

## Portuguese influence on culinary heritage tourism along the Sugar Road in Japan

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**Keywords** | Sugar, Culinary Route, Heritage, Japan, Portugal

**Objectives** | When Portuguese missionaries came to Nagasaki, Japan, they brought the gift of sugar “that would transform Japanese cuisine forever” (Wilson, 2021). Sugar was first brought in on Portuguese vessels to the port of Nagasaki in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and it became critical to the development of traditional Japanese sweets (*wagashi*) and sugar culture as it travelled along the Sugar Road (Sun, 2015). The Portuguese introduced European confectionaries including Castella sponge cake, Confetto (*konpeito*) candy, bolos and caramel even establishing these Portuguese food products as Japanese words (Sugar Road Council, 2022). During the Edo period (1600-1868) the Tokugawa Shogunate sealed off Japan’s borders under the policy of *Sakoku* (Craig, 2003) and Dejima island in Nagasaki became the only port open to foreign ships. In 1759 bulk shipments of sugar began moving through Dejima along the Sugar Road to Kitakyūshū and then on to Edo (Tokyo) and other parts of Japan (Sun, 2015). The official name of the Sugar Road was the Nagasaki-kaido (highway) which was a trade route but is better known as the Sugar Road for the importance of sugar in influencing regional cuisine. The Japanese combined local products with imported sugar from the Portuguese, Dutch and Chinese to transform Western cuisine into a unique food culture which has been passed down through the generations (Sugar Road Council, 2022). This culinary heritage has since become an important resource for contemporary food tourism along the Sugar Road. The objectives of this research project are to first trace the influence of Portuguese sweets on the historical evolution of traditional *wagashi* and secondly understand their influence on more contemporary *wagashi* offered along the Sugar Road and the resulting implications for food tourism.

**Methodology** | The methodology involves site visits, photo-documentation of Sugar Road products and the systematic analysis of secondary documents. In 2017, the authors conducted a site visit to Dejima Island in Nagasaki, the starting point of the Sugar Road and recreated a trading post where bulk shipments of sugar arrived in Japan. Further research at that time was interrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic until 2023. In 2023 site visits were made to Saga City and Ogi City. Saga City is situated directly on Sugar Road and the authors documented souvenir food products in Saga City. Saga railway station explicitly references the Sugar Road and its Heritage designation.

Ogi City is located just to the north on a linked secondary road and became well known for yokan (sweet bean jelly). Site visits were made to shops along 'Yokan Street' including Muraoka Yokan-shop founded by Muraoka Yasuhiro in 1899 and the Yokan Museum.

**Main Results and Contributions** | Research has identified important historical and contemporary food products that contribute to new opportunities for food tourism along the Sugar Road. Countries such as Portugal have had a significant impact on the development of a unique food culture along the Sugar Road. During the Edo period these highways opened trade between the regions of Japan and while originally restricted to the movement of pilgrims, government officials and feudal lords travelling to and from Edo under the policy of *sankin-kōtai* (alternate periods of residence), in time, these highways become important democratised travel circuits with towns offering accommodation, supplies and local delicacies. The closing of the country to foreign trade in the Edo period forced sugar to be shipped through Nagasaki which then permeated through the country and on to Kyoto, today well known for its *wagashi* (Sugar Road Council, 2022). While some heritage food products have remained the same as they have been for centuries, others have evolved and adapted to meet new customer demands. The *wagashi* shops of today serve both historic and contemporary sweets that can trace their influence to the introduction of sugar by the Portuguese. The Sugar Road Liaison Council was formed in 2008 to leverage the culture and history of the Sugar Road to revitalize the western Kyushu region. The Council includes three prefectures (Nagasaki, Saga and Fukuoka), eight cities and private organisations and businesses. In June 2020, Japan Heritage certified the 'Sugar Culture' of the Sugar Road which includes 52 cultural properties including traditional sweets, historic documents, and historic buildings along the Sugar Road. Businesses can now apply to use the 'Japan Heritage logo' and the 'Sugar Road logo' (sugar-road.net) in marketing their products. In addition to promoting sugar food products and the Sugar Road, the Sugar Road Liaison Council has also held joint exhibits, a road stamp rally, bus tours, walking tours and train tours. This case illustrates the importance of understanding historical perspectives and external influences (i.e., Portugal) in the development of regional and national cuisines.

**Limitations** | Future research needs to be completed at other locations along the Sugar Road to investigate other opportunities to develop food tourism along the Sugar Road. This research is part of a wider research project on traditional Japanese sweets which incorporates both *wagashi* shops (some open for centuries) and other more modern *wagashi* shops.

**Conclusions** | The Sugar Road offers a step back in time to the Portuguese introduction of sugar into Japan. The adoption of sugar in Japan has resulted in a distinctive food culture which remains tied to the European influences of the past but also is embracing innovation now being marketed as new opportunities for food tourism.

## References

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