

# Traditional Local Cuisines of Japan

Issue No. 2

*Imoni* ♦ Yamagata Prefecture

By CGJNYJIC

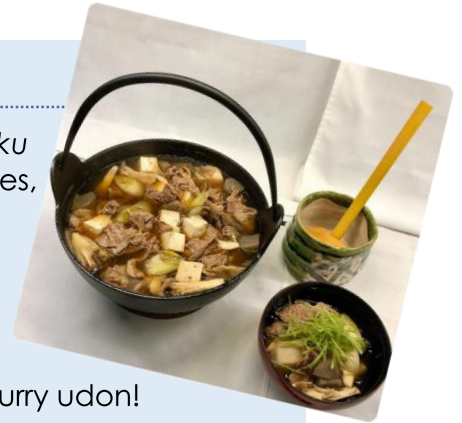
*Traditional Local Cuisines of Japan* is a series introducing the history and food culture of various Japanese locales through their unique *kyodo-ryori* – timeless regional cuisines made with local ingredients and techniques.

This issue features Yamagata Prefecture's *imoni*: a hearty, savory dish starring the *satoimo*, a small and round variety of taro root. Read on to learn the history behind this locally beloved dish!

## What is imoni?

*Imoni* is a stew consisting mainly of *satoimo* (taro root), *konnyaku* (a gelatinous food made from konjac root), meat, and vegetables, all cooked to tender perfection. It is said to have originated in Yamagata during the early Edo Period (1603 – 1868), and has since been a go-to local dish to warm up on chilly days.

The original Yamagata-style *imoni* calls for a soy sauce-based broth. The versatile flavor makes it easy to incorporate into other recipes, creating new favorites such as *imoni* ramen and *imoni* curry udon!



## Yamagata Prefecture

Located in the Northeastern region of Japan, Yamagata is a nature-abundant prefecture that is over 70% forest and mountains.

It is no surprise then that Yamagata possesses a bounty of delicious foods. Aside from being the top national producer of cherries, it is the proud source of Yonezawa beef—one of three top brands of Japanese wagyu acclaimed both domestically and abroad.

There is no lack for sightseeing either. Popular attractions include live-action "human shogi" (left), part of the Tendo City Cherry Blossom Festival in the spring; the energizing Hanagasa Festival (bottom) in the summer; the *Imoni* Festival in the fall, for which visitors hail from all over Japan; and the famously ethereal scenery of soft rime in the winter.

With its expansive offerings of foods and events, Yamagata provides locals and visitors alike with opportunities for adventure all year-round.



attractions include live-action "human shogi" (left), part of the Tendo City Cherry



## Adored by Edo's Greatest Poet?

If you are familiar with the form of poetry called *haiku*, odds are that you have heard of Matsuo Basho. Renowned globally as the master of *haiku*, the Edo poet recorded a late 17<sup>th</sup> century visit to Yamagata in his famous travel diary *Oku no Hosomichi* ("The Narrow Road to the Interior").



The prefecture's Mogami River famously stars in one of the book's verses, and it is said that *imoni* originated there in the mid-1600s as a dish served to ferrymen who docked to deliver cargo.

Of the 5-month journey that makes up *Oku no Hosomichi*, Basho stayed in Yamagata for an entire month, dedicating a significant portion of the book to it. It can be inferred that Basho was rather fond of Yamagata, and perhaps *imoni* as well!

The places Basho once visited are now popular tourist destinations. If you go for a trip one day, be sure to have a taste of the local specialty *imoni*—it may even inspire a *haiku*.



## Imoni Recipe

This recipe is by Chef Shogo Tsutsumi of the CGJNY Ambassador's Residence.

### Ingredients

makes 3-4 servings

Satoimo (taro root)	300g
Beef (thinly sliced or shaved)	200g
Shimeji Mushrooms	1 bundle
Konnyaku	1 block
Firm Tofu	150g
Scallions	2 stalks
☆Soy Sauce	~200ml
☆Cooking Sake	~50ml
☆Sugar	~3 tablespoons

Ready  
to serve!



### Instructions

1. Peel and roughly cut satoimo into large chunks. Use a spoon to tear konnyaku into large, bite-sized pieces. Cut firm tofu and shimeji into bite-sizes, and scallions diagonally into slivers.
2. Submerge konnyaku and satoimo in a pot of water. Bring to a boil on high heat.
3. Add sugar and cooking sake. Lower heat to medium and allow to simmer, carefully removing any scum that surfaces.
4. Add shimeji and half of the beef to the pot. Continue to skim off the scum.
5. Once beef is cooked through, add soy sauce. Continue to simmer until the satoimo is soft.
6. Add the remaining beef, tofu, and scallions and continue to simmer until fully cooked.



#### Tips from the Chef

- ❖ Using a spoon to cut the konnyaku increases each piece's surface area, helping it to better absorb the flavors.
- ❖ Feel free to add more beef and scallions and to adjust the seasoning levels to your preference!

### Imoni-kai: a Yamagata Custom



*Imoni-kai* is an imoni-themed social gathering customary to the Northeast region of Japan. As the birthplace of imoni, Yamagata has hosted the annual "Japan's Biggest Imoni-kai Festival" every September since 1989. Its scale is as the name suggests, having served 12,695 patrons in 2018 when it achieved the Guinness World Record for "most soup served in 8 hours". A giant cauldron measuring 6.5 meters in diameter is used to cook the quantity of imoni needed for the event, which calls for a whopping 3.5 tons of satoimo—prepped on the morning of the event—alongside tons more of its other ingredients (all locally sourced). Specialized backhoes greased with butter are operated to lift the stew out of the pot for serving. The event requires immense energy, time, and dedication to execute, and surely makes for an impressive sight in person!

Did you enjoy learning about imoni? The ingredients for this dish are comparatively easy to find even in the U.S., so please give this recipe a shot! As you enjoy a steaming bowl of imoni, be sure to channel your inner Basho for an originally inspired haiku:

"A ribbon of steam  
Warm, nostalgic aroma  
Autumn's imoni."

※ This is an original haiku by a JIC staff member.