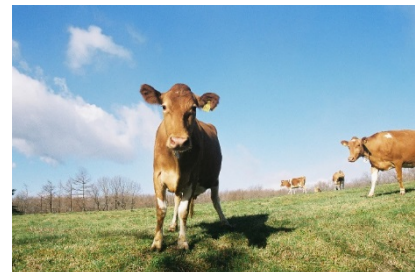


Nasu Kogen: A Tasty Highland



Nasu Kogen, or Nasu Highland, in Tochigi Prefecture is a popular resort area not far from metropolitan Tokyo that draws many visitors with its wide range of attractions, including a volcano still spouting gas and steam, the magnificent nature of the verdant highland, direct contact with animals, leisure activities at theme parks, craft making, and refreshment at a hot-spring resort with a history as a health spa dating back to the Nara period (710–794). Many people build villas in Nasu so as to enjoy their life there even more. And as testimony of the region's excellent environment, Nasu also serves as a summer retreat for the imperial family. Among the area's many attractions, this article takes up the locally produced food. I visited facilities that fully bring out the taste of local produce and spoke with some of the people who produce the mouthwatering flavors of Nasu Kogen.



The Popular Milk of Honshu's Number-One Dairy Kingdom

In the summer Nasu Kogen bustles with people searching for some cool respite from the scorching heat. Cows and goats wilt in the heat too, and they produce better milk both qualitatively and quantitatively in cooler climes. The Nasu region, where large-scale land clearing began after World War II, is ideal for the production of dairy products; in terms of volume it boasts the second largest production of raw milk in Japan after Hokkaido.

Many of the farms in Nasu Kogen welcome tourists. Among them, I visited Minamigaoka Dairy, where popular milk and dairy products are produced on the farm. Ever since settlement in 1948, Minamigaoka Dairy has inherited a strictness about serving only the real McCoy and is open to the public, with no admission fee, as a place where people can come into contact with domestic animals, such as horses and goats, and nature. The dairy gets many visitors. I asked its president, Mr. Takuya Okabe, about



its activities.

The main cows raised for milk in Japan are Holstein cows, but Minamigaoka Dairy raises about 40 Guernsey cows, of which there are only about 200 in the whole of Japan. Guernsey cows produce very little milk, but it is an extremely thick milk with a butterfat content of more than 4%. Guernsey Golden Milk, which is produced entirely at the dairy, from milking to bottling, has a slightly yellowish color and is very fragrant. Drinking it, you get a sense of its thickness and sweetness. Mr. Okabe is often asked whether there is any sugar in the milk, but of course it is whole milk with nothing added and nothing removed. While supermarket milk is sterilized for two to three seconds at a temperature of 120 degrees Celsius, he explained, Guernsey Golden Milk is heated for 15 minutes at 75 degrees in order to preserve the tasty constituents. The difference in taste is immediately evident when Guernsey Golden Milk is used for dishes requiring lots of milk, such as cream stew and cakes.

Milk and Yogurt Awarded Gold Medals

At FOODEX JAPAN, the largest food and beverage trade fair in Asia, Guernsey Golden Milk received the top gold medal in the Local Milk Grand Prix category last year, and Guernsey Golden Yogurt was awarded the top gold medal in the Local Yogurt Grand Prix category this year. These commendations are testimony of the products' good taste.



The characteristic of Minamigaoka Dairy's yogurt is its thick taste, which gives a sense of fullness and depth. In contrast, yogurt made from normal milk lacks fullness and has a kind of transparent color. When eaten at the dairy, the yogurt also comes with a fruity sauce made by processing apples and strawberries harvested at an organic farm using cow manure.

The popular soft ice creams are also made from the same milk. These ice creams have a lovely soft and creamy taste, which explains why at busy times the dairy can sell several thousand of them in a single day. The cows produce extremely thick milk in the winter and slightly thinner milk in the summer. The dairy uses untreated raw milk, so the flavor of its products differs a little from season to season. That is how it should be, said Mr. Okabe, and indeed the differences are something to look forward to.



"We offer the genuine taste of dairy products."



Integrated Milking and Production: Cheese Made on the Farm

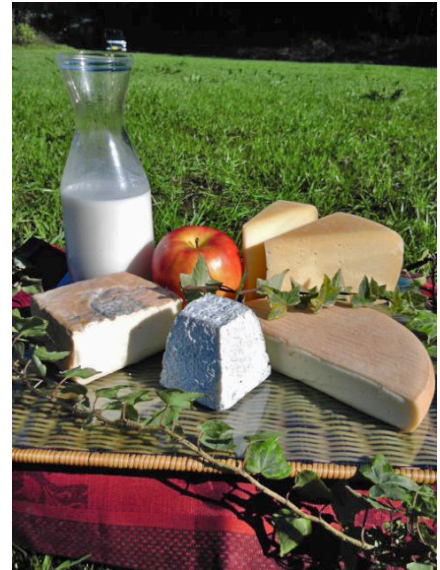
The cheese made from the milk of cows and goats raised in Nasu Kogen is the area's representative dairy product, and many visitors come to buy it. Among the many products available, the cheese made at Nasu Kogen K. I. Lady Farm is outstanding, renowned for its high quality and exquisite taste and selected by Japan Airlines for the first-class meals on its international flights. I asked Mr. Yuko Takahashi, head of the farm's cheese factory, about cheese manufacture.



On this farm, 300 cows and 40 goats are raised by members of the family, and milking from half of them takes place twice a day, morning and evening. The raw milk taken from the cows amounts to 4,000

kilograms a day, of which 300 kilograms is used for cheese processing. All 50 kilograms taken from the goats is used for making cheese. When raw milk is processed into cheese, it loses about 90% of its weight. So if you eat 20 grams of cheese, you get the same nutrition intake provided by one 200 ml bottle of milk.

Among the farm's seven regular products, the most popular is the fresh cheese made from cow milk, which uses an originally developed manufacturing method based on know-how picked up in Italy. This fresh cheese is made from raw milk taken at 5:30 in the morning on Mondays and Fridays. It is placed in the shop at 10 o'clock, by which time there are already many regular customers waiting to purchase this extremely fresh product. At noon the cheese is delivered to restaurants, hotels, and shops in Nasu so that it can be consumed on the same day.



“If You’re Making Cheese, Don’t Transport the Milk!”

This cheese factory, which was the first facility in Tochigi Prefecture to receive authorization under the Sextiary Industry Comprehensive Business Plan of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries with the aim of establishing a Nasu Kogen farm-produced cheese brand, has been visited by the emperor and empress. In the design of the factory, thorough consideration has been given to the careful handling of milk by cheese artisans. For example, the factory has been constructed adjacent to the milking place in order to minimize the distance that the milk has to be sent to the factory’s tank after milking. The pipeline directly linking them has been given a mild slope so that the milk flows as gently as possible to the tank. This is because in usual factories the milk gets churned as it is sent by air pump, and its constituents break up.



Emphasizing freshness, Mr. Takahashi explained, “The most important thing in making delicious cheese is to use the freshest milk just extracted from the animal. If 30 to 60 minutes are spent transporting the milk at room temperature, it will come into contact with that much more unwanted bacteria in the air. What’s more, the fat globules will coagulate due to shaking during transportation [creating a butter-like substance], so the quality of the milk is bound to deteriorate.”

Furthermore, the lactic acid bacteria differ depending on the type of cheese to be made, he explained, and the constituents of the milk differ from season to season. Controlling temperature and humidity in response to these conditions is a tricky task; even a difference of just one degree is impermissible. The excellent taste that has become Nasu Kogen’s hallmark is the product of skillful artisanship that makes delicate and fine adjustments to control the activity of the living lactic acid bacteria.



“We want to make Nasu cheese for the world.”



A Combination of Nasu Kogen's Abundant Nature and Food Ingredients

As well as being one of Japan's leading tourist spots, Nasu Kogen is a thriving agricultural district producing rice, vegetables, meat, raw milk, and other products. [Nasuben](#) (Nasu no Uchibento) is a popular lunch set developed by a group of like-minded people who wanted to let visitors to this gastronomic treasure trove enjoy the taste of delicious local produce. I asked Mr. Kazuya Suzuki, who played a central role among these members and serves as chairman of the Nasu no Uchibento Regional Vitalization Council, about the attractions of Nasuben and the hardships faced in its development.



Nasuben is a locally produced and locally consumed lunch set that condenses the good tastes of Nasu Kogen. In reference to the legend of the nine-tailed fox, a well-known story in Nasu, the lunch comprises nine ingredients served in nine separate dishes on a tray specially made from Nasu cedar. The nine ingredients include rice balls using Koshihikari rice (or Nasuhikari, a local brand) and local garlic chives, green onions, eggplants, seasonal vegetables, fruit, and milk. The central dish on the tray consists of a recipe using Nasu *wagyu* (Japanese beef) concocted by the facility serving the lunch. These original main dishes, such as stew or meat loaf, are a highlight of the lunch.



At present there are eight facilities serving Nasuben, with another scheduled to come onboard in the near future. Each facility offers a distinctive set based on such themes as Western style, Japanese style, and mum's home cooking, so visitors looking to enjoy their meals have a wide range of options. Since certain rules have to be followed in menu composition, there is no variation in terms of content and quality among the eight facilities. Apparently there are many repeaters making the rounds as well. The lunch comes with a written description of the ingredients used, dish names, and cooking methods so as to spark conversation during the meal.

Cooperation between Agriculture and Tourism Bears Fruit

In order to properly convey the good qualities of Nasu Kogen's ingredients, the first thought was the need to make well-prepared dishes. In practice, however, spending a lot of time making

elaborate dishes during the busy lunch hour is a burden on kitchens. The menu is renewed every year after discussions in a study group comprising a broad range of local related persons and sampling sessions. The competition, in the good sense of the word, acts as a mutual stimulus for participating facilities. It is also necessary because raising the level is essential for supplying delicious food to tourists and attracting them to Nasu in search of good taste. There has never been any idea of making a profit out of Nasuben.



The use of only local ingredients is actually quite a rigorous rule. When Nasuben was launched five years ago, the main headache was how to ensure stable supplies of local ingredients to participating facilities. For example, facilities could go out and buy from direct sales stores, but there was much concern that if they made procurements in that way every day, shortages were bound to arise. In addition, the distribution structure was such that in order to maintain brand value, locally produced brand vegetables were all shipped to the metropolitan Tokyo area and could not be purchased locally. The first step, therefore, was to expand the circle of people agreeing that it was meaningless for tasty produce grown with considerable effort in Nasu to be entirely shipped



to the metropolitan area and that sightseeing visitors should be able to enjoy the taste too. The person in charge at the local agricultural cooperative at that time eagerly approached producers, and when procurement became feasible, the Nasuben project was started. As a result of this change in the distribution structure, today restaurants other than those offering Nasuben are also able to serve special dishes using local ingredients, and local brand vegetables have become available in supermarkets for anyone to buy.

The Nasuben project has inspired other efforts to utilize local produce, and gradually a mechanism has taken shape to vitalize the local community by linking agriculture and tourism. In the future such efforts will embrace even more local people, further expanding the circle of regional cooperation.

Besides the examples described above, good tastes are being created in Nasu in various ways, much to the delight of visitors. There are, among others, numerous restaurants offering local, Western-style, and Asian cuisine, highly individualistic bakeries and confectionaries, café terraces ventilated by a refreshing breeze, and orchards where visitors can enjoy freshly plucked fruit. Nasu's abundant and high-quality ingredients are nurturing a diverse food culture.

Cooperation: Minamigaoka Dairy <http://www.minamigaoka.co.jp/english-page/newpage1.html>

Nasu Kogen K. I. Lady Farm <http://www.cheesekobo.com/> (Japanese only)

Nasu Tourism Association <http://www.nasukogen.org/common/images/pamphlet.pdf>