

***Ayu* Cuisine**

Ayu, or sweetfish, are small freshwater fish found in rivers and streams. They live only in clean, fast-moving water and therefore live primarily in habitats like the Yoshino River (known also as the Kinokawa River), which is fed by clear spring water from the mountains. These relatively rare conditions have made *ayu* highly prized. In Kawakami, *ayu* cuisine comes in many forms, ranging from pre-grilled *ayu* sold takeout-style at the local roadside market (*michi no eki*) to multicourse dinners that feature *ayu* in a range of elegant preparations.

Salt-grilling, or *shioyaki*, is the classic way of cooking *ayu*. Coarse salt is applied to the fins and tail to keep them from burning, and the fish is skewered whole on a bamboo stick and grilled. Despite this seemingly simple preparation, there is an art to skewering the fish so that its body forms an undulating wave (reminiscent of swimming). When eating salt-grilled *ayu*, it is common to eat the entire fish, including the salted fins.

Other dishes are more complex. *Ayu* sashimi is prepared by cutting most of the meat from the body, slicing it into thin pieces, and neatly arranging it between the head and tail. *Ayu* can also be made into tempura, either fried whole or in delicate fillets, or served stewed with ginger, sweetened soy sauce, and *sanshō* peppercorns. It sometimes features in *kamameshi*, a dish similar to pilaf, paella, or biryani, in which rice is cooked with diced vegetables and seasoned with soy sauce, miso, and other flavorings in a small iron pot. In this preparation, a whole *ayu* is nestled into the rice and cooked together with the other ingredients, sometimes with an egg cracked over the top. There are almost as many ways to eat *ayu* as there are fish in the Yoshino River!

Several hotels and traditional inns in Kawakami serve *ayu* cuisine, and their multicourse meals give diners the chance to try a variety of sweetfish dishes.