

***Fugu*: First Banned, Then Adored**

The consumption of puffer fish, or *fugu*, is ancient. Archaeological excavations of Neolithic shell mounds indicate that people have been eating the fish since the Jōmon period (12,000–500 BCE). These first, adventurous fisherman likely had not yet mastered the art of removing the puffer fish’s deadly tetrodotoxins, and for many, it may have been their final meal. Despite the fatal risk, *fugu* only grew more popular over the centuries.

By the Azuchi-Momoyama era (1568–1603), the *fugu*-related death toll was felt acutely in western Japan. When samurai gathered in Kyushu for the territorial clashes of the late sixteenth century, many died not on the battlefield, but at the dinner table.

In 1592, the imperial regent Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536–1598) enacted the “Ban on Consumption of Puffer Fish” (*Fugushoku kinshidome no rei*), putting a halt to *fugu* cuisine. Punishments for breaking the law were severe and included the loss of one’s hereditary stipend, a key source of income for the samurai class. For the warriors of the *fugu*-loving Chōshū domain (now Yamaguchi Prefecture), the restrictions were particularly harsh.

Among the common people, clandestine *fugu* consumption continued. It was not legalized again until 1888, when Japan’s first prime minister, Yamaguchi-born Itō Hirobumi (1841–1909), was boldly served the delicacy at the Shunpanrō inn in Shimonoseki. Hirobumi was so enamored with the fish’s flavor that he opted to repeal the law that had stood for nearly three centuries.

Fuku Ryōri Cuisine

Shimonoseki’s puffer fish cuisine (*fuku ryōri*) is famed nationwide. The city faces the Hibiki Sea, the Suō Sea, and the Kanmon Strait—all good fishing grounds for puffer fish. More *fugu* are handled there each year than anywhere else in Japan. The delicacy is served in many ways: as sashimi, sushi, hotpot, and in rice porridge, or even as *hirezake*, roasted puffer fish fins served in hot sake. It is also eaten charcoal-grilled or deep-fried.

A Fish of Many Names

Over the centuries, the puffer fish has been called many things. In Japan, it is most commonly called *fugu* and written with the Chinese characters 河豚, meaning “river pig.” One nickname common in the Kansai region is *teppō*, or “rifle,” a nod to its potentially

deadly quality. In Shimonoseki, it is known as *fuku*. The word is thought to have originated from a homophone meaning “good fortune.” It has also been suggested that the word “*fugu*” is locally avoided for its resemblance to a similar word (*fugū*) that means “ill-fated.”