

Katsuo no tataki served with sea salt, chopped green onions and paper-thin slices of locally grown garlic

THE PRIDE OF KOCHI

Katsuo no tataki, Kochi's most famous dish, is for its citizens' their pride and joy.

ROB GILHOOLY

Searing *katsuo* over rice straw flames is a skill that requires a great deal of practice to perfect.

ORANGE-RED flames engulf the pitchfork-like implement that Shoichiro Otani deftly lowers and raises, then rotates as he flash-grills fillets of representative regional cuisine of Kochi Prefecture.

The grilling process in the making of *katsuo no tataki* (seared skipjack tuna) lasts no more than a couple of minutes, and it takes even less time for Otani to expertly cut the meat into 1-cm slices with a handmade sashimi knife.

"There's no counting, no timer, just a sense that comes from experience," says Otani's mentor, 84-year-old Josaku Tanaka, who has been grilling the Kochi delicacy at his family-run fishmonger, Tanaka Sengyoten, in Naka-Tosa Town for sixty-five years. "The trick is to only sear about 1 mm of the outer surface. Any more than that, and you have nothing more than grilled fish."

The origins of *katsuo no tataki* are uncertain, though it is sometimes said it was first practiced by Ryoma Sakamoto, a celebrated nineteenth-century samurai who adopted it from foreigners he once saw searing meat in Fukuoka.

Sakamoto was born in Kochi when it was known as the province of Tosa and even today



Josaku (right) and Takahiro Tanaka, father and son proprietors of the fishmonger Tanaka Sengyoten in Naka-Tosa Town, Kochi Prefecture



Sliced seaweed-wrapped *makimono* (sushi rice roll) filled with *katsuo*, cucumber and Japanese parsley.

the dish more generally known as “katsuo no tataki” is also called “Tosa-zukuri” (literally “Tosa-made”).

While *katsuo* is caught at many places around Japan, those hauled in by the region’s *ippon-zuri* (“single rod and line”) fishermen off Naka-Tosa’s Kure Bay are considered skipjack royalty. A combination of water quality and temperature and excellent “*nabura*” (shoals of fish feeding on the surface) makes Kochi the perfect environment for the fish, according to Tanaka.

“The *katsuo* caught here is particularly good, featuring an appropriate amount of fatty tissue,” Tanaka says, adding that a characteristic of the dish is that after searing it is immediately placed on a bed of icy water to arrest the cooking process and retain the sweet, smoky flavor of the *wara* rice straw from which the grilling fire is made.

Another characteristic is the array of condiments served with the fish, according to Tanaka’s son, Takahiro, who is the current president of Tanaka Sengyoten.

These include sea salt, chopped green onions and paper-thin slices of locally grown garlic featuring a pleasingly subtle, even aromatic, aftertaste.

“Adding garlic and so on was not some flight of gastronomic fancy – traditionally these were the only things that were available to harvest in this region,” says Takahiro, a graduate of Keio University who quit his job at a large corporation at age 30 to rebuild the family’s 130-year-old business.

Interestingly, while tuna has come to be seen as the king of seafood by many Japanese over the past thirty years, that title once belonged to *katsuo*, according to Takahiro.

“*Katsuo* has a complex, deep taste, far more so than bluefin or other types of tuna,” he says, adding that the main season for catching skipjack in the area is between March and July. “After that they migrate

northward to cooler waters, where its increased size and fatty content alter that depth and balance.”

Takahiro’s father, Josaku, recalls a time as a child when the fish caught by the town’s fishermen would be sold by their wives in outside stalls in a district known as Kure-Taisho-Town Market. “There were about fifty women selling seafood, including *katsuo no tataki*, and the area became known as the town’s kitchen.”

While the number of sellers has halved since, efforts by Takahiro to rejuvenate the area through promotion of the local delicacy have paid off, with Tanaka Sengyo flash-grilling as much as 500 kg of *katsuo* daily for visitors who flock to Kure-Taisho-Town Market from far and wide.

The trend is also seen at other outlets, such as the lovely Yamasaki restaurant in neighboring Susaki City, where Masayoshi and Rie Kawasaki serve up sumptuous variations on the theme, among them a skipjack *makimono* (roll) which is dipped in a tangy *ponzu* sauce (made with soy sauce and citrus juice).

A short drive away in Kochi City, meanwhile, the wonderfully chaotic Hirome Ichiba market is home to two flashy *katsuo no tataki* joints, both sporting glass-fronted counters where the dish is prepared amid searing flames right before customers’ eyes.

“It’s a bit of a show, but customers enjoy it and can see for themselves how tough the grilling process is and fresh the fish is,” says Kei Fujimoto, manager of Myojinmaru’s Hirome Ichiba store as he takes a break from grilling *katsuo*, the technique for which, he says, takes two years to master. “It’s a unique dish among Japan’s varied food culture and one of which the people of Kochi are extremely proud.”

Josaku Tanaka agrees, adding that the only way to enjoy it to the full, is to eat it fresh. “And that means you have to come to Kochi,” he says. **J**