



The *kiritampo* is enjoyed with seasonal vegetables and Hinai-*jidori* craft chicken from the Hinai region of Akita Prefecture.

The Ishikawa family has run the Hokushu Club *ryotei* restaurant in Odate, Akita Prefecture, for more than 120 years; seated are fifth-generation patrons Hiroshi Ishikawa (left) and Mikako.

Mikako Ishikawa mashes hot rice before smearing it onto skewers made from Akita cedar and griddling on an *irori* sunken hearth.

# KIRITAMPO: HOTPOT PERFECTION

Akita Prefecture staple *kiritampo* comes into its own in Autumn, taking pride of place in traditional regional hotpots *kiritampo-nabe* and *miso-zuke kiritampo*.

ROB GILHOOLY

**K**IRITAMPO<sup>1</sup>, a rice-based sustenance food, was created by the *matagi*, fearless winter hunters dressed in deerskins who tracked down bears, wild boar and anything else they could find in the mountains of Akita Prefecture, northern Japan.

“The origins of *kiritampo* are not certain, but

according to one historical document dated 1870 it was enjoyed at least 200 years ago,” says Hiroshi Ishikawa, fifth-generation president of Hokushu Club, a *ryotei* (traditional Japanese restaurant) in the lush and tranquil city of Odate that has served *kiritampo* for over 120 years. “Odate is surrounded by mountains, and in the winter the *matagi* would use some of the flesh of wild fowl, bears, deers and wild boars they caught and cook it in a pot with a heavy broth along with vegetables and balls of rice they carried with them that had hardened and become unpalatable. And that, it is said, is how we got *kiritampo*.”

It is a custom that soon found a following among residents. Today, *kiritampo-nabe*, a hot-pot in which



At Odate's Kiritampo Festival, *miso-zuke kiritampo* is toasted on skewers over red-hot charcoal before being slathered with a sweet *miso* soybean paste.

cylinders of charcoal-grilled mashed rice, chicken and vegetables are cooked in a chicken-bone- and soy-sauce-based broth, is considered not just a local delicacy but a representative autumn dish.

"In Autumn, company employees, social circles, and so on, will gather to eat kiritampo-nabe," says Ishikawa, who is also chair of the Odate kiritampo society. "In other parts of Japan, they hold *bonenkai* yearend parties, but here it's *tampo-kai* parties," Ishikawa added, as he and his wife Mikako cooked the dish on an *irori* (traditional sunken hearth) in a tatami-mat room inside Hokushu Club.

Unsurprisingly, the ingredients used are traditionally only harvested in Autumn and include *maitake* mushrooms, *naga-negi* (a kind of leek), *gobo* (burdock root) and *seri*, the delectably pungent Japanese parsley that provides a striking counterpoint to the full-bodied, heady broth, rather as coriander does in some other Asian cuisines.

The chicken, meanwhile, is in itself something of a delicacy - a variety known as *Hinai-jidori* (literally "craft chicken from the Hinai region") that is painstakingly raised to taste almost like the wild fowl after which it was named - a fowl that was hunted in these parts even during the Jomon period (BCE 10,000-300).

The more widespread popularity that kiritampo has come to enjoy over the years is reflected in its status as a year-round offering on Akita's menus, with visitors from far and wide coming to enjoy the dish at around fifty establishments in Odate alone, even during the steamy summer months, according to Ishikawa.

For locals, however, it has remained very much a seasonal dish, and one that is enjoyed to mark the

harvesting of *shin-mai*, the first rice of the year.

That status is reflected not only in the *tampo-kai* gatherings, but also Odate's Kiritampo Festival, an annual event that this October celebrated its 45th year.

Originally held along the banks of the Nagaki-gawa river, for the past six years the festival has taken place within

the grounds of Odate's Nipro Hachiko Dome - until recently the world's largest wooden-framed dome stadium - and features live entertainment and stalls serving local Akita fare, most prominently kiritampo, both as hot-pot and another delectable manifestation: *miso-zuke kiritampo*.

Originally, an absence of soy sauce in the region meant the stock used in the hotpot was made from miso, a fermented soy bean paste, according to Ishikawa. That tradition is continued in *miso-zuke kiritampo*, where the mashed rice is pasted onto thick skewers made from fragrant Akita cedar and toasted over red-hot charcoal coals before being slathered with a sweet miso paste.

At the festival, visitors were invited to make their own *miso-zuke kiritampo*, molding the rice onto the skewers and toasting them on two long rows of charcoal-fueled concrete griddles.

"Like many families in Odate, we make kiritampo, especially the hotpot, at home, mostly to mark special occasions," says Tomoko Tanaka as she and her two daughters, Runa, 11, and Kokona, 4, joined dozens of festival goers and rotated their self-made kiritampo skewers on the searing hot griddles. "Food culture is an important part of any community's identity - especially in Japan - and I'm extremely proud to have been born into a community where this simple, but tasty dish originated." 

<sup>1</sup> Theories vary. The word *kiritampo* may derive from cylindrical *yutampo*, a hot-water bottle, or *tampo*, a spearhead. The food itself may have originated as an offering to the mountain gods or as a humble farmer's food.