

Delicacies of Ibusuki: Sweet Potatoes

Sweet potatoes arrived in Japan about 400 years ago. They were brought to Kagoshima from the Ryukyu Kingdom (now Okinawa), where they had been imported from China. The high-calorie, mineral-rich root vegetables arrived by several different routes, but an Ibusuki sailor and fisherman named Maeda Riemon (d. 1719) is often credited with popularizing them in Japan. Japan endured several famines in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but Kagoshima's sweet potatoes saved the local population from starvation, making Maeda a local hero. Today, several monuments and a shrine are dedicated to his memory.

The loose, volcanic soil of Kagoshima is ideal for growing sweet potatoes, which thrive with good drainage and warm weather. Today, the prefecture is the foremost producer of sweet potatoes in Japan, and many are grown in Ibusuki. The spuds are used in many traditional local dishes, such as sweet potato mochi (*karaimo nettabo*) and julienned sweet potatoes deep-fried in

batter (*gane*). They are also used to make *shōchū*, a Japanese spirit. There are six *shōchū* distilleries in Ibusuki, and their products are served at restaurants all around town, where they are traditionally mixed with hot water to enhance the alcohol's natural aroma.