THE FLAVOR OF FUKUSHIMA LIGHTS UP RECONSTRUCTION

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Nearly 11 years have passed since the Great East Japan Earthquake. Fukushima Prefecture suffered severe damage in the disaster, but today it is well on its way to recovery, with exports of agricultural products surpassing pre-earthquake levels. The world has come to love the “delicious tastes of Fukushima.”

Fukushima has been doubly blessed by nature with an abundant water system and plenty of fertile soil. Diverse weather patterns and landscapes within the prefecture nurture a varied and robust farming industry. Wide temperature differences between day and night improve the flavor of its rice, and the summer heat in the basin-shaped valleys intensifies the sweetness of its peaches.

Fukushima has always been a cornucopia of food products, but an accident at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station following the Great East Japan Earthquake of 2011 led to a painful era, when demand waned for its prized agricultural and marine products. Shipping restrictions and reputational damage dampened the consumption of Fukushima’s food products, and many foreign countries imposed import restrictions that resulted in a decline of exports from the prefecture.

Yet consumer confidence has gradually returned, thanks to stringent pre-shipping monitoring of contamination and additional scientific proof of the safety of Fukushima’s food products. At one point, 55 countries and regions worldwide imposed restrictions on food imports from Japan, but many have now abolished or eased them. For example, the United States lifted all restrictions last September, announcing that 10 years of sampling food products from Japan had led to the determination that imports from the country posed very low risk to consumers. The European Union likewise eased its restrictions in October, while Taiwan recently announced this February that it, too, would relax restrictions on imports from Japan. As restrictions have eased, exports have increased, with the prefecture exporting 332 tons of agricultural products from April to December in 2021—the highest figure since the prefecture began keeping records in 2005.

At the Tokyo 2020 Games held last year, athletes, coaches, and other participants enjoyed the taste and succulence of Fukushima peaches. The prefecture presented the Dominican Republic baseball team with a large quantity of the fruit, which disappeared in no time at all. Ken Eriksen, head coach of the U.S. softball team, gave a nod to the peaches at a post-practice interview in Fukushima, confiding with a grin that he had devoured a half dozen at his hotel.

Not to be forgotten when speaking of Fukushima specialties is its sake. Daishichi Sake Brewery Co., Ltd. produces sake made by the orthodox kimoto method, a painstaking process that requires the fermenting yeast mash to be prepared entirely by hand. Daishichi has been actively exporting its brew—which is highly regarded abroad for its mellow flavor—since the late 1990s. “Although Japanese sake has the same high qualities of depth and aroma as full-bodied Western wines, for a long time it was almost unknown to the rest of the world,” says OHTA Hideharu, the 10th generation owner of Daishichi.

The company undertook to open up foreign markets in collaboration with other breweries, initially by enforcing strict quality-control measures such as refrigerated transportation, to ensure that the sake reached foreign markets in optimal condition. They also promoted their products at restaurants and liquor shops to advertise the charms of Japanese sake. These efforts gradually bore fruit and led to an increase in exports. Daishichi was eventually asked to provide sake for a banquet hosted by the Dutch royal family. “Not too long after the earthquake, we were invited once again to take part in a banquet and serve sake to the guests. It heartened us that we could showcase the quality, safety, and reputation of a product from Fukushima,” Ohta recalls.

“All we can do is take their flavors to an even higher level and share them with the rest of the world.”

Exports of alcohol achieved their highest level in FY 2019 and those of agricultural products their highest level in FY 2020. "Exports of alcohol slightly decreased due to COVID-19 in FY 2020. It was the first decrease in this category since records began in FY 2012.”

"The yeast mash essential for the fermentation of kimoto sake is prepared entirely by hand, and that is the secret of its depth of flavor," says OHTA Hideharu, the representative of Daishichi Sake Brewery.