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「Nara's Food Culture」 <http://www3.pref.nara.jp/foodculture>



Nara, A Slow Food Capital

Nara, the Birthplace of Japanese Food Culture

Nara-zuke

Nara

Nara was the site of Japan's capital, Heijō-kyō, established in 710. At the time, the city flourished as the political and cultural heart of the land. The capital's bustling population required that a steady supply of food and resources be brought from all over Japan.

While Nara is now famous for its historic shrines and temples, it was also known as a "food capital."



Nara-zuke and Sake

Nara-zuke is a fermented food and is one of the preserved vegetables that has been made since ancient times. The preservation of produce in salt, vinegar, rice bran or sake lees naturally enhances its shelf life while infusing it with rich, unique flavors. Kimchi, sun-dried daikon radish (takuan), and of course, Nara-zuke, are popular examples. What sets Nara-zuke apart are historical roots in Nara and the use of sake lees, a byproduct of sake brewing.



Traditional sake brewing



The Origins of Nara-zuke

The prototype of Nara-zuke, referred to as kasu-zuke, is inscribed on 8th century Nara-period wooden tablets (mokkan), from when the Japan's capital was located in Nara. These are the oldest extant records of what we now call Nara-zuke.

By the 15th century, the process for producing clear Japanese sake had been perfected at a temple in Nara. As you may know, sake is an alcoholic liquid derived from pressing fermented rice. The byproduct, sake lees, became the ingredient key to preserving Nara-zuke. This unique food originating in sake-rich Nara, soon became recognized for its intensely rich flavor and by the 1600s (Edo period), Nara-zuke had spread throughout Japan, becoming a beloved culinary tradition.



Source: Wooden Tablet Database
(Nara National Research Institute for Cultural Properties)



Why Are Nara-zuke Brown?

Sake lees plays a key role in creating the distinctive deep brown color of Nara-zuke. The sugars and amino acids in the sake lees combine to form melanoidin, the pigment responsible for this rich hue. When green vegetables absorb these elements of sake lees they take on a brown color that signals the lees has fully penetrated the vegetables and they are peaking in flavor.

Ways to Enjoy Nara-zuke

Nara-zuke are traditionally enjoyed with rice or sake but can also be creatively paired with other foods. For an interesting twist, try spreading finely chopped Nara-zuke mixed with cream cheese, on crackers—an appetizer that pairs wonderfully with wine.

Nara-zuke is characterized by its repeated immersion in sake lees, a process that varies depending on the type of vegetable and can take up to several years. While white melon and cucumber are the most common, a wide variety of vegetables can be used to make Nara-zuke. We encourage you to explore different produce and experience the full range of flavors of this unique delicacy.



What Makes Nara-zuke so Flavorful?

1. When salt-cured vegetables are immersed in sake lees, the salt gradually leaches out, and the flavor of the sake lees seeps into the vegetables.
2. Submerging vegetables for the right amount of time and repeatedly changing the sake lees enhances the flavor.
3. Experienced craftspeople judge the timing and the flavor to perfect the degree of fermentation

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