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Okinawa's Edible Delights

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Kissed by the sun: Okinawan herbs

One of the greatest attractions of Okinawan cookery is its colorful array of herbs. We visit grower and enthusiast Yoko Takenishi, photographed here in her garden, and trace her life's journey through the wondrous realm of island herbs.



Herbaceous bounty to sustain body and soul

Contributing to the impression of Okinawan cuisine as a tradition unto itself are customs such as using every last part of the pig and cooking with abundant native vegetables that have unusual appearances and intense flavors. But when you understand that liberal use of herbs is another vital characteristic, it can bring a whole new perspective to the islands' edible delights.

A figure that looms large in any discussion of the herbs appearing on contemporary Okinawan dining tables is Yoko Takenishi, who heads the Yaeyama chapter of the Japan Herb Society and runs the Ishigaki Island Herb School. She lives amid her gardens on Ishigaki, one of the Yaeyama Islands located to the southwest of Okinawa's main island, near Taiwan. Besides growing, harvesting, and cooking with the plants she so loves, she produces a regular column on the subject for a local magazine. Her accompanying illustrations are as accomplished as any rendered by a professional artist.

A visit to Takenishi's herb farm begins with a conversation about horses: "I've decided to get a pony," she smiles. "I grew up on a farm, and my family always kept a horse. One of my fondest memories from when I was really little is of my father letting me ride on the saddle in front of him on his way to the fields, and for quite a while now I've been thinking I would like to have a horse of my own." Takenishi was born on the even more remote island of Yonaguni, west of Ishigaki. Famous for its native horses, the island gives its name to the fine small breed.

Listening to her talk about her childhood on Yonaguni, it quickly becomes obvious that she's no come-lately expert who studied her subject in school, but a born lover of herbs who has spent her whole life getting to know them inside and out.

Takenishi was born in 1954, when the country was just beginning to make strides following World War II. On isolated Yonaguni, few had electricity, water still came from wells, and meals were cooked on wood-fired stoves. A long-term hospitalization for her father in Kyushu meant her mother had to raise Takenishi and her three younger sisters by herself. Her mother took in sewing to support the family and also grew vegetables and made tofu, both of which the children would sell before going to school. There were many other children like them on Yonaguni in those days.

"Even as a little girl," she says, "I was always on the lookout for new and unusual plants, and when I found one, I immediately had to have a close-up look. If I saw a flower out of reach at the top of an embankment or someplace, I would ask a grown-up or an older cousin who was staying with us to get it for me or to go and count how many petals it had. I would even resort to tears if I had to, just to get my way. I was such a pest about it that they started warning each other not to take me into the woods."

Once she had reached grade-school age and was allowed to roam more on her own, she began bringing home an endless assortment of plants. She got waterweeds from the rice paddy and plastered them on her wall to count their leaves. "Guess what, Grandma," she would say, "these things

grow right on top of the water!" "So you like playing with plants, do you?" "Uh-huh. They're fun." Though her grandmother seemed surprised by her interest, she was herself a regular user of medicinal and other herbs and knowledgeable enough that even people from other villages came to her for advice.

Takenishi continues, "When I was in school, my mind was always wandering across the countryside. I would wonder if the fruit on a particular tree I had seen was ripe yet, and I would plan my next excursion. I liked to dig up lilies and crocuses and moss roses and bring them home to plant in our yard."

She spent her high-school years on Ishigaki, but family circumstances prevented her from going on to college. After returning to Yonaguni to find work, she married a colleague and soon had three children. Her father-in-law, a science teacher, grew medicinal herbs in his garden, further adding to her many connections with herbs throughout her life.

A job transfer for her husband brought her back to Ishigaki. As she continued to work and raise her three children there, it wasn't long before she started to be troubled by local dietary patterns.

"I discovered that nobody used more than a handful of ingredients," she frowns. "When I would mention to my coworkers that I had cooked something with the chives I grew in my own yard or had made tempura with mulberry leaves I found growing somewhere, they would be totally flabbergasted. All they knew was the lettuce and asparagus they bought at the



Roselle and other species of hibiscus can be used in jams as well as salads.

supermarket, shipped in from outside. I had grown my own water spinach for as long as I can remember, but when I tried some from the supermarket, it didn't taste anything like what I was used to. It had no fragrance at all. The green onions should have had a lot more zing, too. Back in the day, we even ate banana root and the cores of papaya trees. Maybe that's because it was a time of food shortages, but those hardships don't change the fact that people used to know a lot more about the things growing around them that could be foraged for food."

Then tragedy struck. Her oldest daughter, Kiwa, was killed in a traffic accident while in the 11th grade. Having lost her daughter, who was just starting to come into her own in life, it was as if time had stopped for Takenishi. She kept working, harder than ever, but try as she might, she could not get motivated for anything, and she didn't feel like talking to anyone. Ultimately, it was herbs that pulled her out of the darkness that seemed to have no exit.

She found a small, handmade book her daughter had put together, and approached a publisher about turning it into a real book. Through a bit of a mix-up, an editor happened to see a diary Takenishi had been keeping, written in the form of letters to her lost daughter, and urged her to publish it. Once that was printed, he said he would like her to write a series of illustrated essays on the herbs she so frequently mentioned in the letters to her daughter.

"I often touched on herbs in my letters because that was one of the things we talked about when we did things together like baking a cake or whatever. At first I told the editor there was no way I could do the illustrations and turned him down, but he said, 'Just try drawing something once, it doesn't matter what,' so I did. When I showed him what I had done, he



Top right: Pages from Takenishi's growing collection of pressed-leaf specimens, each accompanied by handwritten botanical notes.

Center and below: Herbs and edible flowers harvested from Takenishi's gardens.



immediately said, 'Oh, wow, these are spectacular!' and buttered me up so much that I had to accept."

That was how she began writing a regular column for a local magazine. Her husband dabbled in painting, so she asked him to teach her the basics of perspective and such, and she set about developing her skills. She even sought out the tutelage of a professional artist, but she soon realized she wasn't really interested in learning how to make "paintings," per se. She just wanted to draw plants, so she enrolled in a correspondence course focused specifically on botanical illustration instead. But when she did what the text told her to do, the resulting pictures always felt wrong to her somehow, and she gave up pretty quickly.

Without necessarily realizing it, Takenishi carries a very specific image of each plant in her mind. It comes from having been in constant, close contact with plants in her daily life. That's the difference between a person who merely looks at plants in order to paint them and someone who has communed with them, body and soul.

"As a child, when I noticed how *seiron benkeiso*—also known as *Kalanchoe pinnata*, or 'miracle leaf' in English—sprouts new plants from its leaves, I remember referring to the little plantlets using *iru*, the Japanese verb 'to be' for animate things, including humans. Even today, I still have a habit of addressing plants in essentially the same way I talk to people." The extremely close relationship Takenishi enjoys with plants is palpable in the true-to-life detail of her herb portraits.

Three years ago, Takenishi suffered a second loss, when her husband died suddenly of a stroke. The man who started her on the ABCs of painting did not originally share her interest in plants, but a plant had played a key role in bringing them together. The first time they met, he brought her





Homemade scones to be enjoyed with herbs. The red tea is *akabana* hibiscus sweetened with roselle jam and spiced with shell ginger and *pipatsu* pepper. The yellow tea includes lemongrass and mint. The red jam is made from roses, the yellow from *pipatsu* and turmeric, the maroon from roselle hibiscus.



Far left: Composed in a salad of Ishigaki herbs and edible flowers are hibiscus, fennel, *hirezansho* (a relative of Sichuan pepper), pipatsu pepper, *chomeiso* ("long-life plant," a member of the carrot family), and *hamamachi* Ryukyuan mugwort. Left: A collection of Ishigaki spices includes coriander, marjoram, pipatsu, turmeric and pipatsu, hirezansho, savory, shell ginger, and galangal.



Yoko Takenishi

An herb specialist and grower on Ishigaki Island, Takenishi heads the Yaeyama chapter of the Japan Herb Society and directs the Ishigaki Island Herb School. Born on the island of Yonaguni in 1954, she is a leading evangelist for Okinawan herbs. www.herb-ishigaki.com

some gold-banded lilies, her very favorite flower. After several more meetings, they decided to tie the knot.

"The last time I went to Yonaguni with my husband, about six months before he died, we came across a large clump of Easter lilies in bud down by the beach in Hikawa. I'm not a religious person, but it feels almost mystical to me to have had an encounter with lilies at both the beginning and the end like that. It's as if they were his final gift to me," she muses.

Flowers figure strongly in her interests. "I have this image that food should be bright and pleasurable," she says. One of her favorite ways to achieve that is with edible flowers, which add beauty as well as flavor. She cites hibiscus blossoms: "Some people object to using hibiscus in herb teas and such because in Okinawa it's often planted at graves. But we've been using it for generations, and, in any case, it helps food do what it's meant to do, which is to appeal to all five senses."

Encouraging the use of edible flowers is one way Takenishi would like to spark some new traditions for Okinawan herbs. To her, herbs' primary value is in improving food. Medicinal uses are secondary. No matter what the health benefits, she rejects foods that look and taste like medicine. "You take pleasure in good food," she says, "and in due course it makes you healthy and strong. That's how it should be."

Okinawa has long been famous for the longevity of its residents, but that is less true today. In the past, life expectancies for both men and women were higher in Okinawa than in any of the other 46 Japanese prefectures. In 2013, however, women fell to a still-respectable 3rd place, while men plummeted to a dismal 30th. This has been attributed to a rise in obesity as a result of changes in diet.

Takenishi points out, "Okinawa has more daylight hours than anywhere else in Japan. We have thriving green foliage year-round. When plants spend less time at rest, it makes a difference in what they store up.

I'm no scholar, but it seems clear to me that when plants get more sunshine, they grow more vigorously and the goodness becomes more concentrated. Herbs grown in Okinawa have a stronger fragrance; they're more pungent. Take lemongrass—nothing you find on the main islands can even come close. When I go to conferences, people from other parts of the country say to me, 'Okinawan herbs are really a breed apart, aren't they? They smell so much stronger.' I think the historical longevity of people here had something to do with eating plants that got more sun. I'd like to see us return to being the prefecture with the highest life expectancy. You are what you eat. Food is our most precious thing. I want to help enrich it in any way I can."

When Takenishi lets her thoughts wander, she often finds herself remembering the landscapes of Yonaguni. It has long been a dream to return to the island of her birth someday.

"I look back now to the days when we were forced to be self-sufficient, the whole family pitching in, somehow managing to eat even though we didn't have any money, and I actually find myself thinking those were the good times. In the season for school outings, I would hike all over the countryside on my two skinny little legs. If I climbed up the side of a hill, I could look out over the village and its terraced rice paddies. At the shore Yonaguni had the clearest, bluest waters you could ever hope to find. You saw right through the blue to the sand at the bottom. It was like living in a picture someone had painted—a fairy-tale world. Of course, it wasn't until I was much older that I realized this. At the time, that was just the way it was. But it's still there, and therefore it's possible to get it back. Though in a somewhat evolved form, it's still possible to reclaim something close to those tranquil days when we thrived on herbs and wild plants. My goal for the future is to help preserve not only the culture and history of the islands but the native herbs, too, to make sure they will get passed down to future generations."