

Yamanashi Flavours

Trying local cuisine at Makiba Restaurant

[*Kendra Evans*]

A huge part of Yamanashi Prefecture's local culture is the production of food and drink. Its wine, grapes and peaches are famous all across Japan. But Yamanashi also produces many other kinds of food. You can find Yamanashi meats, Yamanashi vegetables, Yamanashi dairy products, even Yamanashi whiskies and sake. Nowadays, trying to eat local produce is becoming more and more popular in the UK: it helps vitalise the local economy, encourages small businesses and is environmentally friendly. However, I don't know of anywhere in the UK that has as many unique local products as Yamanashi. For those who want to taste all these different specialties, there is one place where you can try them all.

Makiba Park is a farm at a 1429m altitude in Hokuto, northern Yamanashi Prefecture, with a beautiful view of Mt Fuji. Animals graze in the fields during warmer months, and visitors can interact with them for free. It is a fun location for both tourists and citizens. On the grounds, overlooking the fields and mountains is the Makiba Restaurant, an establishment dedicated to serving some of the best food Yamanashi has to offer. I went to try some local produce – and I had the rare opportunity to interview the manager, Mr Kobayashi, who told me many things about the restaurant.



Mr Kobayashi

Mr Kobayashi has worked at the Makiba Restaurant for thirteen years. He commutes every day from Kofu! His favourite dish at the restaurant is the Fujizakura Pork Loin. Thank you so much for letting us ask you questions about the restaurant! We will definitely come and visit again!

Meat



The main highlight of the Makiba Restaurant menu is the meat: 100% Yamanashi produced. The two most popular are Koshu Wine Beef and Koshu Fujizakura Pork.

Koshu Wine Beef is the most popular; its name originating from the wine pomace mixed in with the cow's feed, giving the meat a deep, delicious flavour. Yamanashi is one of the few places in Japan where wine is produced in large quantities, and so Koshu Wine Beef is unique to this area. At Makiba Restaurant, the main dish using Koshu Wine Beef is the Beef Stew, thick and flavourful, using Koshu Wine and vegetable extracts in the sauce.

Koshu Fujizakura Pork is produced from a specific breed of pig, and its story is an interesting one. In 1959, right after World War II, two typhoons in the space of a month caused huge destruction in

Yamanashi Prefecture, destroying crops and livestock. Richard Thomas, an Iowan US Army Sergeant working in Japan, set up the Iowa Hog Lift, transporting 35 hogs to Yamanashi by plane. Those hogs helped revitalise the livestock industry, and Fujizakura Pork can trace its line back to those same 35 Iowan pigs. It is famous across Japan for its flavour, which makes it suited to most pork dishes, particularly the Pork Loin and the Bacon Steak at Makiba. The Fujizakura Pork Loin is grilled on the bone and served with black pepper and lemon, a way of seasoning the meat that brings out a beautiful and rich flavour. The Fujizakura Bacon Steak, although it is the same meat, is very different –the cut of pork is thick, and fried to preserve the layers without making the meat greasy. It is much cleaner than British bacon, almost like gammon.

To combine these last two meats, I ordered the Kiyosato Jumbo Burger, one of the most famous dishes at the restaurant. A combination of BLT and cheeseburger, this giant sandwich uses Fujizakura Pork bacon and a Koshu Wine Beef mince patty. This choice surprised me – usually chefs think that mincing beef makes it lose flavour, so using high-quality meat is a waste. But when you eat the Kiyosato Burger, you can really taste the difference. The meat is much softer, and has a much more nuanced flavour than ordinary burgers. Mr Kobayashi told us that even the mince in the pasta dishes is Koshu Wine Beef. I think that this attention to detail really sets Makiba Restaurant apart, and shows its dedication to local produce.



You might be wondering about the vegetarian options. There are several meat-free dishes, but unfortunately, not all the ingredients are from Yamanashi Prefecture. In this case, Mr Kobayashi has forgone local products in favour of making these dishes completely vegetarian: there is no consommé, extracts or animal products of any kind. It can be a challenge to find completely animal-free food in Japan, so it is good to know that such consideration has gone into the dishes here at Makiba Restaurant.

Vegetables

When it comes to other ingredients, the upmost effort has been made to feature local produce. The menu differs from summer to winter, and ingredients change depending on what is in season. The Kiyosato Jumbo Burger includes homemade sauces and local vegetables grown in the Yatsugatake Mountains. These vegetables are known as *Kogen Yasai*, or 'high-altitude vegetables'. Apparently, there are fewer insects at such an altitude, reducing the need for pesticides, and since Makiba Restaurant is so close to these farms, the vegetables are fresh as well as natural.

Sweets and Drinks

The Makiba Restaurant also has a shop, and for dessert, we were lucky enough to try the most popular item in store: cheesecake! It is made with Camembert, and has a sweet, creamy flavour. It is very affordable and tastes amazing. I would definitely recommend it!

Many of the shop products are also locally produced: Yamanashi wines, Yatsugatake milk, and Fujizakura bacon and sausages for cooking at home. There are also boxes of sweets, perfect for giving to friends, family and colleagues to try. For example, Shingen *mochi* can be bought in boxes of eight or more, and is popular with tourists and locals alike. It is a softer kind of rice cake, dusted with soybean flour, covered with brown sugar syrup and eaten with a stick. As the 'Shingen' in the name tells us, it is a Yamanashi specialty, only produced in the prefecture. Almost all products exclusive to Yamanashi can be found in the Makiba Restaurant store.



In the summer, the Makiba Café outside also hands out small soft-serve ice creams for free! The ice cream is made with a mix of milks, including some from the Mt Fuji region. It is smooth and easy to eat, and popular with families. The Café sells larger versions, along with burgers, sausages, bacon and more during summer months.



Thoughts?

I was very impressed by the Makiba Restaurant, and the lengths Mr Kobayashi and his team have gone to. Almost all of the dishes at this restaurant showcase locally sourced products, and although the food is very high quality, it is still affordable. The flavours are strong, each element of the dish has clearly been thought through, and there is a wide choice on the menu. Makiba Restaurant shows us that to eat locally in Yamanashi, you don't have to eat simply.

About the Restaurant

However, Makiba Restaurant isn't just about the food. It dedicates itself to using local ingredients, but it also highlights local scenery and nature. The restaurant is only open until six because, according to Mr Kobayashi, "there's no point in opening when it's dark": the Yatsugatake Mountains and the Minami Alps surround the park, but Mt Fuji is the real sight to behold. In the summer, the fields below are full of animals, and the park is full of life. The view is what makes Makiba Restaurant and the surrounding area so unique in Japan. Foreign tourists haven't quite discovered it yet, but people come to this part of Hokuto in large numbers from as far away as Osaka, to enjoy the scenery, go cycling or hiking, and come to the Makiba Park and Restaurant to see the animals and try the local food.

What defines Yamanashi Prefecture the most is its nature. Makiba Restaurant might be the best place to appreciate both the nature itself and what that nature produces. I would recommend getting some Koshu Fujizakura Pork and a glass of Koshu Wine and sitting by the window to soak up the calm of the countryside.



Getting There

Car: 20 mins from Chuo Expressway Nagasaka IC

Train: 10 mins by taxi from JR Koumi Line Kiyosato Station

Bus: 12 mins by Kiyosato Picnic Bus from outside JR Kiyosato Station.

Opening Times: 10am – 6pm (5pm in winter)



Kendra is a British Coordinator for International Relations in her first year in Yamanashi Prefecture. She has enjoyed returning to her old hobbies, like Japanese calligraphy, but also discovering new interests, like hiking and eating as many omiyage as possible. This winter has been much colder than she's used to, but you can find her in her apartment on a hill above the city, snuggled under the futon.