



Japan is a country steeped in *tradition*. If it is customary to do things in a certain way, then that has a particular importance.

# With Love and Craftsmanship

In *Japan*, apples are not eaten as a snack but as a delicacy – and are often sold as individual specimens. This peculiarity of Japanese culture has had a significant impact on the cultivation of apples in the island nation and has raised them to the status of a cultural asset.

By Christian Heinrich

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Apple growing is like music. It always needs a rhythm – and if a melody is added in, it can turn into art. The rhythm of apple growing is set by nature, the seasons, and the weather; that's no different in Italy than in northern Germany, Japan, or America. But in Japan, apple growers add their own melody to this rhythm. And the instruments that create the melody are craftsmanship and love.

In the northern prefecture of Aomori, for example, on many apple plantations the fruits are double-bagged in early July, about 50 to 60 days after full bloom. In this area, the main reason behind this is to improve the shelf life of the fruit, while in the Nagano prefecture further south, it's all about the fruit color.

The outer bag is removed 35 days before harvest, and the inner one, which is coated with fungicides, one week before. To protect the apples from sunburn in the final few days, large nets are spread out over the trees to reduce the intensity of the sun's rays. It's all just as elaborate and painstaking as it sounds: on average, a worker can bag between 100 and about 400 apples per hour, which even on a medium-sized plantation amounts to more than 1,000 labor hours. But Japan is a country tied to tradition. If it is customary to do things in a certain way, then that has a particular significance, and it is usually done patiently and without grumbling.

**After the Satsuma mandarin (770,000 tons produced and consumed annually), the apple (750,000 tons) is the most popular fruit of the Japanese.**



The structure of Japanese apple growing also reflects this: the main practitioners of this labor-intensive, hands-on cultivation process with the focus on the highest possible fruit quality tend to be small family farms.

The fact that apple growers in Japan lavish so much time and attention on their fruit also has to do with the high status afforded to the apple. “For us, an apple is something precious. Apples are treasured gifts for the harvest and year-end festivals, we gift them to friends and acquaintances on special occasions, and we give them as get well soon gifts for the sick in hospital,” says Professor Hiroo Koike, who has run a research station for apple growing in the Nagano prefecture for several decades and is considered one of Japan’s foremost apple-growing experts.

Because of their status, apples are often also bought and sold as individual specimens in Japan. Weighing in at around 300 grams on average, they are usually larger than European apples and will ideally have a deep, uniform color. So rather than being munched on as a snack between meals or as part of a cafeteria lunch, apples tend to be eaten on special occasions and at home. And that’s why growers give each individual apple the kid glove treatment in their attempts to get the very best out of their crop.

**On average, a hand-cultivated apple orchard in Japan is less than one hectare in size.**

Before the apples are bagged, the fruits are thinned out on the tree. Selectively removing apples from clusters of several fruits is emblematic of the fact that in Japan, tradition and care are valued over mass production and high yields.

Each apple is cherished and nurtured to achieve the best possible shape and color. Around 20 to 30 days before harvest, red varieties are de-leafed by hand around the fruits to allow the color to develop better, with around one in ten leaves closest to the fruits being removed. “This step of the harvest cycle takes up roughly 20% of the labor time,” Koike says.

The fruits are also rotated to expose the shady side to the sunlight in order to ensure uniform fruit coloring –

**Malus sieversii, the Asian wild apple, originally came to Japan from Central Asia, albeit the long way round via Europe and the USA: in 1879, the Japanese government imported many different varieties from North America, giving rise to the birth of apple growing in Japan.**

another important factor for customers and buyers down the line. According to Koike, this practice accounts for another 18% of the labor time. Reflective foils are often used to further optimize the color.

Attention is paid to factors such as size, color, and natural flavor – Japanese consumers have a preference for sweet apples – right from the breeding stage. Apples are grown in around a dozen of Japan’s 45 prefectures, with most found in the north of the main island where it is slightly cooler, meaning that rice is harder to grow there – another factor

that spoke in favor of establishing apple growing back in the day. Almost every prefecture in which apples are grown has its own breeding program. More than half of the 750,000 tons of apples produced annually in Japan are grown in Aomori, followed by Nagano. But other prefectures such as Iwate and Akita are also well-known apple growing areas.

Some Japanese-bred varieties are now found all over the world. The best known Japanese apple is the Fuji, which accounts for 60% of apple production in Japan. This variety was first introduced in 1939, but several events intervened

**“For us, an apple is something precious: a treasured gift on special occasions or for hospital visits.”**

Hiroo Koike, *professor and apple growing expert from Nagano*





In Japan's small *apple orchards*, like this one in Aomori Prefecture, most of the work is done manually following traditional methods such as pruning and burning branches in the spring.





1+4 *Apple blossoms* are still partly pollinated by hand the traditional way. Apples are luxury items for special occasions in Japan, so farmers go to great lengths to optimize their crops.

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before the Fuji became a firm favorite the world over: World War II brought apple growing as a whole to a standstill; in 1941, early frosts destroyed a large part of the crop; in 1944, a typhoon destroyed stocks; and the price of apples plummeted in 1948. However, the 1950s saw a revival in apple growing in Japan, and by 1962, Fuji apples – named not only for the famous mountain but also for the city of Fujisaki, where the variety was developed at an apple cultivation research station – had become a worldwide hit.

In addition to the Fuji, other varieties have also been licensed in growing regions around the world. Shinano Gold, a Nagano-bred variety – Shinano is the old name for Nagano – is now also grown in South Tyrol, for example. The best fruits of this variety grow to 350-400 g in weight.

Thinning, bagging, leaf removal, rotating towards the sun, netting – a melody of craftsmanship and love that many Japanese apples clearly exude. And that attention to detail can ultimately pay off: in luxury fruit emporia and auctions, completely flawless specimens

**In the Nagano area in particular, newer orchards are being densely planted, inspired especially by the orchards in South Tyrol.**

can go for as much as several hundred euros. Even more effort is lavished on apples for gifting. Paper stencils in the shape of the Japanese or Chinese characters for “happiness” and “health” or with images of dragons or temples are stuck on the apples on the tree. When the sun shines on the apples, they turn a beautiful, uniform red – except under the stencils, where the skin stays yellow, leaving the images clearly visible and immortalizing the melody of Japanese apple farmers in the apple skin.

These practices can, of course, elicit much astonishment and shaking of heads. Why lavish so much time and

**Red Fuji varieties are best grown in apple plantations in which the fruits are not bagged. Their uniform red color can also be achieved without this labor-intensive step, and the higher Brix level this produces makes them more popular with Japan’s consumers, whose preference is for sweet apples.**

effort on something that is only going to be eaten? That’s true, on the one hand, but this practice ties in completely with Japanese culture, which regards transience as part of the cycle of life and sees no reason to be less circumspect because of it – a form of “consciousness of existence”, perhaps. And this not only applies to the apple itself – it’s also about the apple grower who nurtures the fruit with so much craftsmanship and love. **CHH**

Stencils are used to create characters for “health” or “happiness” on the skin. In luxury emporia or at *auctions*, completely flawless apples can sell for as much as several hundred euros – each.

