

Meals, Drinks, Sweets: Rice as Part of Japanese Life

Rice is a significant part of Japanese identity.

Gohan, which is cooked white rice, is a staple of Japanese cuisine. It's so essential that the term is formed by adding the honorific prefix *go* to the alternative pronunciation of the character *meshi* (meal).

Sake is a Japanese alcoholic drink, also made from brewing rice. And it is used as an offering to the gods in Shinto shrines.

Needless to say, sushi is also made from rice. Other Japanese dishes — such as grilled fish, tempura, *osuimono* soup, and Japanese pickles — have all been concocted as perfect accompaniments to rice.

Rice balls (*onigiri*) made by shaping rice are one of the most popular signature products at convenience stores.

Rice with Deep Roots for Japanese Sweets

Like *mochi*, which is made of glutinous rice (*mochigome*), most confectionery in Japan contain rice. For this reason, confectionery stores typically stock rice.

Interestingly, employees of the confectionery manufacturer *Eitaro Sohonpo* in Tokyo, founded over 200 years ago, participate in a unique activity that sets them apart from the more sophisticated traditional confectionery produced in Kyoto. The employees grow and harvest their own *mochigome* used in making the *Eitaro* sweets.

I had the privilege of observing the employees participate in an annual spring rice-planting event (*taue*) under the guidance of a collective of organic farmers. Passersby understandably stared curiously at this age-old process — manual labor having become increasingly rare in modernized Japan.

Rice planting is a challenge for those who aren't used to keeping their balance in flooded rice paddies. But the first-hand experience of rice planting was worthwhile for confectionery manufacturer employees, who usually worked in product development, in-store sales, or marketing. They gained knowledge of their products' basic ingredient, share their experience with customers, and develop a deeper passion and dedication to their work.

Department store employees were also invited to roll up their sleeves (and pants) at the rice paddy. The rewards of hands-on experience at the place of production were invaluable — the nurturing of relationships being one of the greatest. Farmers who guided the participants got a real sense of the fruits of their labor being transformed by confectioners into sumptuous creations that bring joy to whoever tasted them.

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These rice paddies are a quintessentially Japanese scenery reminiscent of former times — young, enthusiastic employees planting rice, employees' children playing around in the mud.

Without a doubt, such an experience elevates confectionery to a new level, which means very happy customers.

The scenery of the paddy will change according to the growth cycle of the rice, with rice cultivation and several weeding sessions still to come. By the time autumn arrives in its golden glory, delicious mochi will be ready for harvest.

Mouthwatering mochi will finally be at our eager fingertips.

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瑞穂の国の原風景：ご飯、お酒、お菓子…日本の暮らしをつくるお米

日本は米の国である。

白米を炊いた“ごはん”が食の基本、呼び方も飯（めし）に御（ご）と敬語をつけて呼ぶほど大切にしているが、SAKEは米を醸造したアルコールであるし、神社ではお神酒（みき）として神に捧げている。寿司は勿論米であるし、想像して貰えば焼いた魚や天婦羅、お吸い物、漬物、みんな白いご飯とセットになって美味しく食べられるのである。ご飯を握ったおにぎりはコンビニエンスストアでも超人気・定番商品である。

日本の菓子は米が原料のものが多いが、中でも餅菓子はその名の通り、餅米という原料を使用している。普通の菓子屋は当然米を仕入れるのだが、200年以上続く江戸の菓子屋（京都の菓子とは違う）の榮太樓総本舗は、社員がもち米作りに参加する稀有な活動をしている。

春の恒例行事、「田植え」を取材させて貰った。有機栽培の農家集団の指導で作業は進むが、このような超アナログな作業は近代化が進んだ日本では滅多に見かけない風景である。通りがかりの人は珍しそうに眺めていく。

水を張った田圃に入り、足を取られながら慣れない作業は大変であるが、普段は開発や店頭販売、営業などの菓子屋社員が、自社製品の基本、米が作られる現場を知るのには本当に大切に、この経験を顧客に伝えられるし、更に愛情をこめた仕事の進め方になるそうである。

ゲストとして百貨店の社員も共に汗を流したが、現場での実体験から得られるものは大きいし、素敵な人間関係が出来るのが最大の効果である。指導している農家にとっても、自分達の作った米が職人の手で美味しい菓子になり、それを食べる顧客のとびっきりの笑顔が見られる、そんな貴重な関係が出来ているのである。

こういう体験で出来る菓子は益々おいしくなるし、最後は顧客の笑顔に繋がる。入社したばかり社員は目を輝かせて田植えしているし、親についてきた社員の子供達も泥だらけになって騒ぐ、昔ながらの日本的な風景が田植えと共に広がっている。

米作り、今後雑草取りが数回、田圃は稲の成長につれ景色が変わっていくが、黄金色に染まる秋には美味しいもち米の収穫。そして・・・新米で作る餅菓子が待っている。

出典:瑞穂の国の原風景：ご飯、お酒、お菓子…日本の暮らしをつくるお米

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