

Japanese Foods Near You

— Foreign Foods That Have Become Popular in Japan (Kabocha) —

Many agricultural crops we see in Japan today originally came from foreign countries. They include rice, wheat, Japanese pumpkin (kabocha), sweet potatoes, eggplants, tomatoes, and Chinese cabbage (hakusai), just to name a few. Here, let us turn our attention to kabocha, a commonly eaten vegetable that is grown throughout Japan.

The kabocha is native to tropical America, but was brought to Japan via Cambodia, and hence the name “kabocha” (a near phonetic equivalent of “Cambodia”). In supermarkets, they are sold whole or cut into smaller pieces. Because of its oblate shape and bumpy surface, kabocha is frequently associated with unattractiveness and used as a metaphor for referring to things that are poor in appearance. For example, “kabocha-yaro” is a derogatory term referring to a man with an unattractive face or an incompetent man, and “kabocha with eyes and nose” is used to describe someone who is short and fat and has a round face.

Nevertheless, not only is the orange-colored flesh of the kabocha rich in beta-carotene, it contains one of the highest levels of the nutrient among all green and yellow vegetables. Inside the body, beta-carotene is converted to vitamin A and acts as a powerful antioxidant to prevent lifestyle-related diseases. Therefore, whether by braising or stewing kabocha or by turning it into soup, eating kabocha everyday could bring wonderful health benefits.

In Japan, it is customary to eat kabocha on winter solstice, which marks the shortest day and longest night of the year (around December 22). As winter solstice is called *toji* in Japanese, kabocha eaten on that day is called “toji kabocha.” Since ancient times, it was said that eating kabocha chases away evil spirits and prevents sickness, a wisdom that implies that the kabocha was a precious food item back in the days when winter meant a lack of vitamin supplies.

As an interesting note, Matsudo City in Chiba Prefecture, the hometown of Japanese astronaut Naoko Yamazaki, holds a fund-raiser called “Kabocha Fund for Cambodia.” The project took shape after Matsudo City donated children’s desks and chairs to Cambodia and the mayor of Matsudo attended a commendation ceremony in Cambodia by invitation from the governor of Prey Veng Province to receive an order and a letter of appreciation. At the ceremony, the mayor presented 3,000 kabocha seeds to the deputy provincial governor, and in return, the deputy provincial governor presented Cambodian pumpkin seeds to the mayor. By cross breeding the “Matsudo white kabocha,” which Matsudo City has succeeded in reviving for the first time in 53 years, with the Cambodian pumpkin, the inspiring project aims to create a new brand of Matsudo kabocha and to use that kabocha to implement activities for further assistance to Cambodia.

身近にある日本の食物

— 外国からきて大活躍の食物 (カボチャ) —

海外から渡来した農作物には、イネ・ムギ・カボチャ・サツマイモ・ナス・トマト・ハクサイ等たくさんあります。その中で、日本中で栽培され、食卓によくのぼるカボチャについてお話しします。

熱帯アメリカの原産で、カンボジアから渡来したのでカボチャの名前がつけられたようです。スーパーなどでは、カットしたり大形の扁球状のままでも売られたりしています。カボチャはその形や表面のこぼこなどの見た目から、よいイメージを持たれず、「カボチャ野郎」(顔の醜い男や、能力のない男をあざけっている語)や「カボチャに目鼻」(丸顔で、太っていて背の低い人の形容)など、あまりよくないことの例えに使われています。

しかし、果肉の黄色はβ-カロチンで、緑黄色野菜の中でも含有量はトップクラスです。体内ではビタミンAの働きをしたり、抗酸化物質として体が酸化されるのを防ぎ、生活習慣病を予防します。油で炒めたり煮たりスープにしたりと幅広く料理に使え、毎日でも食べたい食物です。



一年中で昼が一番短く、夜が一番長い「冬至」(12月22日頃)に、日本では「冬至カボチャ」を食べる風習があります。カボチャを食べると厄除けになったり、病気になるいと言われてきました。冬にはビタミンなどの供給源が不足した昔、カボチャは貴重な食物だったことが分かります。

ところで、山崎宇宙飛行士の出身地である千葉県松戸市では、「カンボジア支援のためのかぼちゃ募金」を行っています。松戸市がカンボジアに、児童生徒用机・椅子を送った事業がきっかけとなり、カンボジア王国プレイベン州知事より招聘を受け、市長が勲章と感謝状授与式に訪問した際、かぼちゃの種3,000粒を副州知事へ提供しました。代わりに、副州知事からカンボジア産かぼちゃの種をいただきました。松戸市では、53年ぶりに「松戸白かぼちゃ」を復活させました。カンボジアのかぼちゃと交配させ、新たな「松戸ブランド」のかぼちゃを生みだし、カンボジア王国に対する更なる支援活動を行うことを目的にしたすばらしいプロジェクトです。