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Kobalitearu Photos courtesy of Japan Special Forest Product Promotion Association

Zemmai

Koshlabura

FLORA: A mountain of good eats in them thar hills

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generation.

Sansai are usually succulent, tender, a little bitter, and have a strong lye, which means they need some preparation before cooking. Different sansai require different ways to take out the lye and prepare. Once they are prepped, they can be used for tempura, a topping in soba noodles, stir-fried or marinated with other vegetables.

Some of the popular sansai are taranome (aralia sprout), zenmai (royal fern), warabi (bracken), kogomi (ostrich fern) and fukinoto (Japanese butterbur).

My favorite way to taste sansai is tempura, especially taranome tempura, which has a crunchy yet tender texture

and contains a slight sweetness from its young buds.

It is believed that sansai are highly nutritious and are a natural medicine that can help fend off various diseases.

On Okinawa, because of its tropical weather, sansai are not commonly known as a seasonal specialty. However, sansai played a vital role in wartime, according to Junichiro Higuchi, arborist and a sansai guide on Okinawa.

"During World War II, many Okinawan people escaped to Yambaru in the northern part of Okinawa," Higuchi said.

"They did not have enough food because they were hiding in the mountains. So, they used to eat edible wild plants to survive.

"Many old Okinawans know how to eat sansai in the wild, but most young people now don't know about sansai."

- Junichiro Higuchi

"Many old Okinawans know how to eat sansai in the wild, but most young people now don't know about sansai," he said. "But, there are many sansai that you can find on Okinawa."

In Japan, most mountains are privately owned. In other words,

you can't just go in there and take the plants. It is also prohibited to take plants from national parks and nature reserves. So it is difficult for

people to find sansai in the mountains nowadays.

"It used to be a common thing to pick sansai and share with your family and community," said Gohei Murakami, director of the Japan Special Forest Product Promotion Association. "But urban development shrunk up the mountainside and the tradition of eating sansai has decreased recently, especially among young generations. Today, most people don't know how to find sansai in the wild."

You can always go to a super market. However, Murakami pointed out that sansai sold at super markets are ones that are likely grown on a farm. He also said the taste could be a tad weaker.

"Probably, the best place to purchase naturally grown

sansai would be a farmers market in the countryside that is run by JA (National Federation of Agricultural Cooperation of Associations)," said Murakami. "Some sansai are in the risk of radiation exposure from Fukushima nuclear power plant, so it is recommended to purchase the product which are officially inspected by JA."

JSFPPA has been holding workshops to teach people about sansai and how to sustain it. There are currently about 70 certified sansai advisors in Japan who spread the goodness about these wild plants.



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Tara no me



Taranome (Aralia sprout)

Taranome is popularly known as the king of sansai. What's it good for: Help preventing diabetes, cancer and kidney failure.

How to cook: Tempura, vegetable with dressing
Preparation: Boil it with a tea spoon of salt for about 2-3 minutes and rinse with running water. Or, if you are cooking it as tempura, you fry it up after just washing it.



Fukinoto

Fukinoto (Japanese butterbur)

Its unique bitter taste is loved by many. What's it good for: Helps fight cancer and hay allergies.
How to cook: tempura, stewed, vegetable with dressing,
Preparation: Boil it with a tea spoon of salt for about 5 minutes and rinse with running water. Or, if you are cooking it as tempura, you can fry it up after just washing it.



Udo

Udo (Aralia cordata)

Udo has the strong scent and is popular at super markets. What is good for: It is said to ease body pain.
How to cook: salad, stewed, stir-fry, tempura
Preparation: After peeling the skin, soak it in water and a table spoon of vinegar for 5 minutes.

(Reference - Japan Special Forest Product Promotion Association's website)



Urei

Our ancestors tried and tested so many wild plants to distinguish if those are edible or not, and passed the recipes on to us," said Murakami. "It is a joy of spring. The tradition of tasting sansai is a wisdom that we would like to hand to next generation in Japan."
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Speakin' Japanese

Picking out produce

What better time of the year to try some local produce than now? It can be particularly adventuresome to try some unfamiliar fruits and vegetables. Here's a few words and phrases to help you shop around.

- "Kyo wa nani ga yasui desuka?" = What is on sale today?
- "Kyo no osusume wa nanidesuka?" = What is today's recommendation?
- "Ikura desuka?" = How much is it? (Note: Produce prices are usually per 100 grams [0.22 pounds])
- "Kore wa amai desuka?" = Is this sweet?
- "Kore wa ... desuka?" = Is this ...?
- "Amai" = Sweet
- "Nigai" = Bitter
- "Oishii" = Tasty
- "Yasai arimasuka?" = Do you have vegetables?
- "... arimaska? = Do you have ...?
- "Yasai" = Vegetable
- "Kudamono" = Fruit
- Tamato = Tomato?
- "Daikon" = Japanese radish
- "Kyabetsu" = Cabbage
- "Tamanegi" = Onion
- "Imo" = Potato
- "Ninjin" = Carrot
- "Yasuuri" = Bargain
- "Amai" = Sweet
- "Ookii" = Big
- "Chiisai" = Small

"Omake des." = This is complimentary. (Sometimes market staff may give you an extra veggie or item as complimentary bonus. Say "arigato," or thanks.)

WHEN ON OKINAWA, you can also say it in "Uchinaan-guchi" (island dialect) like this:

- "Tamanahh" = Cababge
- "Goya" = Bitter melon
- "Chideekuni" = Carrot
- "Mahsan" = Tasty

-Tetsuo Nakahara, Stripes Japan

Pronunciation key: "A" is short (like "ah"); "E" is short (like "get"); "I" is short (like "it"); "O" is long (like "old"); "U" is long (like "tube"); and "AI" is a long "I" (like "hike"). Most words are pronounced with equal emphasis on each syllable, but "OU" is a long "O" with emphasis on that syllable.



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