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"Uchina"(Okinawa) Food Culture

Savor a Cuisine Passed Down Through Generations



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◎ Okinawa Prefecture

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The 9 Elements of Traditional Okinawan Food Culture

Okinawan Traditional "Culinary Culture"

Built on the foundation of Okinawa's unique culinary culture known as Ryukyu cuisine, it is a culture of daily living that incorporates various elements such as ingredients and cooking techniques, manners and customs. Underlying these is a deep reverence for nature and climate. It is a spirit that values the bond with family, relatives, and the region, and the influences of exchanges with other countries including China and Japan.

What is "Ryukyu Cuisine"?

Ryukyu cuisine is the traditional cooking developed in Okinawa and passed down through generations. During the era of the Ryukyu dynasty, it was born as a cuisine to entertain visiting diplomats from China and magistrates from the Satsuma Domain in what is now southern Japan, and was established as court cuisine with refined cooking techniques and etiquette. This was passed on to the upper class, and since the Meiji era has spread to the general populace, where it has developed further. In addition, there is the popular cuisine that has formed as a result of the natural environment of the subtropical islands, and both of these cuisines have been passed down as the sources of Ryukyu cuisine.

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"Ryukyu cuisine," "Awamori," and "Geino (performing arts)"

– cultural traditions of Okinawa that have been passed down from the Ryukyu Kingdom era

Okinawa Prefecture, which was once known as the Ryukyu Kingdom, has formed its own culture. Upholding itself as "Shurei no kuni = a country that values courtesy," the Ryukyu Kingdom welcomed and entertained foreign guests by offering them courteous treatment.

In particular, the sapposhi, or investiture missions dispatched by the Chinese emperor, consisted of a large number of Chinese officials, staying in Ryukyu for up to about six months upon the accession of a new king. Banquets held on these occasions were an important national event, focusing on cuisine and the performing arts to welcome the Chinese envoys. The kyutei ryori (dishes served at the court), goyoshu (official royal liquor) awamori, and geino that enlivened these banquets are still popular among the Okinawan people as the pride of Okinawa Prefecture.

The culinary culture and performing arts cultivated during the Ryukyu Kingdom era have been inherited through the shurei no kokoro (spirit of courtesy) that has been passed down among the Okinawan people, while reflecting the history of "yogawari" (changes in the world).

1 Ingredients

A host of native ingredients nurtured by the subtropical climate are employed, including vegetables, seafood, seaweed, tofu, and pork, together with ingredients brought in from the outside such as kombu, bamboo shoots, etc.

2 Cooking

There are many soups, stews, stir-fried and fried foods that make use of fat. Another characteristic element is fully utilizing ingredients to minimize waste, evident in such practices as using broth left over after boiling for stock. There are few raw foods.

3 Flavor (stock)

With pork and bonito stock as a base, ingredients such as meat, seafood, kombu, vegetables, and lard are combined to give rise to a deep umami and richness that is the keynote of the flavor.

4 Nutrition

The concept of "ishoku dogen" (the equal importance of medicine and diet for a healthy body) has taken root, with a dedication to employing ingredients that have a natural affinity, and frequent use of natural ingredients and infusions, shinjinmu, known to be excellent sources of nutrition.

5 Sweets

Passed down through generations of confectionery artisans, these are traditionally used during ceremonies and events. In addition to the strong presence of Chinese-style cakes, there are also Japanese-style and Western-style cakes.

6 Liquor

During the Ryukyu dynasty, Ryukyu awamori was presented to the shogunate, and was served to entertain emissaries. In recent years, slow-aged "kusu" (vintage liquor) is becoming popular.

7 Tea

The most consumed varieties in Okinawa are shimi-cha and sanpin-cha, both originally from China. There is also a unique Okinawan-style tea called bukubuku-cha, which is whipped to a froth with a bamboo whisk in a wooden bowl.

8 Tableware

With its dazzling patterns, Ryukyu lacquerware, as well as pottery, porcelain, etc., have been used since the Ryukyu dynasty as dishes for Ryukyu cuisine, and expresses the Ryukyu aesthetic together with the food it carries.

9 Manners and Customs

Food is a medium for reaffirming social bonds, with special dishes being served during events and traditional ceremonies where relatives and locals gather.

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For details see here →