

The Recovery of Waseda Myoga

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A very interesting walking tour was held around the Waseda University (早稲田大学) at the last Sunday of September. The tour was a short trip tracing sites of Waseda *myoga*, Japanese ginger, and was organized by a Waseda *myoga* project; a group of local residents, schools, and stores in association since 2011.

Waseda University is known to have constructed its campus on a rice field in the Meiji era, but I did not know precisely about Waseda *myoga*. *Myoga* is an herbal vegetable telling us of the beginning of hot summer days, and is served atop *tofu* or *somen*. I am wondering whether there is still any *myoga* at this time of the year and moreover in the Waseda region, a busy downtown area with a big University. There is no rice field anymore.

The handout that day showed us more information about Waseda *myoga* which is kind of a

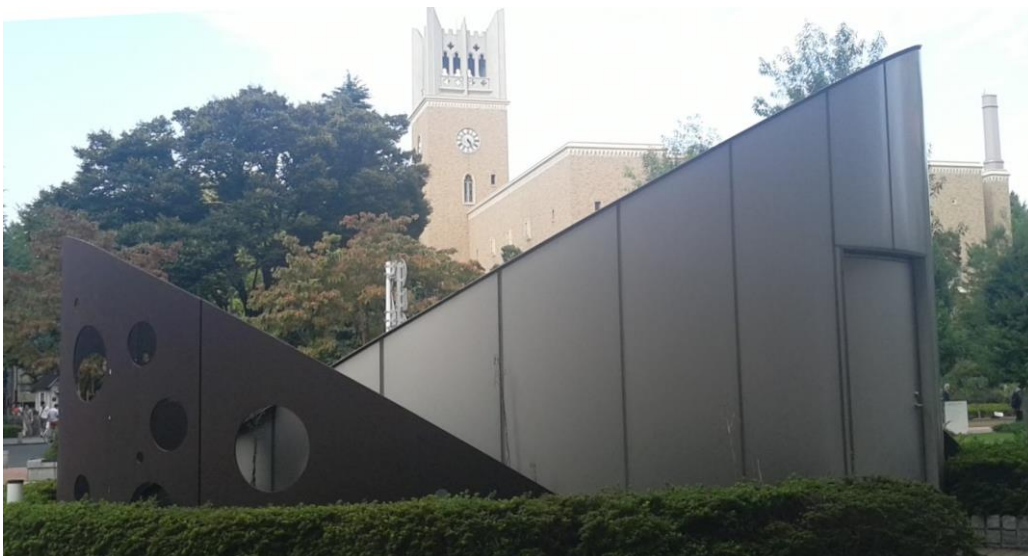


A tour map of Waseda *myoga* (Waseda *myoga* project)

late bloomer; harvested in October from the end of September. Waseda myoga is reported in the old documents as having vivid red color compared to the faster-growing species, oversized, fragrance is also strong, and the taste better. A part of the stem which begins to grow in early spring called myoga-take; was favored in Edo period. According to Dr. Osamu Soda of Waseda University, there is a record of myoga-take in a menu of Tokugawa Shogun Ienari (家斉 1773-1841), and was also served at the banquet party which entertained Commodore Perry who led the black ships in the Edo period. Serving at the state dinner which would determine the future of Japan means that Waseda myoga is one of the best ingredients at that time.

After the Meiji restoration Waseda University was constructed in the area of Waseda. The inscription on a myoga monument which is in front of the main gate tells us that there were many myoga fields around the campus and the myoga field was a symbol of Waseda in the 35th year of the Meiji era (1902). The walking tour stopped by the Tensojinja shrine which used to be called Shinmei-gu of myoga field; a precinct of the shrine was set aside and Waseda Jitsugyo was constructed there. Myoga fields decreased due to the urbanization of the Waseda region after the Meiji era. No myoga field is seen around the university in a precise map of Waseda from 1925; two years after Great Kanto Earthquake.

It was a Waseda myoga sousakutai, a search party; led by Mr. Michishige Ohtake, the Representative of the Traditional Vegetables Society of Edo-Tokyo and Mr. Mitsunori Ishihara who was a student of Waseda University at the time that the forgotten Waseda myoga was discovered. Mr. Ohtake told us the story about the search party from its beginnings. Myoga, unlike vegetables that grow from seed, puts out sprouts every year from rhizomes.



A myoga monument of Waseda University

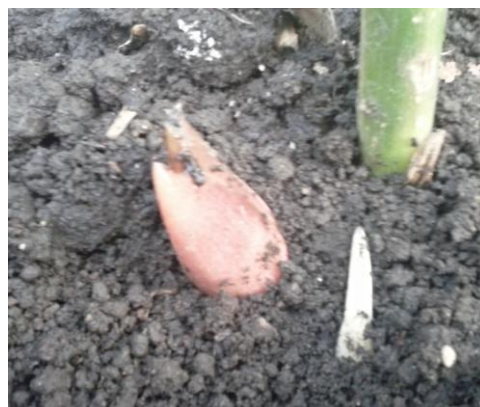
Mr. Ohtake presumed that if there were a small patch of ground, a possibility of Waseda myoga surviving could be high. The climate suitable for Japanese ginger was helpful, and finally the Waseda myoga which grew in a garden of an old family in Nishiwaseda was found in 2010. When the rhizome was transplanted to the Inokuchi farm in Takanodai, Nerima-ku where Japanese ginger was being grown formerly, myoga grew well and brought us many excellent flower buds just as written in the old document. Today rediscovered myoga is planted in the corner of Tensojinjya precinct and sidewalks of Waseda Junior & Senior High School as well as at the Inokuchi farm. The flower buds of myoga were just beginning to stretch on the ground when we saw the side walk; and would grow bigger and become red in color resembling the school colors of Waseda University.

One of old *senryu*, a popular short poem of the Edo period, says, "Kamakurano namini Wasedano tsukeawase"; means *Katsuo*, bonito of Kamakura (鎌倉), tastes best with Waseda myoga. In the Edo period, bonito was caught in Kamakura Sea and sent to Edo, and had been trading at a high price. Today, in conjunction with the timing of the myoga harvest, [Waseda Katsuo Matsuri](#), bonito festival has been held in Waseda region since 2012.

For the reconstruction after the Great East Japan Earthquake, the bonito are sent directly from *Kesennuma* (気仙沼) fishing port, and served at participating restaurants and *izakayas*. It's an attempt to help the people of Tohoku with Katsuo by the festival. The catch of the fresh bonito of Kesennuma port is number one in Japan. In particular, *modorigatsuo*, the fall katsuo of Kesennuma is well known for fat delicious paste. I tried modorigatsuo with Waseda myoga fortunately. The taste was so delicious that I could believe that modorigatsuo is as good and rich as prestigious *toro*.



Myoga at Waseda Junior & Senior High School



A flower bud of myoga

Freshness is the key for myoga. You can enjoy its very delicate aroma, taste, and the texture of freshness. In this tour I was able to taste the freshly harvested Waseda myoga. The intensity of aroma that transforms into deep flavor every time I bite it was the one of the most vivid experiences of my life. Edokko, native Edo-Tokyo born, loved Waseda myoga so much, and even Tokugawa shogun ate them. Waseda myoga would become a premium brand vegetable even for inbound tourists from many countries.



Myoga pickles



Modorigatsuo with Waseda myoga