



Unlocking the Secrets of the Yamanashi Peach

– What is Hidden Behind the Sweetness? –

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One of life's simple pleasures: biting out of a chilled, sweet, and fresh peach on a hot summer day and then feeling the rich juice glide down your throat until it quenches your thirst. Therefore, I was excited when summer came as Yamanashi Prefecture is well known for producing some of the best peaches in the world – peaches with a lovely appearance, tender flesh, and an elegant sweetness. Yet, I was disappointed when I saw the exceptionally high price of these peaches at a local supermarket.

Peaches were first documented around the 10th century in China, my motherland, and they were later introduced to Europe before being commercialized around the world. Nowadays peach production in China accounts for more than half of the total market in the world. Hence, what makes such ordinary and cheap fruit in the Chinese market so much more expensive in Japan? To find the reasons behind such a steep price tag, I began my peach journey one sunny day in July.

Yamanashi Peaches: Merely a “Gift from Nature”?

Located in Central Japan, Yamanashi Prefecture enjoys the longest hours of daylight in the country and thus the climate is warmer than elsewhere. In addition, the dramatic change in temperature between day and night helps greatly in fruits' sugar accumulation. Also, rivers running across the region provide the land with rich irrigation. Given these natural characteristics, Yamanashi is

particularly suitable for growing sun-loving fruits, especially peaches, of which Yamanashi produces the highest yield countrywide. However, is it safe to stop here and draw the conclusion that peaches in Yamanashi are expensive merely because they are what you could call a “gift from nature”?

Mr. Horii, the owner of Takara Peach Orchard, which is located in Ichinomiya Town in Fuefuki City, a place known for being “the best land for peaches,” resigned his position in an IT company in Tokyo around eleven years ago and came



back to Yamanashi to help his wife in the orchard founded by her grandfather more than sixty years ago. Even though it was not an easy decision for him at first to say goodbye to the bustling entertainment in one of the biggest cities in the world and, instead, to return to a peaceful and small town surrounded by mountains, Mr. Horii eventually came to embrace his new life as a fruit farmer, having the time and space now to invite his friends over for barbecues in the spring and enjoy the pleasures offered by sunshine and music as the slender branches in the orchard become full of blooming flowers.

When I first learned that only three persons take care of this orchard, which produces about sixty thousand peaches per year, I immediately took it for granted that raising such an extensive amount of fruit was thanks to the help of modern technology. Yet, this was not the case.

Peaches in Takara Peach Orchard are not grown in greenhouses but in the open field, where they have full access to sunshine, soil, and rainfall, each of which helps them to preserve their natural qualities. Peach farmers' busiest period begins when the flowers bloom in spring. Mr. Horii's family will pollinate each flower manually to get as many buds as possible, remove the less prominent buds by hand to assure the rest have enough space to grow, monitor the remaining buds carefully to track their growth, and wrap their peaches one by one to protect them from birds and insects. As a result, a perfect, juicy, and sweet peach is ready to be harvested when the weather becomes warmer. According to Mr. Horii, Yamanashi's natural environment accounts for eighty percent of the role in cultivating fruit while

labor accounts for only twenty. Nevertheless, to me it seems that the natural environment pales in comparison to Mr. Horii's efforts, as he tirelessly nurtures his peaches in order to make them as delicious as possible. As Kazuo Inamori, a representative figure in the Japanese business world, once said when describing his method to success, "you cannot expect to achieve anything unless you never stop working harder than everyone else."

Winners Never Quit, and Quitters Never Win

After Takara Peach Orchard, I headed for Tanzawa Orchard to look for more answers. Unlike Mr. Horii, who switched to work as a farmer later in life, Mr. Tanzawa has been engaged in the field of fruit planting his entire lifetime. Mr. Tanzawa used to work in the Department of Agriculture for Yamanashi Prefecture and, now, he runs his own nectarine orchard with his family. Though most peaches produced in Yamanashi are pink in appearance and milky white in flesh, the nectarines from Mr. Tanzawa's orchard, with their smooth skin and yellow flesh, are also well-known for their ideal balance between sweetness and tartness and should absolutely not be missed.

Nectarines are not a cross between a peach and a plum as is commonly believed but in fact a variant of a peach. Despite the subtle genetic variant between the two, they are almost identical. The main physical difference is that peaches have a fuzzy coating whereas nectarines are smooth and without a coating. The story begins when Mr. Tanzawa was sent to California by Yamanashi Prefecture as a trainee in agriculture more



than four decades ago. When he first came across the charming sight of ripe nectarines, whose skin caught the light of the sun and shone with a deep red color, he went to take a bite. Feeling the sweet juice running down his chin, Mr. Tanzawa decided immediately that he wanted to introduce these nectarines to Yamanashi, where there were no nectarines planted at the time. However, this would require much effort.

It took years to transform the fruit and adapt its flavor to Japan's sweet tooth by breeding new varieties. The time at which to harvest the fruit was also a problem. Compared with other countries, where much of the fruit crop is used for processing into juice, jams, or wines, and thus its appearance tends to be of little concern, the Japanese prefer eating table fruits or giving fruit as gifts, and thus fruits need both look and taste good. Unfortunately, the season for harvesting nectarines is quite short. Nectarines are best served when ripe, but not overly so. If the nectarine is not fully ripened, it will taste sour and hard; however, if it is fully ripened, its delicate body can be easily damaged when displayed in stores. It took time and effort for Mr. Tanzawa to find a way to overcome such issues. But even when other fruit farmers in Yamanashi had given up raising nectarines, he, with the help of his wife and daughter, kept trying: wrapping the fruits manually, putting mirrors to reflect all sides of their appearance, checking the fruits every day, and choosing the best-ripened ones. Thanks to Mr. Tanzawa's commitment to promote the nectarine in Japan, more and more customers are now able to enjoy such a wonderful treat in the summer. However, Mr. Tanzawa is not satisfied yet. Beyond raising

nectarines at his own orchard, Mr. Tanzawa nowadays devotes himself to being a nectarine missionary of sorts, teaching his cultivation techniques at other orchards and agricultural colleges.

"The road ahead will be long and our climb will be steep". As implied by this Chinese verse, Mr. Tanzawa will most likely never quit his journey but continue with passion and effort to create an even more perfect nectarine.

***Monozukuri* as a Key Principle**

After visiting these two orchards, I was impressed by the spirit of working hard and focusing on a single career for a lifetime. This experience reminded me of the Japanese word *monozukuri*, a term that describes the Japanese style of manufacturing with an intangible sense of responsibility, an emphasis on quality, attention to detail, and dedication to continuous improvement. This craftsmanship concept is not only vital to Japan's strength in manufacturing, but it also acts as a fundamental philosophy that guides Japanese in their attempt to make things as best as possible in almost every field.

I realized that more than the natural environment, it is the unremitting efforts and the sense of craftsmanship among farmers in Yamanashi Prefecture that contribute to the making of such sweet gifts. However, can such a simple answer in such a neat package really cover every possibility? If you, too, are interested in exploring the fruits of Yamanashi, come visit the orchards here and find out for yourself one summer day what is hidden behind the sweetness.