

Delicacies of Ibusuki: Okra

Ibusuki is Japan's largest producer of okra, which is grown at nearly 1,200 farms in the area. Okra is a relatively new crop, having been introduced to Japan at the end of the 1800s, when it arrived from Africa via China. Even then, it was not widely cultivated until after World War II (1939–1945). In 1946, a local sailor encountered okra in Sumatra and brought some home to Ibusuki, as did a trainee at the Kagoshima Agricultural Research Station. The two budding okra farmers subsequently exchanged seeds, developed hybrid cultivars, and promoted okra, firmly establishing Ibusuki as the okra capital of Japan.

Ibusuki okra farmers now use greenhouses to extend the growing season from February to October, producing more than 3,000 metric tons each year. The city promotes an eco-friendly farming practice in which insects are used to naturally manage crop-damaging aphids. Farmers plant sorghum alongside the okra to attract ladybugs, which eat the aphids. In

this way, farmers can harness natural predation to reduce the presence of pests without relying on pesticides.

Okra is best enjoyed fresh. When in season, it is served throughout Ibusuki in sandwiches, on pizza, and in traditional Japanese cuisine, such as tempura.

Delicacies of Ibusuki: Yamagawa Pickles

Ibusuki's Yamagawa district is known for *yamagawa-zuke*, a variety of pickled daikon radish that has been made for hundreds of years. The exact origin of the dish is unknown, but it was first recorded in the cargo manifest of a Shimazu-family warship that sailed in 1592.

Making *yamagawa-zuke* pickles can take as long as half a year. First, freshly harvested daikon radishes are hung to cure in the dry winter wind. After about a month, the long roots are flexible enough to tie in knots. The dried

radishes are pounded with a wooden mortar and pestle, first with seawater and then with salt, and then left to ferment in large earthenware jars for several months. The final product is a salty-sweet pickle with a mild crunch that is often served in thin slices.