

Herbaceous bounty to sustain body and soul

Contributing to the impression of Okinawan cuisine as a tradition unto itself are customs such as using every last part of the pig and cooking with abundant native vegetables that have unusual appearances and intense flavors. But when you understand that liberal use of herbs is another vital characteristic, it can bring a whole new perspective to the islands' edible delights.

A figure that looms large in any discussion of the herbs appearing on contemporary Okinawan dining tables is Yoko Takenishi, who heads the Yaeyama chapter of the Japan Herb Society and runs the Ishigaki Island Herb School. She lives amid her gardens on Ishigaki, one of the Yaeyama Islands located to the southwest of Okinawa's main island, near Taiwan. Besides growing, harvesting, and cooking with the plants she so loves, she produces a regular column on the subject for a local magazine. Her accompanying illustrations are as accomplished as any rendered by a professional artist.

A visit to Takenishi's herb farm begins with a conversation about horses: "I've decided to get a pony," she smiles. "I grew up on a farm, and my family always kept a horse. One of my fondest memories from when I was really little is of my father letting me ride on the saddle in front of him on his way to the fields, and for quite a while now I've been thinking I would like to have a horse of my own." Takenishi was born on the even more remote island of Yonaguni, west of Ishigaki. Famous for its native horses, the island gives its name to the fine small breed.

Listening to her talk about her childhood on Yonaguni, it quickly becomes obvious that she's no come-lately expert who studied her subject in school, but a born lover of herbs who has spent her whole life getting to know them inside and out.

Takenishi was born in 1954, when the country was just beginning to make strides following World War II. On isolated Yonaguni, few had electricity, water still came from wells, and meals were cooked on wood-fired stoves. A long-term hospitalization for her father in Kyushu meant her mother had to raise Takenishi and her three younger sisters by herself. Her mother took in sewing to support the family and also grew vegetables and made tofu, both of which the children would sell before going to school. There were many other children like them on Yonaguni in those days.

"Even as a little girl," she says, "I was always on the lookout for new and unusual plants, and when I found one, I immediately had to have a close-up look. If I saw a flower out of reach at the top of an embankment or someplace, I would ask a grown-up or an older cousin who was staying with us to get it for me or to go and count how many petals it had. I would even resort to tears if I had to, just to get my way. I was such a pest about it that they started warning each other not to take me into the woods."

Once she had reached grade-school age and was allowed to roam more on her own, she began bringing home an endless assortment of plants. She got waterweeds from the rice paddy and plastered them on her wall to count their leaves. "Guess what, Grandma," she would say, "these things

grow right on top of the water!" "So you like playing with plants, do you?" "Uh-huh. They're fun." Though her grandmother seemed surprised by her interest, she was herself a regular user of medicinal and other herbs and knowledgeable enough that even people from other villages came to her for advice.

Takenishi continues, "When I was in school, my mind was always wandering across the countryside. I would wonder if the fruit on a particular tree I had seen was ripe yet, and I would plan my next excursion. I liked to dig up lilies and crocuses and moss roses and bring them home to plant in our yard."

She spent her high-school years on Ishigaki, but family circumstances prevented her from going on to college. After returning to Yonaguni to find work, she married a colleague and soon had three children. Her father-in-law, a science teacher, grew medicinal herbs in his garden, further adding to her many connections with herbs throughout her life.

A job transfer for her husband brought her back to Ishigaki. As she continued to work and raise her three children there, it wasn't long before she started to be troubled by local dietary patterns.

"I discovered that nobody used more than a handful of ingredients," she frowns. "When I would mention to my coworkers that I had cooked something with the chives I grew in my own yard or had made tempura with mulberry leaves I found growing somewhere, they would be totally flabbergasted. All they knew was the lettuce and asparagus they bought at the



Roselle and other species of hibiscus can be used in jams as well as salads.