

The Sakuraba Story



Sakuramochi rice cakes were invented around 300 years ago, in 1717. According to the Toenshosetsu (a series of essay collections edited by Bakin Takizawa and others), Sakuramochi came into being when Shinroku, an employee of Chomei-ji Temple in the Mukojima district of Edo (Old Tokyo) began pickling the leaves of Sakura (cherry) trees growing on the banks of the Sumida River in salt, wrapping mochi rice cakes in them, and then selling the cakes. These cakes sold like wildfire, and Sakuramochi became the representative springtime sweet of the Edo era.

Oshima Zakura Cherry Trees

Sakuramochi comprise rice cakes wrapped in Sakura leaves pickled in salt, but when we think of the Sakura leaves produced in Matsuzaki Town, we think of Oshima Zakura cherry trees. Oshima Zakura is a variety of Japanese cherry tree that grows in coastal areas and is highly resistant to salty winds. Even amongst hardy Japanese Cherry Trees, Oshima Zakura is said to have an especially strong life force, and its distribution includes the Izu Islands (centered on Izu-Oshima) and southern areas of the Miura, Boso, and Izu Peninsulas. On the Izu Peninsular in particular, Oshima Zakura is referred to as Takigi-Zakura ("Bonfire Cherry"), Shiokaze-Zakura ("Salt-wind Cherry"), and Mochi-Zakura ("Rice Cake Cherry"), and these unusual names speak to the close relationship between these trees and the local people. Oshima Zakura is especially rich in coumarin, a fragrance component peculiar to cherry trees, and it is so fragrant that other cherry varieties pale in comparison. Due to their hairlessness and attractive shape, the leaves make optimal food ingredients, and in Matsuzaki Town, only Oshima Zakura are grown.

Izu's Sakuraba-zuke (Cherry Leaves Pickled in Salt)

The history of Sakuraba-zuke in Izu began around the end of the Meiji Era (1868-1912). At the request of a pickles-maker in Kozue, Kanagawa Prefecture, barrels and salt were transported to the Koura area in southern Izu and locally picked Sakura leaves were pickled in the barrels. At the beginning of the Showa era (1926-1989), the leaf-picking operation was moved to Matsuzaki Town, where charcoal-making was a thriving industry at that time. The move was because Oshima Zakura trees provided the raw materials for charcoal-making, and it was easy to gather the young leaves of the Oshima Zakura trees, which grew abundantly in mix-tree groves blown about by salty winds.

Throughout the Taisho era (1912-1926) the Sakuraba-zuke industry grew alongside charcoal production, so much so that around 1935 the leaves were being sold under the "Tokyo Sakuraba-zuke" brand name as far away as Kyushu. The Jamatsu Railway Line that linked Numazu Station and the port at that time was also an important "Sakuraba Path" connecting Izu with consumption areas throughout Japan. From 1950 onwards, Matsuzaki Town became Japan's top charcoal producer due to the postwar economic recovery, and Sakuraba production also increased accordingly.

Sakura Leaf Cultivation

Sakuraba production in the era when the leaves were picked from trees growing wild in nature peaked in the mid-to-late 1950s and then declined rapidly.

Japan's energy revolution from 1955 to 1964 dealt a huge blow to the Sakuraba industry by decreeing that "leaves cannot be picked unless the wood is used for charcoal".

The industry was rescued from this crisis by the Cherry Tree "lobation cultivation method". The industry's recovery is said to have begun with a farmer in the Iwashina area of Matsuzaki Town planting 5,000 Oshima Zakura seedlings in 1962-1963. Since then, landscapes of Sakura fields have been spreading across the mountains around Matsuzaki Town, which is now Japan's No. 1 Sakuraba producer, proudly comprising approx. 70% of Japan's total Sakuraba production.

● Picking and Harvesting Sakura Leaves

From late January to early February each year, the Cherry Trees are pruned by cutting their branches approx. 20 cm from the base. Beginning in early May—approx. 40 days after the new buds have sprouted—the leaves are carefully handpicked one-by-one, with the harvest continuing until the end of August.

● Maruke (Dividing Harvested Leaves into Bundles)

The harvested leaves are divided according to size into bundles of 50 leaves each. In Izu-Matsuzaki, this task is called maruke. Incidentally, maruke is a term that has been passed down from ancient times and is only used to describe this part of the Sakuraba production process.

● Pickling the Leaves

From early May, the harvested leaves are collected every day and pickled on the same day. In the past, the Sakura leaves were pickled in Japanese cedar sanjikkoku barrels (large barrels measuring 2 m high and 2 m in diameter). Two or three people would get into the barrels and lay the bundles of leaves one-by-one concentrically around the bottom of the barrel, facing outwards, and then sprinkled with salt. This layering process is continued until the barrel is full, with approx. 40,000 bundles (2,000,000 leaves) pickled in one barrel. When the barrel is full, 1 ton of heavy stone is placed on top of the leaves and they are left to pickle for five to six months. The pickling process is complete when the leaves have acquired an amber color and their characteristic aroma.

Incidentally, in the days when the leaves were picked from trees growing wild in nature, the "Five-month leaves from four-to-five-year-old trees" are said to have had excellent color, shape, and aroma. Releasing a deep yellow-green liquid during the pickling process, the pickled leaves were a pretty amber color and deliciously moist, harmonizing well with the mochi rice cakes. Today, these leaves picked from trees growing wild have become "fantasy Sakuraba".