In the cooling weather of fall, the people of Tohoku warm up with family, neighbors, colleagues and friends over communal pots of tasty, warming, fragrant stew at parties known as imonikai—a culinary custom that stretches back to the Edo Era.

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One of the most typical sights in autumn in Japan’s Tohoku region is the imonikai, a well-known and beloved seasonal culinary celebration at which the central feature is imoni, a satoimo (taro)-based stew. It takes place in prefectures in the Tohoku area (with the exception of Aomori Prefecture) from September to November in conjunction with the taro harvesting season. Imonikai are particularly popular in Yamagata and Miyagi prefectures, drawing crowds as large as the springtime cherry blossom viewing parties. During this period, local supermarkets lend their customers imonikai pots free of charge when they purchase the ingredients and related supplies, while convenience stores sell firewood for simmering imoni.

Imonikai take place on a variety of scales, from small gatherings of family and friends to company and school parties to huge events designed to invigorate a whole community. Tohoku natives living outside the region also hold imonikai all over Japan, and in 2008 the German Tohoku Expatriates Society even launched an annual European imonikai on the shores of the Rhine in the city of Düsseldorf.

The ingredients for imoni—besides taro—differ slightly by region. In the central and southern regions of Yamagata Prefecture, for example, a simple soy sauce-flavored imoni featuring beef, konnyaku (konjac) and leeks flavored with soy sauce and sugar is favored. In Yamagata Prefecture’s Shonai region, as in the Sendai Plain of Miyagi Prefecture and in Fukushima Prefecture, pork, vegetables and konnyaku are popular additions, creating a butajiru pork soup-style version of imoni flavored with miso. Other regional variations with a local flair feature ingredients such as chicken or seafood.

There are various opinions regarding the origin of imonikai, but the custom is generally thought to have arisen during the Edo Period (1603-1868), with its roots in the town of Nakayama in Yamagata Prefecture. The boatmen of the Mogami River there boiled taro together with boudara (dried codfish) and soy sauce. The Nabekake pines in Nakayama mark the spot where the boatmen of those times made their imoni, and many people still gather on the nearby flood plains to enjoy their own imonikai.
During the imonikai season, the area along the Mamigasaki River, a tributary of the Mogami River, is known to be crowded with groups of people reserving a spot to hold their imonikai. Every September on the Sunday before Japan’s Respect for the Aged Day (the third Monday in September), this popular imonikai site becomes the venue for an event called Japan’s Biggest Imonikai Festival. A variety of tents and local food stands line both sides of the river, and a horde of media representatives from both Japan and abroad shine a spotlight on this massive spectacle, with the centerpiece a giant batch of imoni bubbling away inside “Nabetaro,” the nickname of a six-meter cast-iron pot.

Numbered tickets for the feast are distributed starting at 8:30 a.m., but they usually sell out shortly after noon. It takes massive quantities of ingredients to make this enormous stew: 3 tons of taro, 1.2 tons of beef, 3,500 slices of konnyaku, 3,500 of leeks, 700 liters of soy sauce, 90 liters of sake, 200 kilograms of sugar, and 6 tons of water. Six tons of firewood are used to fuel the fire that boils the stew, and two backhoes are employed to stir the imoni. It all comes together to create the highlight of the festival, a Yamagata-style (soy sauce-flavored) imoni that feeds thirty thousand people. Except for the sugar, all of the ingredients used in the colossal stew are grown right in the prefecture. The star of the show is a large, gelatinous variety of taro called “Dotare” grown in the rich local Yamagata soil.

On the opposite shore, a wide array of imoni variations are prepared in an assortment of smaller vessels, such as a three-meter aluminum pot, so that attendees can savor and compare various regional recipes. The sheer size of the six-meter Nabetaro is awe-inspiring, but the nine-piece aluminum pots are fine examples of Yamagata’s famous cast-metal artistry and offer a glimpse of local craftsmanship.

This year marks the twenty-seventh time Japan’s Biggest Imonikai Festival has taken place. Yoshinori Niizeki, one of the event’s originators, says the festival now packs both shores of the river, but since the event date has been charged to the middle of the holiday weekend starting last year, there was a particularly impressive jump in visitors from outside Yamagata—including tourists from abroad. Niizeki notes that a group of Chinese tourists from Shanghai “enjoyed their first taste of imoni and were so impressed by its flavor. The sight of people taking these huge pots outside to prepare and eat this dish..."
is strange and very intriguing. And to enjoy imoni beneath a bright blue sky—what could be better?”

Yamagata’s neighbor to the east, Miyagi Prefecture, holds its largest imonikai at Eboshi Resort, a famous ski resort in the town of Miyagi Zao. The imonikai there lasts from mid-September to early November, and attracts mainly local residents. On the weekends, however, the event experiences a surge of activity and hosts as many as two hundred visitors a day.

The ingredients of the Zao imoni are local specialties including taro, plateau daikon, and Tokarita tofu, konnyaku, Chinese cabbage, burdock root, carrots and more. In addition to ingredients grown locally, the water used in the imoni is from Eboshi Resort’s natural springs. Guests can choose to flavor their stew with either Sendai-style pork miso or Yamagata-style beef soy sauce. The Imoni Set even includes udon noodles and enough imoni to satisfy even the big eaters. All ingredients are cut in advance, and there’s no need to prepare pots, firewood or cookware—just make a reservation, and even if you arrive empty-handed, you can have the memorable experience of creating and enjoying an imoni meal with everyone.

After you enjoy a hearty stew, why not take Eboshi Resort’s fifteen-minute aerial tramway ride to a viewing platform eleven hundred meters above sea level? At that summit you can enjoy a panoramic view of the Pacific Ocean and a two-kilometer vista of vivid autumn foliage. The peak viewing season is between late September and late October, but beautiful foliage can be found further down the mountain even in November.

The imonikai is a delightful herald of the arrival of autumn in Tohoku, representing a tradition unchanged from Japan’s bygone days. It presents an opportunity to connect with others and the local community, and a way to use the tempting aroma of a good meal to put a smile on everybody’s face.

6 Even in the same area, there are different takes on what goes into imoni
7 The bubbling stew in Nabetaro is stirred with a backhoe
8 A smaller cast-iron pot on a wood-fired brazier
9 Zao’s imoni features plenty of locally grown produce
10 Japan’s imonikai are also drawing foreign visitors
11 The landscape Miyagi viewed from the top of Eboshi Resort’s tramway
12 Zao is a resort town known for its many onsen