

Fishing, Farming, and Foraging: Food Culture in the Goto Islands

As one might expect, Goto Island cuisine draws heavily on the bounty of the surrounding sea. Yet the abundant produce of its fields and the innumerable camellias growing around the islands ensure that should any one food source fail, others will remain. Historically, this self-sustainability is one reason the Goto Islands remained inhabited even when poor catches or disasters drove the villagers of other outlying islands to abandon them.

From camellia oil to tropical fish, local specialties combine the products of fishing, farming, and foraging to offer visitors dining experiences unique to the Goto Islands.

Goto Udon

Udon noodles are made from wheat flour, water, and salt. In the standard form found across Japan, the dough is cut into thick, chewy noodles about 3 millimeters wide (uncooked). Goto udon, however, is much slimmer at about 1.7 millimeters, and the noodles are rounder than typical square-cut udon.

To make it, cooks stretch the dough by pulling and twisting the noodles between two wooden rods, a technique passed down for more than a millennium. During the stretching process the noodles are coated with local camellia oil, a unique addition that prevents them from breaking and results in a firm, silky texture when cooked. This step is called *migaki*, or “polishing.” Finally, the noodles are dried in the sea breeze.

Goto udon can be served both hot and cold, but a common local preparation includes a hot broth made from flying fish. Another popular style is called *jigokudaki* (“hell boiling”), in which the noodles are boiled and brought to the table in a cast-iron pot. Diners pull them from the hot water and dip them in a cup of *dashi*, a stock made from dried fish flakes. A selection of toppings—often raw egg, sliced green onions, and bonito flakes—is served alongside.

Camellia Oil

The Goto Islands have dense concentrations of camellia trees, both in orchards and growing wild. When the seeds ripen, residents collect them from the trees in their yards, the borders of fields, or the mountains and sell them to facilities that press the seeds for oil. In addition to Goto udon, camellia oil appears in many other local foods as a cooking oil or an ingredient in salad dressings. The tree’s leaves are also dried for tea.

Kankoro Mochi

Kankoro mochi is a traditional sweet in the Goto Islands. Standard mochi is made by pounding glutinous rice into a sticky paste. *Kankoro* mochi adds locally grown sweet potatoes to the rice for sweetness. The practice may have originated as a way to stretch supplies of expensive rice by including more economical ingredients.

Sweet potatoes are a common crop on Fukue and are harvested in autumn. Raw sweet potatoes are difficult to store for year-round use, however. The roots are vulnerable to cold, but storing them at warmer temperatures can cause them to sprout. In other regions of Japan they can be dried in the sun, but this method would cause them to spoil in the islands’ moist coastal environment. Instead, farmers thinly slice the potatoes, boil them, then place the boiled slices on shelves in outdoor drying racks. An awning protects the slices from the sun while winter’s cold sea winds pass through the racks. This draws their moisture away, and after three to five days the slices are hard and dry.

To make *kankoro* mochi, the dried sweet potatoes are steamed together with glutinous rice to reconstitute them. The mixture is then pounded into a sticky paste and rolled into loaves. The loaves are sliced, and pieces can be eaten raw or grilled.

Hakofugu

Hakofugu is both the name of, and a way of preparing, boxfish. Sometimes called “trunkfish,” boxfish are a family of tropical species armored in a hard carapace of fused plates that gives them a boxy appearance. Because of their small size and the troublesome carapace, local fishermen once regarded boxfish as bycatch and threw them away. However, they eventually devised a way of preparing the fish. They are flipped upside down and the viscera removed. The liver, which is edible, is returned and

added to a mixture of barley miso, sake, green onions, ginger, and mirin. The fish is then wrapped in foil and broiled on a grill. Once cooked, it is served as is, using the fish's inverted, boxy body as a container. The mixture inside, which includes the scant flesh, is scooped out with a spoon and eaten either by itself or on top of rice.

Other Seafood

The Goto Islands have several additional seafood specialties, such as vinegar-marinated mackerel rolls (*oni saba zushi*). Mackerel fillets are soaked in seasoned vinegar, placed atop sushi rice, and tightly rolled before being cut into bite-size slices. Another dish, called *mizuika no ichiyaboshi*, is bigfin reef squid that has been filleted and dried overnight to bring out its umami flavor. Farmed Pacific bluefin tuna is another emerging local product. Fishermen have recently had success farming this prized fish in several of the islands' inlets.

Liquor and Spirits

Shochu, a traditional Japanese spirit, has long been distilled on the island from locally grown sweet potatoes (*imoshochu*) or barley (*mugijochu*). In recent years, however, camellia has been used to add a touch of local flavor. In 2017, a Fukue craft brewer released a *mugijochu* fermented with yeasts extracted from camellia flowers. The island also joined the nationwide craft gin boom in 2022 with the opening of a distillery that uses camellia seeds, leaves, and oil lees as flavoring botanicals.