

niponica

Discovering
Japan

にほにか

no. 39



• Special Feature •

Celebrating with Food in Japan

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Celebrating with Food in Japan

Celebrations of life's turning points and the changing seasons in Japan are often highlighted by colorful foods, made with fine ingredients and beautifully presented.

contents

- 04 Seasonal Calendar of Food and Celebration
- 08 The Joy of Sharing Delicious Dishes for Celebrating the Life's Special Moments
- 10 Preparing Spaces for Seasonal Celebrations
- 12 How Rice Brings Color to Japanese Celebrations
- 14 A Virtual Journey through Japan
Japan's Regional Specialty Foods for Celebrations
- 16 Strolling Japan
Karatsu
- 20 Souvenirs of Japan
Higashi Sweets

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Over the first three days of January, families gather to enjoy *osechi-ryori*, a collection of auspicious dishes that includes *tazukuri*, made of small fish stir-fried in a sweet and savory sauce symbolizing a bountiful harvest, and herring roe, which represents wishes for the prosperity of future generations. *Zoni* (small photo below), a soup of mochi and other ingredients served in a warm broth, is another essential part of the New Year's celebration.

New Year



Seasonal Calendar of Food and Celebration

Culinary calendar closely tied to seasonal celebrations

Photos: PIXTA, Aflo



Setsubun

Around February 3, Japanese people celebrate the change of seasons by performing the *mamemaki* ceremony of throwing beans to drive away evil spirits. The day is also marked by eating thick *ehomaki* sushi rolls, filled with seafood and other ingredients. Eating in silence while facing that particular year's auspicious compass direction is said to ensure that good fortune does not slip away.



Momo no Sekku

On March 3, displays of *hina-ningyo* dolls and peach blossom decorations convey wishes for the healthy growth and happiness of girls. The menu for the day adds festivity to the Girls' Day festival with the spring colors of *chirashi-zushi*, a dish of seasoned sushi rice topped with colorful ingredients; *hamaguri no osuimono*, a clear clam soup where paired shells symbolize good fortune; and *sakura mochi*, a tasty treat wrapped in cherry blossom leaves.



Hanami

Spring in Japan reaches its peak with the arrival of cherry blossoms in April. The custom among commoners of enjoying food, drink, and entertainment under blooming cherry trees is said to have started around the 18th century, with everyone sharing *hanami bento* — picnic lunches in bento boxes packed with rice and an array of side dishes.

Tango no Sekku

This event, dedicated to prayers for boys to grow up healthy, is held on May 5. Traditional displays feature *koinobori* streamers shaped like carp and *kabuto* helmets believed to protect children from harm. The day is marked by eating *kashiwa mochi* rice cakes, which are wrapped in oak leaves, as oak trees do not shed old leaves until new ones sprout and so symbolize a prayer for the prosperity of one's descendants, as well as *chimaki* (glutinous rice wrapped in bamboo leaves), which has long been believed to ward off evil spirits.



Tsukimi



The arrival of autumn is celebrated between mid-September and early October with decorations of pampas grass and full-moon viewing events. *Tsukimi dango*, dumplings shaped to resemble the moon, are offered to the gods before being shared between family and friends.

Nagoshi no Harae



On June 30, people visit shrines in Kyoto and other areas for the summer purification ritual, passing through *chinowa*, a large ring made of cogon grass to cleanse themselves of impurities accumulated over the past six months and pray for good health and safety for the coming six months. The triangular white *minazuki* cakes served on the day are made from rice or wheat flour and are designed to resemble ice chips for warding off the summer heat. The cakes are topped with adzuki beans, which are believed to ward off evil spirits and demons.

Shichi Go San

Shichi Go San on November 15 is an event to celebrate the milestone of children turning three (*san*), five (*go*), and seven (*shichi*) years old, and to pray for their continued healthy growth. After a visit to a shrine, children are given *chitose-ame*, literally “thousand-year candy,” a traditional sweet representing wishes for good health and longevity.





The Joy of Sharing Delicious Dishes for Celebrating Life's Special Moments

In this Japanese form of celebration, good wishes are conveyed by special foods and everyone shares the joy of celebrating the milestones of life.

Photos: Kurihara Osamu

In Japan, people gather around the table with family and close friends to celebrate the milestones of life and the changing seasons. On particularly joyous occasions — Shichi-Go-San celebrations marking the third, fifth, and seventh years of a child's life, graduations, weddings, celebrations of longevity — these celebratory meals are often shared at special venues.

For a chef at one of these venues, the presentation of the celebratory meal is a very important job. Kano Tetsuro, head chef at a traditional restaurant set in a Japanese garden at a Tokyo ceremonial venue that hosts many weddings and other celebratory banquets, says, "What is essential to a celebratory meal is adhering to traditional customs."

Ingredients considered auspicious are vital to these meals. Sea bream, called *tai* in Japanese, provide a pun on the word for congratulations, *medetai* (auspicious). In addition, these fish are red and white, considered lucky colors in Japan, and so they are highly valued at celebratory gatherings. The *okashi-ratsuki* style, in which the fish is served whole from head to

tail, symbolizes "completing things from beginning to end." Shrimp are considered symbols of longevity because their long whiskers and curved backs resemble an old person. *Kombu* seaweed, with its pun on *yorokobu*, meaning to rejoice, has long been used to celebrate joyous occasions and express wishes for family prosperity.

Meaning is also conveyed through presentation. Tableware features the shapes and patterns of animals and plants considered auspicious, and red and white colors are emphasized in the plating. Gold accents also add a touch of gorgeous elegance to some dishes.

"And, of course, we use seasonal ingredients. Because savoring the bounty of the season itself leads to sharing the joy of gathering together at precisely that moment," Kano adds.

Festive touches infused into each dish are a heartfelt expression of the chef's hospitality. These dishes embody the delicate Japanese aesthetic, infusing food with a message for the spirit.



1. Tuna, scallop, and splendid alfonso sashimi served on a crane-shaped plate
2. A dish featuring tofu made from green soybeans, the spring mountain vegetable *urui* (*Hosta montana*), and gold leaf, served in a cherry blossom-shaped bowl.
3. Broth served in a lacquered bowl with a phoenix design on the underside of the lid. Shrimp paste mixed with egg white, paired with the spring mountain vegetable *kogomi*, in a *dashi* broth carefully drawn from *kombu* seaweed and bonito flakes.
4. A simmered dish made with minced sea bream, *tai* in Japanese, bamboo shoots, butterbur, and other spring vegetables
5. Roast beef with a sauce of citrusy *ponzu* and grated daikon radish
6. *Donabe taki gohan* (rice and vegetables cooked in an earthenware pot) topped with *tai* sea bream. The chef carefully debones the fish at the table and mixes it into the rice.

Left: A private room at Kochu-an, the restaurant at Happon-en Garden, a ceremonial venue that hosts an array of celebratory events. (Photo: Happon)
Right: Chef Kano Tetsuro, head chef at Kochu-an



Preparing Spaces for Seasonal Celebrations

Tableware and decorations imbued with auspicious wishes and special meaning make tables look more vibrantly festive and food taste even more delicious.

Photos: PIXTA



Jubako

A traditional stackable Japanese box-shaped tableware with lids used for stacking and serving food. Their stacked design symbolizes the accumulation of good fortune. Used to hold New Year's *osechi* dishes, cherry blossom viewing bento, and other special meals, *jubako* fill the air with a festive spirit. (Photo: Fujina Ware, autumn grasses design in overglaze enamel, Colbase)

Celebratory Chopsticks

Ryokuchibashi (Double-ended chopsticks) are used at celebrations such as New Year's and weddings. Made from willow, a wood believed to ward off evil spirits, these chopsticks are tapered at both ends to symbolize humans and gods sharing the same meal.



Tosoki

These vessels are used to serve *toso* (medicinal sake) drunk during the New Year to pray for good health and longevity. The set includes a *choshi* sake vessel with a spout and a *mitsugumi sakazuki* set of three sake cups of varying sizes. People toast one another's good health, passing and sipping from the small, medium, and large cups in turn.



Decorative Flowers

Flowers and plants considered to bring good luck are selected to decorate celebratory occasions. The New Year's floral arrangement pictured here features pine, a symbol of longevity, and nandina, also known as heavenly bamboo, which is said to ward off misfortune.

Ozara and Kozara

A variety of plates in vibrant colors and unique shapes create a striking impression on a festive table. Large plates called *ozara*, decorated with auspicious patterns in vivid colors, are used to serve whole fish, sashimi, and *chirashi-zushi* (see page 5). Portions are taken from the *ozara* and placed on small individual plates called *kozara*, which are also often decorated with pine trees, turtles, fans, and other auspicious motifs. (Photo: *Ozara* (large plate) with cherry blossoms and eagles by Colbase; *kozara* (small plates) by Tachikichi)



Tableware for Celebratory Meals

Much of the tableware for festivals, seasonal events, and other celebrations is lacquerware, which due to its durability symbolizes good luck. The lacquerware pictured here is used in the Okuizome ceremony, a rite held to celebrate a child's 100th day of birth by pretending to feed them their first meal. The set includes a child's *meshi-wan* rice bowl, *shiru-wan* soup bowl, *hirazara* flat plate, and *fukazara* deep dish.

Mizuhiki

A decorative cord made from hardened washi paper twisted into a string, colored gold and silver, used to tie ceremonial envelopes or gift wrapping. They can be shaped into auspicious cranes to decorate celebratory tables.





+ White Rice

Polished grains of white rice steamed to fluffy perfection have a lustrous sheen and a sweet, toasty aroma that stimulates the appetite. Japanese rice is known for its chewy texture and intense, mouth-filling umami flavors. Although white rice is a part of everyday meals today, it was once a special treat that commoners were only able to enjoy on special occasions.



+ Mochi

Mochi is a traditional Japanese food, made by steaming *mochigome*, particularly sticky glutinous rice, then pounding it with a wooden pestle to make it even chewier. Pure white mochi rice cakes are grilled or boiled and eaten to celebrate the new year.



+ Amazake

A sweet rice drink made from *komekoji*, a mixture of rice and *koji* mold, *amazake* is an auspicious beverage served at festivals and special events. Although called sake, the drink does not contain alcohol and can be served to children, as well. Today *amazake* is known as "the drinkable IV" due to its high nutritional value, and it is loved for its health and beauty benefits.



+ Sekihan

Long believed in Japan to have the power to ward off misfortune, the color red is traditionally featured at celebrations. Steamed *mochigome* with adzuki beans and cowpea, which take on a faint reddish hue, is still an indispensable part of celebrations in Japan today.

How Rice Brings Color to Japanese Celebrations

A staple of the Japanese diet, rice has long sustained the way of life here. The rice stalk, each one offering a multitude of grains, signifies prosperity and has become a prayer symbol standing for abundance and longevity. This sentiment is expressed in celebrations, and an array of food made from rice is traditionally served on auspicious occasions.

Photos: PIXTA



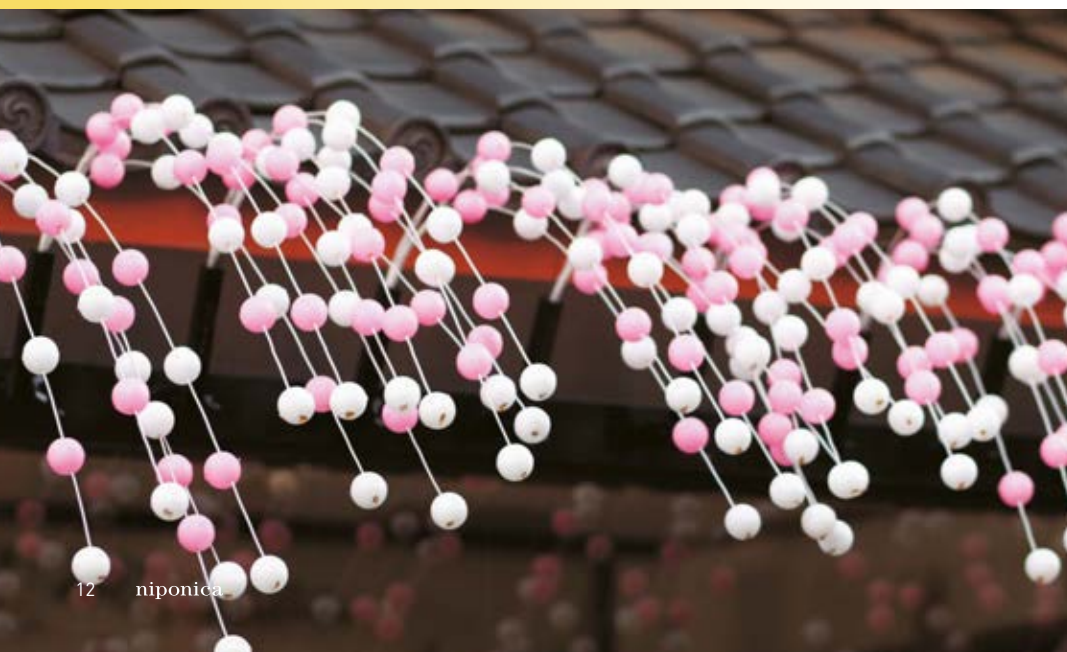
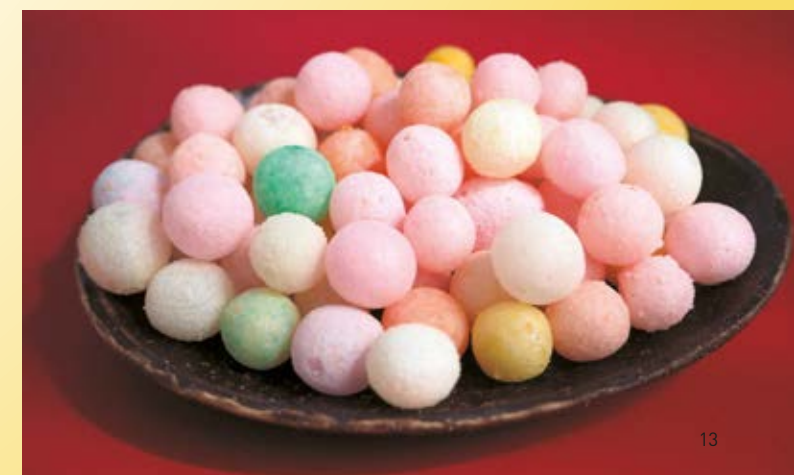
+ Chirashizushi

Sushi, the most well-known of Japanese dishes, comes in a variety of forms and is eaten in celebration of milestone occasions. *Chirashizushi* features colorful fish and vegetables scattered over *sumeshi*, rice seasoned with salt and vinegar. Sushi in this form adds a touch of elegance to occasions celebrating children's milestones, such as the Momo no Sekku Girls' Day Festival and the Shichi-Go-San rite of passage for three-, five-, and seven-year-olds.



+ Arare

Mochigome or finely crushed mochi is roasted to create *arare*, elegantly decorated celebratory sweets. *Oiri* (pictured) is one type of *arare*. These traditional confections from Kagawa Prefecture are often presented as a wedding favor.



+ Mochibana

Mochibana (mochi flowers) are a Japanese New Year's decoration with rice cakes dyed red or pink on branches of willow. These tiny "flowers" add color to New Year's celebrations held in the depths of winter when flowers are not blooming and are symbolic of a longing for the new buds of spring and a bountiful harvest. When the celebrations end, the *mochibana* are removed from the branches, and typically eaten deep-fried in oil, or grilled.

+ Dango

Dango are traditional dumplings made by adding water to rice flour to form a dough that is rolled into balls and steamed. *San-shoku dango* (three-colored *dango*) come in white, pink, and green, representing the seasonal landscape as snowmelt gives way to fresh green foliage. They are a beloved treat for spring flower viewing and to celebrate new beginnings like graduations and entry school.





A Virtual Journey
through Japan

Japan's Regional Specialty Foods for Celebrations

In Japan, local dishes unique to the region have been prepared for special occasions such as life milestones and annual events since ancient times. These foods use everyday ingredients and culinary ingenuity to express festive wishes that reflect the local culture through presentation and flavor. Here, we explore celebratory local dishes across Japan that take on a special meaning when people gather together to share them.

Ishikawa

Oshizushi

Oshizushi, or pressed sushi, made by layering vinegared rice and seafood in a wooden mold and pressing them together, is produced in various parts of Japan. The one made in Kanazawa City, Ishikawa Prefecture, is prepared by packing it into a wooden mold and letting it rest overnight. The beautiful dark blue nori seaweed, dyed with edible pigments, is served on New Year's Day, celebrations, and festivals. (Photo: Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries website)



Akita

Nasu no Hana-zushi

This traditional dish layers round slices of pickled eggplant, steamed *mochigome* glutinous rice, edible chrysanthemum flowers, and chili peppers. The vibrant yellow, red, and purple hues make it an essential part of New Year's celebrations and festive occasions. Each bite fills your mouth with the tang of pickled eggplant, the sweetness of the *mochigome*, the heat of the chili peppers, and the fresh aromatics of the chrysanthemum flowers. (Photo: Aflo)



Hokkaido

Sake Chanchan Yaki

This hearty *teppanyaki* dish features local salmon, cabbage, onions, mushrooms and other vegetables, all grilled in butter and finished with miso. Originating in fishing towns, this has long been popular method of quickly preparing freshly caught salmon. At festivals and gatherings of neighbors and relatives, people come together around large *teppanyaki* griddles to share *sake no chanchan yaki* and mingle. (Photo: PIXTA)



Ibaraki

Mitsume no Botamochi

A local confection made with *mochigome* glutinous rice and *uruchigome* standard short-grain white rice, in a traditional lacquered box (*jubako*), then topped with sweet red bean paste and roasted soybean flour. It is said to have originated three days after a child's birth, when it was served to new mothers to provide nourishment after childbirth, the dish may also be given out to neighbors as a celebration of childbirth. (Photo: Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries website)



Yamaguchi

Kashiwan

This soup dish takes its name from *kashiwa*, a Japanese word for chicken. Cooled *dashi* broth is poured over a bowl of boiled chicken, shiitake mushrooms, chrysanthemum greens, and other vegetables, as well as colored wheat gluten and boiled eggs. With its splendid appearance, *Kashiwan* has long been served to guests at weddings, funerals, and other ceremonial occasions in this part of Japan. (Photo: Hagi Genki no Kai)



Aichi

Oshimon

These traditional sweets come in auspicious shapes such as sea bream and plum blossoms. They are usually made by mixing rice flour with boiling water to make a dough that is kneaded and then shaped in wooden molds. The treats are then steamed and painted with color. For the Hinamatsuri girls' festival in March, *oshimon* are grilled and dipped in soy sauce sweetened with sugar. (Photo: Aichi Prefecture)



Shizuoka

Saba no Hako-zushi

This box sushi is vinegared rice packed in a wooden box, features a variety of ingredients, including boiled and flaked *saba* (mackerel), simmered vegetables like carrots and *shiitake* mushrooms, *sakura* shrimp, and steamed fish paste *kamaboko*. With its vivid colors, *saba no hako-zushi* has long been a favorite special treat enjoyed on festive occasions. (Photo: Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries website)



Saga

Sukozushi

A style of pressed sushi made by pressed vinegared rice into a wooden box called a *morofuta*, *sukozushi* is topped with bamboo shoots, pickles, sweet-and-salty simmered vegetables, and glazed grilled *mutsuguro*, a mudskipper of the goby family of fish and a specialty from the Ariake Sea. A local dish has been carefully passed down and is still indispensable for festivals and celebrations. (Photo: Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries website)



Kyoto

Shiromiso Zoni

Each region of Japan has its own version of *ozoni*, a traditional soup for New Year's festivities. In Kyoto, *ozoni* is most commonly made with a white miso broth. White miso, with its gentle sweet taste, was featured in dishes served on special days such as court festivals in the past. A bowl of *shiromiso zoni*, featuring round *marumochi* rice cakes, taro, and local *kintoki ninjin* carrots, is served at the beginning of the year. (Photo: PIXTA)



Nara

Kaki-Namasu

Namasu, thinly sliced daikon radish and carrots lightly pickled in vinegar, is commonly eaten during New Year's celebrations. In Nara Prefecture, locally grown persimmons, or *kaki*, are added to the dish. *Kaki-namasu* may be served in persimmon bowls, made by scooping the center of the persimmon out and leaving the peel intact, for a New Year's dish special enough to start the year. (Photo: PIXTA)





Journey to a Bustling Historical Castle Town



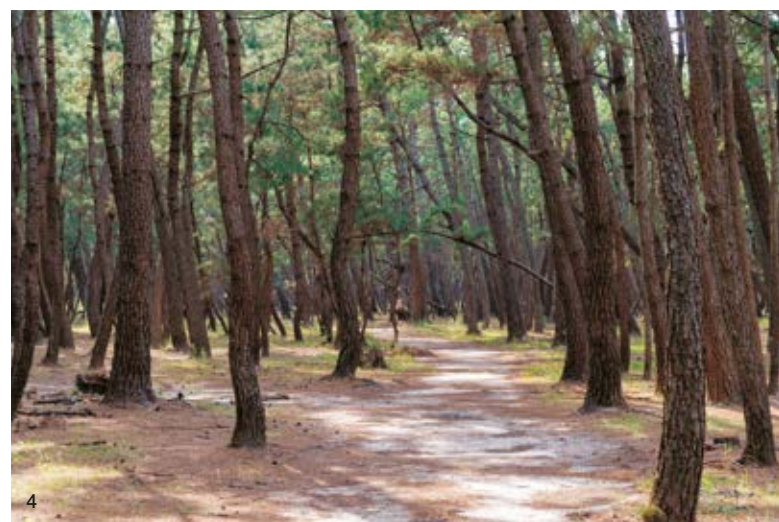
Karatsu

The city of Karatsu, blessed by the bounty of the sea and a long history serving as a hub for people and goods, developed lively festivals, still celebrated today. A walk through the city reveals a lingering feeling of excitement.

Photos: PIXTA, Aflo



1. Karatsu Kunchi, the autumn festival held at Karatsu Shrine during November 2–4, features a procession of *hikiyama* floats and is listed as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage. (Photo: Karatsu Tourism Association)
2. Crafting the *hikiyama* floats involves the traditional technique of applying more than 100 layers of washi paper to clay molds. From top: Lion, sea bream, flying dragon
3. Karatsu Castle is nicknamed Maizuru Castle for its shape, which resembles a crane spreading its wings toward the sea.
4. Niji no Matsubara pine forest, a designated Special Place of Scenic Beauty in Japan, is an area approximately 4.5km long and 500m wide filled with black pines. (Photo: Karatsu Tourism Association)
5. View of the Genkai Sea from Suginojara Hobokujo ranch





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6. During the Karatsu Kunchi festival, traditional dishes, made like this for generations, are served on generously sized platters to large gatherings of guests. (Photo: Genyo)

Located at the northern tip of Saga Prefecture in northwestern Kyushu, facing the Genkai Sea, the journey to Karatsu takes about an hour and a half from Fukuoka, whether by train from JR Hakata Station or a direct bus from Fukuoka Airport. For centuries, the town flourished as a gateway to the continent. Around the time when Karatsu Castle was built in the 17th century, the area began to develop as a bustling castle town, with crowds of merchants coming and going. The scenic pine forest known as Niji no Matsubara also came into being about the time that the castle was constructed. This beautifully cultivated pine forest, originally planted to prevent from tide, is now home to some one million pine trees.

Karatsu is especially lively during the Karatsu Kunchi festival, held in November when autumn deepens. The largest in Karatsu, the festival celebrates a bountiful harvest,

with *hikiyama* floats shaped like lions, sea bream, boats, and more parading down the city streets. The enormous floats, lavishly adorned with gold and lacquer and pulled by large crowds of people, are nothing short of spectacular.

During the festival period, families serve home-cooked dishes known as Kunchi cuisine. Relatives, friends, and those who have finished pulling the *hikiyama* floats are welcomed into the home, where large platters of colorful seafood, vegetables, and other dishes are set out for everyone to gather around the table and enjoy. The star of this feast is *kue no sugatani*, grouper simmered in broth and served head-to-tail. A luxury fish native to the region, grouper can grow up to a meter long, making this a signature dish at celebratory feasts in Karatsu. Bringing the festival's exciting atmosphere into the home, Kunchi cuisine is a form of celebration that involves chatting with

11. Karatsu-ware pottery, with its natural clay texture highlighted by a simple glaze, is cherished for everyday use and gains a deep, mature patina over time. (Photo: Karatsu Tourism Association)

12. Nakazato Tarouemon XIV continues to create works that elevate traditional Karatsu techniques into contemporary artistic beauty. (Photo: Nakazato Tarouemon Pottery Studio)

13. The Former Takatori Residence, once the home of coal baron Takatori Koreyoshi.

14. With its extremely rare modern Japanese style of construction, features a *noh* stage in the grand hall. (Photo: Karatsu Tourism Association)



friends and family while appreciating, sharing, and savoring these delicious and beautiful dishes.

To fully savor Karatsu cuisine, do not miss the squid from the district of Yobuko, located north of the city center. *Ika* sashimi, made from freshly caught squid, is an exquisite dish with a distinct sweetness due to its transparency and freshness. Immediately prepared from freshly caught squid, it is a culinary masterpiece that truly showcases the sweetness of translucent squid flesh. *Ika shumai* dumplings, made of steamed squid paste and served in a gorgeous presentation, are also a must-try. Venture south of Karatsu to one of the many hot spring resorts. At Ureshino Onsen, enjoy the unique melt-in-your-mouth texture and rich flavor of *onsen yudofu* (tofu boiled in hot spring water).

There is, of course, more to Karatsu than just its cuisine. It is the birthplace of the celebrated Karatsu-ware

pottery, tea ware renowned in the world of *chanoyu* and long cherished by tea ceremony masters for its simplicity and warmth. The pottery produced today in the 430-year-old Nakazato Tarouemon kiln shows clearly how these traditions have been passed down over the centuries. In the modern era, Karatsu flourished as a port for the export of coal, and the wealth amassed by the coal mine owners brought new culture to the town. The Former Takatori Residence, once the home of a coal mine baron, preserves this legacy today. Featuring a full *noh* stage built in the grand hall, the residence exudes a sophisticated and elegant, yet somewhat austere presence.

Take a trip to Karatsu and quietly immerse yourself in a culture that celebrates people coming together to share in annual festivities, the bountiful flavors of the sea, and the simple, warm aesthetic embodied in the local stoneware.



7



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7. *Kensisaki ika*, the swordtip squid inhabiting the rough waves of the Genkai Sea, offers a satisfying crunch and rich, tasty flavor.
8. *Ika shumai* squid dumplings steamed and served in a bamboo steamer
9. Ureshino Onsen is known for its sodium-rich waters that leave the skin looking beautiful. (Photo: Ureshino Onsen Ryokan Shiiba Sanso)
10. Onsen *yudofu* is tofu boiled in water from Ureshino Onsen's famous hot springs. The mildly alkaline water breaks the proteins down, causing the tofu to dissolve.



Karatsu Area Map

- 1 Karatsu Castle
- 2 Niji no Matsubara
- 3 Suginojima Hobokujo
- 4 Yobuko
- 5 Nakazato Tarouemon Pottery Studio
- 6 Former Takatori Residence

•Access
Karatsu is approximately 90 minutes by train or direct bus from Fukuoka Airport.

•Contact information
Karatsu Tourism Association website "Tabi Karatsu"
<https://www.karatsu-kankou.jp/en/>



Perfect for
Japanese Celebrations

Higashi Sweets



In addition to the celebratory sea bream and plover, *higashi* sweets come in many charming animal shapes like rabbits and *tanuki* raccoon dogs.

(Photos: Kyokasho Kanshundo)

Left: Packing sugar evenly into the small molds and then cleanly removing it requires a high level of skill.

(Photo: Kyokasho Kanshundo)



A box of *higashi* sweets come in auspicious designs such as cherry blossoms, irises, and flowing water.

(Photo: Kagizen Yoshifusa)

Before it became the everyday sweetener it is today, sugar in Japan was an expensive, non-perishable luxury item used for special occasions only. Crafted in sugar, *higashi* are beautifully shaped and colored confections presented as gifts.

Some *higashi* are made solely of sugar, while others are made by mixing sugar with rice, beans, wheat flour, or starch syrup. What these confections have in common is that they are formed by pressing and compacting sugar in wooden molds rather than being baked in an oven.

The quality of *higashi* design is largely determined by the wooden molds used. These molds, carved from mountain cherry wood with chisels and knives, are

themselves masterpieces of handcrafted artistry. It is, however, the artisan's techniques — blending ingredients, adding color, judging moisture levels, and making adjustments in how the mixture is pressed into and removed from the mold — that ultimately craft the beautiful shapes of these confections.

Often given as casual gifts today, *higashi* now come in a wide array of designs, not just as symbols of celebration such as sea bream and cranes. Today, you might see natural motifs and traditional patterns, as well. *Higashi* designs symbolize wishes of good fortune and an appreciation of seasons throughout the year. Try some *higashi* and savor their gentle sweetness as you consider the meaning these small confections hold.

