

Hiyama Nattō (Fermented Soybeans)

Nattō, a staple of the traditional Japanese breakfast table, is a pungent, sticky dish of fermented soybeans believed to have many health benefits. There are multiple stories surrounding the origins of *nattō*, but they generally agree that it began with boiled soybeans fermented by bacteria in rice straw (*wara*) that was used to wrap them. Hiyama Nattō, produced in the city of Noshiro, is made using a method passed down for generations and is known for its large, firm beans and extra stickiness.

During the middle of the Edo period (1603–1867), three low-ranking samurai families of the Andō clan (based in the town of Hiyama, now Noshiro) were the only people allowed to make Hiyama Nattō. It was no secret that fermentation using *wara* was the cornerstone of their method, but other elements of the recipe were known only to those three families. In 1885, not long after the abolition of the samurai class, two of the families quit the craft. The remaining family founded the Hiyama Nattō Company, which still produces *nattō* by wrapping locally grown soybeans in rice straw according to the traditional recipe. The current head of the company, Nishimura Shōuemon, is the fifteenth-generation owner.

Today, more and more rice farmers in the Shirakami area use labor-saving combine harvesters at harvest time. These machines cut the rice plants and separate the grains from the straw, concurrently chopping the *wara* into small pieces that are redeposited in the field. Because of this, the undamaged *wara* needed for traditional crafts like Hiyama Nattō is growing scarcer. Luckily, the region still has smaller fields where rice plants are bundled and dried the traditional way, preserving the straw for *nattō* production.

Hiyama Nattō can be purchased still wrapped in straw or packaged in plastic containers. It is sold in local shops like the Michi no Eki rest areas, and is also served in some restaurants and hotels in the area.