensure a protein supply during winter. In warmer months, farmers stocked their irrigation ponds with carp, which kept the water clear of algae. Household waste, even used wash water, was tossed in to supplement the fishes’ diet. Before the pond froze over in winter, the carp were driven into a shoreside fish trap. When temperatures dropped, they entered a state of torpor and were readily accessible as a food source all winter. In spring, the uneaten carp thawed and were released to repopulate the pond.

Other common methods of food preservation included snow storage and smoke drying. Traditional households were equipped to perform these processes themselves. They had rice-straw containers just outside the door to keep daikon radishes and other root vegetables at temperatures just above freezing. Houses also had a special drying rack above the hearth called a *hidana*. Vegetables, fish, and other foodstuffs could be hung from the *hidana* and slowly preserved by the heat and smoke rising from the daily cookfires. Miso was fermented by suspending it in containers from a roof beam or pole above the *hidana*.