

SHONAI: A CULINARY CAPITAL



An excellent foodie destination, Shonai has earned the title of food capital for its flavorful ingredients and dedication to old and new agricultural and culinary traditions. We look at the reasons for its gastronomic success, and four Shonai specialties to taste while you're there

Why Shonai is a Gourmand's Delight

It's Rich in Natural Resources

Shonai has a varied topography with mountains, flat plains, and easy ocean access, meaning there is a wide variety of natural resources. Also, the four traditional seasons are so distinctly different — unlike some areas in Japan — that the food offerings are more diverse and often more flavorful. The area boasts a rich food culture that remains so strong that even now seasonal changes are marked not by flowers or weather changes, but by a detailed food calendar that indicates what crops and foods are in season.

The Region Has Shown Culinary Innovation Through the Ages

Shonai has an exceptional past of harnessing nature's gifts and using advanced agricultural techniques. Tsuruoka City boasts approximately 60 indigenous (also known as heirloom) crops, thanks to the preservation and innovational techniques of local farmers.

The city is also known as the origin of the Japanese school lunch system, which started in 1889 and is now an intrinsic part of Japanese food culture. The initiative's emphasis on local production and local consumption remains.

It Boasts a UNESCO Designation and Shonai Food Ambassadors

Tsuruoka City has also been recognized globally for its gastronomic efforts and was awarded the honor of being a UNESCO Designated Creative City of Gastronomy — the only one in Japan as of 2018. It was given this title as it maintains three characteristics highly valued by UNESCO: the abundance of heirloom crops, foods and local dishes that are seasonal, and festivals and food that are full of history.

To help promote the local food culture, many food experts in the area act as goodwill ambassadors. One of these is Executive Chef Masayuki Okuda, a world-renowned chef born and raised in Shonai. He uses his expertise to showcase Shonai's local fare both through international culinary campaigns and through his own gastronomical endeavors. By using locally sourced ingredients to create mouth-watering Italian dishes, he allows the fresh, fragrant flavors of the ingredients to shine. For a taste of his delightful dishes head to Al-ché-cciano (alchecciano.com) or the more casual Farinamore (alchecciano.com/farinamore.html), both in Tsuruoka City.

4 Shonai Specialties to Try

Dadachamame

This is an heirloom bean that is particularly sweet and has a deep umami flavor. Dadacha means “father” in the local dialect, and mame is “bean” in Japanese, so dadachamame literally translates to “father bean,” a fitting description given its longevity. Its survival is in great part thanks to the cleverness and social skills of Shonai women, who grew the beans in the ditches between rice fields. They curated and exchanged seeds, sharing advice and techniques to improve and increase the crops for all.

Dewa Sanzan Shojin Ryori

Dewa Sanzan (the three mountains of Dewa) has a long history as an important pilgrimage destination and its Buddhist vegetarian fare has been served for centuries, following strict rules to ensure it is fit for ascetics’ needs. It features mostly mountain vegetables gathered around the Dewa Sanzan and visitors are able to try it at one of the many yamabushi guesthouses in the area. More info at nihonisan-dewasanzan.jp

Sake

Shonai’s access to pure water sources from the Dewa Sanzan mountains and Mount Chokai, combined with its rice production and skilled craftsmen means the area is home to almost half of Yamagata Prefecture’s approximately 50 sake breweries. Take no Tsuyu (www.takenotsuyu.com) is one of these, and offers tasting sessions for just ¥500. For the best selection of what Shonai has to offer, head to Sake Bar Ayatsuru (foodever.info), which stocks sake from all 18 breweries in the area.

Yamagata Beef and Shonai Pork

Shonai is historically best known for its pork, but Yamagata wagyu beef is also exceptional. To get a taste of the region’s best meat at a reasonable price, visit Nakajima Butcher Shop in Sakata City. The first floor hosts a butcher shop, while the second floor serves as a restaurant, which is why it can offer locally sourced meat at a fraction of the usual cost. The restaurant also has a family connection with Haruo Nakajima, famous for being the first Godzilla suit actor.

*The staff only speak Japanese but are happy to accommodate international guests.

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