

Kyo-Takenoko Bamboo Shoots from Nishiyama

Oharano and the entire mountainous Nishiyama area in the west of Kyoto are famous for *takenoko*: the spring delicacy of short, young bamboo shoots. Bamboo shoots develop underground and are harvested around the time they break through the soil in spring, before they can grow into tall stalks. After the rough exterior layers of the shoot are removed, the ivory-colored inner flesh can be boiled, grilled, fried, pickled, or cooked as any vegetable. Bamboo shoots from Nishiyama are reliably high in quality and are called *Kyo-takenoko* (“Kyoto bamboo shoots”), a certified Kyoto brand product.

Perfect Natural Conditions

Takenoko grow well in the hillside groves of Nishiyama, partly due to the region’s clay soil. The nutrient-rich calcium carbonate substrate helps bamboo shoots grow sweet and tender. The soil in this part of the city has good drainage, ensuring that the shoots get just enough water. The western location is another positive factor, as the rays of the rising sun provide the necessary light and warmth for the vegetation on the east-facing mountainside.

Cultivation

From long ago, people in the area lived near wild bamboo groves and harvested *takenoko* as food, but Buddhist monks were the first to start intentionally cultivating bamboo. They initially grew it for aesthetic purposes, such as for gardens or for landscaping a temple path. Once the monks learned how to effectively tend bamboo groves, they were able to collect plenty of bamboo shoots to use in vegetarian Buddhist cuisine (*shojin ryori*). Their endeavors were further encouraged by Meiji-period (1868–1912) government efforts to promote agriculture. The knowledge and techniques of cultivating bamboo and harvesting delicious bamboo shoots have been passed down through generations and are still actively utilized by farmers today.

Bamboo grows in many regions throughout Japan, but farmers in the Nishiyama area employ a very particular cultivation process for *Kyo-takenoko*. In spring, they prune the tops of selected bamboo stalks, preventing further growth so that more nutrients can be channeled into producing robust new shoots. Weeding takes place in summer, and in autumn farmers cover the ground with straw in preparation for the relatively frigid Kyoto winter. The straw helps retain heat and moisture, protects the bamboo shoots from harsh weather, and serves as an organic fertilizer. Additional clay soil is placed over the straw during winter to make sure that the substrate remains soft and nutritious. In spring,

farmers dig up the *takenoko* with special hoes (*horikuwa*) that work as levers to carefully unearth the new bamboo shoots. As exposure to sunlight makes *takenoko* bitter, selecting those that are mostly or fully underground ensures milder and better taste.

Very light-colored bamboo shoots, called *shiroko*, are especially rare. The name, literally “white shoots,” describes their cream to beige exterior, as opposed to the typical *takenoko* that are brown on the outside. The light color indicates that the shoots had little to no sun exposure. *Shiroko* comprise only about one percent of the harvest and are highly prized for their crisp texture and sweet taste.

Enjoying Kyo-Takenoko

Some long-established restaurants in Oharano and the Nishiyama area specialize in bamboo shoot cuisine. Various cooking methods and seasonal ingredients are used to create dishes that highlight the flavor and texture of *Kyo-takenoko*. In spring, even restaurants that focus on other types of cuisine offer seasonal dishes that incorporate bamboo shoots.

Kyo-takenoko from Nishiyama can be purchased at grocery stores and local markets. Some farmers set up unmanned stalls on the roadside with bamboo shoots and other produce. The prices are shown on signs or stickers, and payment should be put into a collection box. For those interested in a hands-on experience of digging up bamboo shoots, there are excursions to bamboo groves where participants can learn to find young shoots and use a *horikuwa* hoe.

A Symbol of the Region

Bamboo and bamboo shoot imagery is abundant throughout Oharano and the Nishiyama area, appearing as mascot characters, on manhole covers, and in souvenir designs. The official character of Kyoto’s Nishikyo Ward (which includes Oharano) is Takenyon, an anthropomorphic bamboo stalk with a smiling face and cheerful disposition. Takenyon is usually accompanied by a small bamboo shoot, his little sister Nokotan. The many bamboo-related motifs reflect the fact that *takenoko* are more than a famous regional food product, having become part of the area’s brand and sense of community.