



Cherry Picking and Jam Making in the Fruit Kingdom

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Grapes and peaches are the famous fruit of Yamanashi, with more of these grown here than anywhere else in Japan. But up in the mountains of Minami-Alps City, the farms are famous for a different kind of fruit: cherries.

Ono Orchard & Orchard Farm in Minami-Alps City has been growing cherries on Yamanashi soil since the 40th year of the Meiji Period (1907). Mr. Takashi Ono, the seventh generation head of the Ono family, takes pride in the long history of his farm and the high quality of his fruit. While Yamanashi Prefecture has only the fourth largest area of cherry tree farms in the country, it is second for sales of cherries after Yamagata Prefecture in northern Japan, which produces 70% of domestic cherries.

According to Mr. Ono, this is in large part due to the history of cherry growing. Across most of Japan it is difficult to grow a variety of fruit in one place, but in Yamanashi, the climate and soil suit many different kinds of produce. Its reputation as the “Fruit Kingdom,” coupled with its proximity to Tokyo, meant that from as early as the Meiji Period shipments of high-quality, fresh fruit from Yamanashi direct to the capital

gave farms in the area an edge in sales over the northern prefectures of Hokkaido and Aomori, which have the largest cherry growing areas in Japan after Yamagata. Cherries became, and still are, a profitable choice for farmers in Minami-Alps City.

Of course, there is still a huge amount of work involved to produce these cherries. In the early years of cherry growing, the fruits had to be picked before the rainy season, which would otherwise damage the cherries still on the trees. Today, Mr. Ono and many other cherry farmers use greenhouses, which help to protect the fruit and allow for a longer harvesting period. The trees, however, bear fruit between late May and late June, which still only gives farmers a month to pick, box and sell as many cherries as they can. This one month is incredibly labour intensive and is their busiest time of the year – but the rest of the year is all a build up to harvest time.

Many things can affect the quality of cherries: the water purity, the amount of sunlight, the thinness of the leaves. Leaves at the top of the tree receive the most nutrients from the soil and the most light from the sun, so usually the fruits that grow at the top are redder, brighter and more

delicious. An interesting fact is that they also need cold in winter. Cherries thrive in cold northern Japan – as well as in Yamanashi, thanks to its extreme weather – because low winter temperatures help them bloom later in the year. Minami-Alps City in particular not only has delicious water from the Minami Alps mountains, but it is also at a high elevation with long sunlight hours. Within Yamanashi Prefecture, this is the best location for growing good cherries. Mr. Ono taught us the best way to pick cherries from a tree. Under the leaves on the branches of the tree are small nodules, brown and triangular-shaped. Cherries always grow from these nodules, and they always grow in the same place. If you are too forceful when you pick the cherries, you risk impacting future growth. The best way to pick cherries is to hold it by the fruit, twist it slightly, then pull it away from the branch in the opposite direction to how it is growing.



There are several different types of cherries grown at Mr. Ono's orchard. His own personal favourite is the Takasago, a strong flavoured cherry with a bright colour and slightly sour taste. There is also the Sato-nishiki, a firm, juicy cherry, and the Beni-shugo, which I liked the most. It is strong and sweet, and reminded me of the cherries you can find in the UK. If you come to Ono Orchard and Orchard Farm during the cherry picking season, you can pay a flat rate to spend 40 minutes eating as many cherries as you would like straight from the trees. Tourists from across Japan come to Minami-Alps City for cherry picking. But that is not all there is to do here.



Mr. Ono also runs a local NGO called Happy Park, which specializes in agricultural production, sales, and community outreach. Happy Park is a hub for local produce as well as a pleasant location for lunch at their restaurant. They also hold cultural events such as the Cherry Festival, which this year included a cherry seed spitting competition! But, for Mr. Ono, Happy Park's most fundamental activity is jam-making. Mr. Ono produces many different jams and marmalades from his fruits, and his organization even won the 2017 Dalemian World Marmalade Award in the UK in March for his Japanese Yuzu and Gold Leaf Marmalade (under the name "South Alps Farm Field Trip"). He also makes jams for other farms in the area, who send their homegrown fruits to Happy Park, which

then takes care of the processing, labeling, and bottling for them. Tourists who come to Happy Park can also experience jam-making for themselves. We were fortunately able to do so during our visit.

The jam making process was much easier than I thought it would be. First, you pluck the stems and remove the seeds from the fruit with a special tool. Then, the fruit is put into a large pan over heat with skin still intact. After stirring it for a while, you add some sugar and a small amount of yuzu puree. Usually for jam, lemon puree is added, but lemons

are not grown in Yamanashi, and the mission of Happy Park is to promote local agriculture, so Yamanashi Yuzu is used instead. Once the fruit has broken down and is simmering, the heat is turned off, ready to be put into jars.

We received a brief lesson on how to seal the jars. They must be cleaned and soaked in hot water beforehand to neutralize any bacteria, but if the lid is not properly closed, too much air or bacteria can get into the jam and contaminate it, so it is very important to close it correctly. We poured the mix into our jars, sealed them, and then put them in a hot water bath for thirty minutes. Done!

From visiting Ono Orchard and Orchard Farm and seeing how cherries grow, to visiting Happy Park and seeing how the fruit is cooked and sold, it became clear just how important fruit farming is in the Minami-Alps region and in Yamanashi Prefecture as a whole. Cherries are just one of the many fruit that are grown with love and care, enjoyed both in and out of the prefecture. Anyone visiting Yamanashi Prefecture during fruit picking season should definitely try it for themselves to see how delicious this important produce truly is.

