

# Bringing Flavor Back from Extinction

A world-renowned chef and some progressive-thinking farmers have joined hands to bring refined traditional vegetables to a new audience.

by Rico Komanoya

Even many Tokyo residents are unaware that, amidst this city of 13.8 million people, some 10,000 households have maintained their small family farms—even holding onto their land as prices skyrocketed during the bubble economy years that ended in the early 90s. They've kept their operations alive by producing a selection of more than 10 varieties of the freshest fruits and vegetables at each farm and meeting the needs of local consumers through a direct marketing system.

Some Tokyo farmers are using cultivation methods and seeds that have been handed down from the Edo period to focus on traditional produce called Edo-Tokyo vegetables. Thanks to the passionate efforts of some producers and chefs, these foods are gathering increased attention among consumers and in the culinary world.

World-renowned Chef Kiyomi Mikuni is the owner of a number of restaurants, including the flagship Hôtel de Mikuni in Tokyo's Yotsuya neighborhood. Mikuni, whose cuisine incorporates elements from French and Japanese traditions, began writing a series of articles about Edo-Tokyo vegetables for a magazine focused on sustainable lifestyles. He spent a year on the assignment, visiting local farmers, tasting their products and listening to what they had to say. He came away with in-depth knowledge about what these dedicated farmers had to offer and how rich their potential could be in a high-end produce market. He continues to visit with them to this day.

"The soil in Tokyo is better than many other parts of Japan," Mikuni says. "It consists of volcanic ash and drains well. That's an ideal environment for cultivating vegetables."

He believes Tokyo farmers run their businesses in one of the greenest environments in the country, and that even if the harvest tends to be limited, the vegetables taste fresh and full of flavor. His fondness for local materials extends beyond vegetables to a variety of products such as seasonings.

In the kitchen of Hôtel de Mikuni, the chef creates two



Shigeyoshi Kimura sells his Kameido daikon and other produce through direct sales.

dishes from local vegetables. For the appetizer *Kaméido-daikon mariné, parfumé au "Yuzu,"* he uses Kameido daikon, a type of radish, which he marinates with yuzu citrus and Tokyo-sourced condiments. For the main dish, he uses a different kind of radish called Okura daikon to create a duck stew: *Pot-au-feu de canard et "Okura-daikon," gout miso et Yuzu Poivre.* Both plates showcase the distinct umami and texture of these Edo-Tokyo daikon.

The kind of daikon used for the appetizer is grown in the fields of Shigeyoshi Kimura, the 14<sup>th</sup>-generation of the Kimura



Chef Kiyomi Mikuni (left) puts the finishing touches on a dish featuring Okura daikon. He also created this appetizer (below), using Kameido daikon.



years. The farm's summer specialties are tomatoes and eggplant; the winter products are carrots and the Okura daikon version of the large, white root vegetable. The area was known for this variety until the 1960s, when other, more disease-resistant and easier-to-cultivate species took over. Otsuka became concerned that the variety would become extinct and took on the task of reviving its popularity. Today, Okura daikon has become one of the most popular vegetables.

Both farmers share a common business strategy. Faced with a limited area for cultivation, they have shunned producing mass market vegetables and focus on the production of limited numbers of highly sought ones, while maintaining sustainable quality. It seems to be a recipe for success for a farming business that's operating in the midst of the city.

These two varieties are but two of the vegetables that can claim the Japan Agricultural Co-operative's Tokyo headquarters officially certified "Edo-Tokyo vegetables" brand name. The specification is only given to varieties that meet three criteria: they have been part of the food culture from the Edo period, the seeds are self-supplied or were handled by certain local merchants prior to the mid-1960s, and their production methods are based on traditional ways. At present, 48 species have the designation, among them certain varieties of eggplant, cucumber, pumpkin and carrots.

But Chef Mikuni is determined to strengthen recognition through collaborating with farmers and distributors to encourage the trend toward more locally grown and locally consumed food. And if the flavors of his dishes using the Tokyo-grown daikon are any indication, food lovers who visit the city from around the country and the world will have much to celebrate.

farm family. He has been farming for 18 years, after leaving a publishing firm to join the family business. He is actively trying to promote Edo-Tokyo vegetables by distributing them to neighboring schools for lunch and by writing an autobiographical novel with Kameido daikon as a main theme. He harvests some 4,000 Kameido daikon per month during autumn and winter, and sells out his entire crop to contracted restaurants and through his own direct sales outlet. "The distinct characteristic of the Kameido daikon is its size, which is very convenient for cooking," Kimura says.

The type of daikon used in the main dish is a specialty of Nobuyoshi Otsuka, the 10<sup>th</sup>-generation owner of the Otsuka farm in Setagaya Ward, where he has been farming for 45

Nobuyoshi Otsuka has been farming in Tokyo for 45 years. He's holding an Okura daikon, a variety that he saved from extinction.

