



Eating simmered vegetables on the veranda while drinking locally-made sake.
Living it up in the Japanese countryside.

"Nishime" is a dish of simmered root vegetables, tubers, konnyaku, edible kelp, with soy sauce and sake, etc. It is eaten in households around Japan, but it's more commonly seen in the countryside and can include various ingredients that are particular to a region.

The special ingredients in Unnan's "Nishime" (not to mention the larger Izumo area) are the coil-like "royal fern" and the world-famous shiitake mushrooms. The distinct aroma of the dish suggests its full-bodied flavor. Any house in the area makes this dish frequently, and each household has its little special take on this local classic.

It's said to be an everyday custom here in the countryside to call your neighbors over and break out some rice balls and various pickled vegetables while sipping tea or sake to have a good time.

The ingredients are all grown locally, even the sake is produced at the local brewery. The sake that I drank was the first batch of the year and the bouquet had a fresh bite to it, that couldn't be described as necessarily sweet or bitter, but that satisfied both mouth and stomach. It went down so well that I drank cup after cup without even realizing it.

The person who provided the meeting place, a Mr. Satou, was incredibly friendly and we had a really great time. I thought that this must be what classic Japan looked like from time immemorial.

Produced in Cooperation with

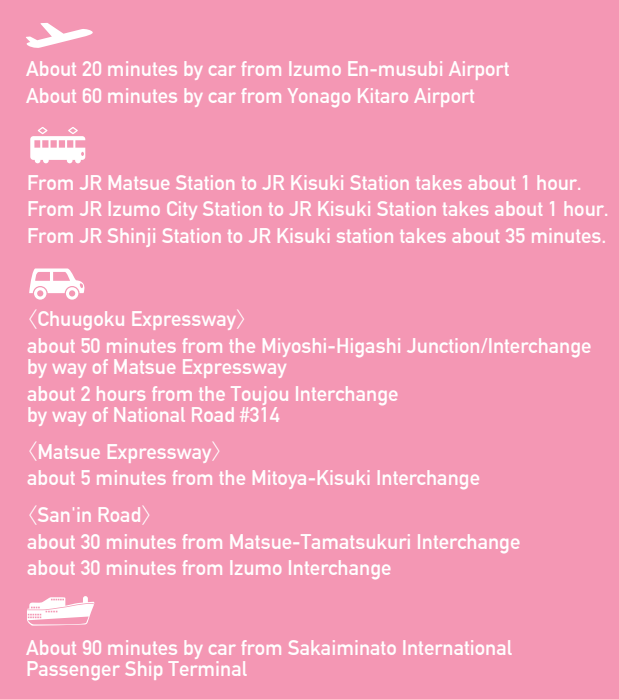
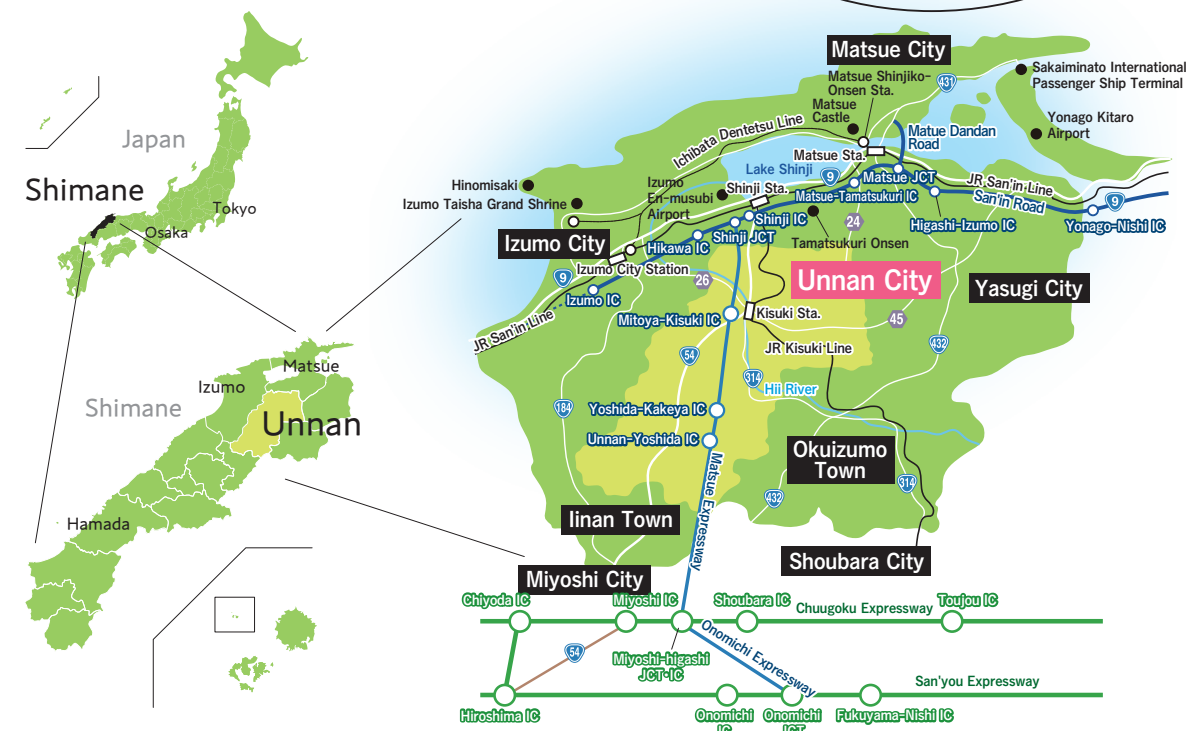
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Access



*Picture is just an image

What did you think of our charming little city, presented here in "Rustic Unnan"? If you'd like to come and see the sakura for yourself, the best time to view them is from about the end of March through the beginning of April each year. Come see the beauty of these carefully-tended sakura trees for yourself!

In our next issue, we will be exploring the wonder of the "Tatara", a traditional Japanese ironmaking process using iron sand, passed down from antiquity to the present day. Join us as we examine the various traditions that shaped the Izumo region, including an interview with the people currently employed there!



Reports about Sakura & Sake

With an immigrant from France and two study-abroad students at Shimane University

What is "Sakura-Mori"?

Unnan is a city, abundant in nature, which is situated in the eastern mountains of Shimane prefecture. One of the boasting-points of this city is its "sakura" cherry blossom trees. Within the city itself, the sakura tunnel that runs along the bank of the Hii river is especially famous. This two-kilometer-long sakura tunnel consisting of about 800 sakura cherry trees is listed among the top 100 best places to see cherry blossoms in Japan, and as such, receives an astounding number of tourists every year.

But why are the sakura trees in this area so beautiful and able to last for so many years? In order to better understand this mystery, Sasha, a study-abroad student from France, along with Riado and Reda, two students studying at Shimane University, took the opportunity to come to Unnan and talk with Dr. Toda, who has been looking after the sakura trees through the Sakura-Mori program.



The health of the sakura trees are of the utmost importance

Sasha: You must be very happy to see so many people coming to see the blooming of these beautiful sakura trees that you've been taking care of.

Dr. Toda: Actually, I don't really go to see the sakura blooming myself. More than seeing them bloom beautifully, I just really like to help the trees to be happy and healthy; the health of the sakura is what's most important. But of course, I am very happy that so many people come to visit them.

Riado: So what kinds of things do you do through your work in the Sakura-Mori program?

Dr. Toda: I take care of the sakura trees throughout the year. During the winter, this work includes pruning the affected or unnecessary parts of sick trees. I also fertilize the trees. And then there's always exterminating any pests and cutting the grass that starts to grow beneath the trees - that's also important. Those are the kinds of things I am doing.

Sasha: Are you carrying out the Sakura-Mori responsibilities as your occupation? Or is it on a volunteer basis?

Dr. Toda: It's not just volunteer work, it's my job. I am carrying out my duties at the request of the "Unnan City Sakura Association," which has about 800 members.

Sasha: How did the Sakura-Mori program come to be?

Dr. Toda: It started when I was a university student studying forestry and dendrology, ever since then, my work has been with forests and trees. After I retired from my job working for the prefecture, I got a request to do this job, and I have been doing this for the 11 years since then. In April 2019, I will have been doing it for 12 years.

Reda: Wow! You really are a sakura professional, aren't you.

Dr. Toda: Actually, although I am quite knowledgeable about sakura trees and plants in general, I am not really an expert on things like "tourism in famous sakura spots". If you are interested in learning more about that, you can find more detailed information on the websites of Unnan city and the Unnan City Tourism Association (ha-ha).

Sasha: There are many famous places to see sakura around Shimane prefecture, but it seems to me that Unnan city shows a particularly strong affection towards their sakura trees.

Dr. Toda: Yeah, I know what you mean. Japanese people have, since olden times, really liked the sakura blossoms, but this affection is especially strong in Unnan. Originally, this area experienced a lot of problems with flooding, and the sakura trees helped to hold the levees at times when they were in danger of being breached. This area worked to protect the sakura trees even in the midst of the difficulties of war. These days, the sakura tree is a symbol of this town, and the people here are working hard to make this city the best place in Japan for Sakura.

Riado: How old are the sakura trees that are blooming now?

Dr. Toda: The sakura trees around the Hii river are all between 70 and 80 years old. Ordinarily, the trees only live about 50 years, but these ones here are living a lot longer. This is not due solely to our efforts with the Sakura-Mori program, but we owe a lot to the efforts of the people living in this area who, from long ago, have been loving and caring for the sakura.

Sasha: It's amazing that the trees can keep blooming with such incredible volume, despite their old age!

Dr. Toda: We are really proud of the big, full clusters of blossoms that our trees get on the ends of their branches. However, even these trees that are blooming today will inevitably wither. That's why we are working hard to raise the next generation of sakura trees. Every day we are doing our best to make Unnan famous as a city that raises generation after generation of sakura trees.



↑ (from left to right)
Sasha, Riado, Reda

↓ Dr. Toda of the Sakura-Mori Program



Each year, Unnan gets a large number of visitors coming to see the sakura cherry tree blossoms.

Sasha: Thank you for taking the time to talk with us today. The sakura cherry trees in the Kisuki region of Unnan are very beautiful and famous. I just saw them myself recently and thought they were so beautiful. I was surprised by how the cherry blossoms are so close you could reach out and touch them!

Dr. Toda: Thank you very much. Though, the beautiful sakura are not just limited to the tunnel in Kisuki. There are also beautiful rows of trees along the Hii river in Mitoya and the Akagawa river as well. There are quite a few places all over the city that are famous for their sakura trees!

Reda: Today the wind was a bit strong. When there is a lot of rain or strong winds, do the pedals from the flowers on the sakura trees fall off?

Dr. Toda: When the sakura first start to bloom, slight winds won't really cause the pedals to fall, but when they are in full-bloom, they fall easily, even without wind. During those times, whenever the wind blows and the pedals start falling all at once and it becomes "sakura snowfall". It's very beautiful when that happens.

Sasha: How many tourists come to see the sakura when they are in season and blooming?

Dr. Toda: Before, the number was a steady 100,000 people, but in recent years, the number of visitors to this small town has risen to over 120,000 or 130,000 people. So, during that season, this area experiences very bad traffic jams (ha-ha)!

My Opinion



Through this interview, I was really able to see how the people of Unnan love the sakura trees.



Despite our not-great Japanese, we were able to feel the kindness in Dr. Toda's voice as he carefully explained his work. As we listened to the various tasks involved with "Sakura-Mori", we learned about Dr. Toda's approach and his way of thinking, and I feel like we got a glimpse of the reasons behind why the sakura trees in Unnan are so mesmerizing.

The thing that surprised me most during this interview was how close we could get to the sakura. The little balls of cherry blossoms drooped the branches so low that you can simply reach out and touch them. In spite of this, people don't really break off or damage the branches. I was really able to feel the love that the people of Unnan have for the sakura. Thank you so much Dr. Toda!

UNNAN SAKURA GUIDE

Unnan City Guide Map



A The Hii Riverbank Sakura Tunnel
- among the top 100 best places
to see sakura in Japan

The 800-tree two-kilometer-long sakura tunnel that runs along the bank of the Hii river is a hands-down must-see! After the sun goes down, a mixture of electric lights and paper lanterns makes for an incredible night viewing as well.

During a normal year, the sakura's full-bloom takes place during the first weeks of April. For those coming by car, there are 1,300 parking spots. This site can be accessed about 3 minutes off the Chuugoku Onomichi-Matsue Expressway at the exit "Mitoya-Kisuki Interchange" towards JR Kisuki Station.

You can enjoy both pink and green varieties of cherry blossoms at the Mitoya Riverside Public Park.

Along National Road #54 and the Mitoya river is another two-kilometer-long stretch of sakura trees. Among these trees are the beautiful green sakura trees, called "Gyoikou", which reach full bloom about two weeks later than the pink variety of "Somei-yoshino" sakura trees. This is a great spot to have a second round of "O-Hanami" (a kind of cherry-blossom viewing party). At night, paper lanterns light up this great view.

During a normal year, the pink cherry blossoms should be in full bloom during the first weeks of April, and the green cherry blossoms should be in full bloom throughout mid-April. For those coming by car, there are 50 parking spaces and the site can be accessed in about 5 minutes from off the Chuugoku Onomichi-Matsue Expressway at the exit "Mitoya-Kisuki Interchange" via National Road #54 towards Hiroshima.



The best time for viewing the "Gyoikou", or green cherry blossoms, is from mid-to late-April.

C Early-blooming dark-pink sakura (known as "Kawadzuzakura")



This striking variety of early-blooming dark-pink sakura can be found stretching for about one kilometer along the Akagawa river. The origin of the flowers' name in Japanese comes from the name of the village in Shizuoka prefecture where this variety of sakura originates from. Full-bloom usually takes place particularly early towards the end of March.

Normally these sakura are in full bloom in the first few weeks of March. There is no parking in the immediate vicinity. For those who come by car, the site can be accessed in about 15 minutes via National road #54 and Prefectural road #157 off the Chuugoku-Onomichi Expressway, exiting at the Mitoya-Kisuki Interchange towards Daito.

F Great Hidden Views: Kawate and Odakara



With massive mountains at your back and the legendary Hii river stretching in front of you, you will find a path lined with sakura trees. Sure you could see the trees from the opposite side of the river as you go along National Road #314, but you'll need to be closer to appreciate the blossoms themselves. As you descend to the floodplain along the river, you can see the breathtaking view of the clear, smooth stream reflecting the scenery of sakura pedals, only broken by the river's jutting stones.

Normally these sakura are in full bloom in the first few weeks of April. There is no parking in the immediate vicinity. For those who come by car, the site can be accessed in about 20 minutes via National Road #314 off the Chuugoku-Onomichi Expressway, exiting at the Mitoya-Kisuki Interchange towards Okuizumo.

Have a stroll along the left bank of the Akagawa river (near "LaMer")

Running for about one kilometer between the Yanagibashi and Kamobashi bridges, which span the Akagawa river, particularly near the Kamo cultural hall of "LaMer", the classic "Somei-yoshino" variety of sakura are being cultivated and make a stunning display of sakura for viewers.

Normally in full bloom during the first weeks of April. Parking is available at the Kamo Cultural Hall "LaMer". For those coming by car, this site can be accessed in about 10 minutes off the Chuugoku-Onomichi Expressway at exiting at the Mitoya-Kisuki Interchange heading towards Matsue via National Road #54.



E Come and enjoy the "O-Hanami" flower viewing at the "Kakeya-no-Sato" roadside station!

Along National Road #54, adjacent to Ryokuchi Park. With just 30 trees, the spot may seem modest, but these trees form a nice tunnel. Upon entering the nearby park, you will feel as if you've entered another world and is a great spot to refresh yourself after driving.

These cherry blossoms typically bloom in the first few weeks of April. Parking is widely available at the roadside station. For those coming by car, you can exit the Chuugoku-Onomichi Expressway at Yoshida-Kakeya Interchange, taking National road #54 towards Matsue, and reach the site in about 10 minutes.

Unnan Souvenirs

Grilled Mackerel Rice

A highly recommended dish, Grilled Mackerel Rice is one of Unnan's signature products. The Grilled Mackerel Rice of "O-Shokuji Dokoro-Okui" is chock-full of shredded grilled mackerel, various mountain vegetables and wild mushrooms. As such, it takes quite a bit of time to make. The rice is topped with fluffy, lightly scrambled eggs, making a truly scrumptious combination.

"O-Shokuji Dokoro-Okui"

468-15 Kisuki, Kisuki-cho, Unnan City, Shimane Prefecture, Japan
TEL +81-854-42-0337
<https://www.unnan-kankou.jp/contents/gourmet/641>



*This picture of Grilled Mackerel is just an image



Sakura-Dyeing Goods

In the process of taking care of the local sakura trees, branches that are clipped away for the health of the tree are used to dye cloth. A wide variety of colors can be drawn from the sakura tree branches from a soft brown to various pinks.

Ko-no-Hana Workshop

320 Shinichi, Kisuki-cho, Unnan City, Shimane Prefecture, Japan
TEL +81-854-47-7087
<https://www.unnan-kankou.jp/contents/buy/482>



Unfiltered Pure-Rice Ginjo Sake "Kumo" (meaning clouds)

A refreshing sake that, although dry, has a hint of sweetness left from the rice, helping it to pair appropriately as an aperitif before the meal or a digestif during. This sake is bottled unfiltered and unpasteurised.

Kisuki Sake Brewery (Co.,Ltd.)

477-1 Kisuki, Kisuki-cho, Unnan City, Shimane Prefecture, Japan
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Sakura Mochi

The Sakura Mochi (stuffed rice cakes) unique to Unnan consist of sweet red bean paste stuffed inside of a small crepe and wrapped inside a sakura leaf. The leaf's salty taste complements the sweetness of the red bean paste. There are pink ones for the normal sakura and green ones for the famous "Gyoikou" of the Mitoya area.

Limited Time Only
(January through the beginning of May)

Tachibana-ya Sweets

51-3 Tonogouchi, Mitoya-cho, Unnan City, Shimane Prefecture, Japan
TEL +81-854-45-2742
<http://tachibana-ya.appspot.com/>

Native EYE

Rustic Unnan Editorial Notes

This free editorial has been provided in cooperation with French study-abroad students and French nationals planning to move to Shimane prefecture. The following is an account of their unique perspectives.



I took this picture without even fully appreciating the beautiful sakura!

Although time was limited, he patiently explained many things to us.

Sasha: This was my first time to see the sakura cherry blossoms in Unnan, but they were very beautiful. Now I understand why they are so famous. This is most certainly thanks to the preservation efforts given by the ongoing "Sakura-Mori" project. On a day when the weather is nice, be it with your family, friends, or even by yourself, I highly recommend you go and see them for yourself!



The rice balls were delicious!

Riado: I am really thankful to have had this opportunity to visit Unnan, especially in regards to the captivating interview with the Sakura-Mori doctor. Meeting someone who tackles his job with such zeal has really been an amazing experience. I really enjoyed taking photos as well. It's not often that you get to have someone follow you around just taking pictures (ha-ha)!

Reda: Of course Unnan's sakura are famous, but those sakura are able to bloom each year thanks to the ongoing efforts of the Sakura-Mori project. I felt my heart swell throughout our dialogue with the Sakura-Mori doctor, who has such passion for his work. The results of such passion – this amazing two-kilometer-long tunnel of sakura running along the river is truly magnificent and I have been deeply moved by it. If you are going to view the sakura anywhere in Shimane prefecture – do I here! I also had the opportunity to eat locally-grown food in a traditional Japanese home. They were all dishes that I had never tried before, and they were all delicious. I highly recommend a visit to Unnan!

It's obvious that these three are interested in the carefully-tended sakura trees that have become part of Unnan culture, but they also seemed quite interested in the various local dishes that they were seeing for the first time. Scan the QR-code to the right to view a behind-the-scenes video.

