

# The Dried Bonito Story: Maintaining the Tradition

## Background

Much of what is truly Japanese is rapidly disappearing from Japan. With regard to Japan’s food culture as well, fine, traditional foods are being displaced by products that are easy to make and that lack any distinguishing character. Here in Makurazaki, a port town in the far southwestern corner of Japan, we have spent the last 300 years in defiance of such trends. We are the leading producers of katsuobushi (literally: dried bonito) which is used to flavor soups and is integral to the Japanese diet. Therefore, it can be said that we have protected and conveyed the very heart and soul of Japanese food culture across these many years.

## The Transmission of a Tradition

Fundamental to the Japanese palate and to flavoring, dried bonito is an irreplaceable part of Japanese life. There is a reference in the Kojiki, a book which dates back to 712, to a “bonito timber,” a piece of wood shaped like a bonito that was placed atop the ridge beam of a palace or shrine. Of course, the reference in this ancient text was not to a raw fish, but most likely what we refer to now as dried bonito. This would suggest that dried bonito has been in existence for more than 1300 years.

In this long history, dried bonito made its greatest strides in the first decade of the 1700s. Prior to this time, the production method had involved only boiling the fish and drying them in the sun, but fishermen in Kishu – far to the north – refined the method by smoking the fish after boiling them and before setting them out to dry. Smoking the bonito, sterilized the fish, made them suitable for long-term preservation, and gave them a fragrance and depth of flavor that they are so well known for today. This production method was brought to Makurazaki in 1707 and it continues to be applied as it was some 300 years ago.

## Makurazaki: The Bonito Port

The bonito caught by Makurazaki’s fishermen are found swimming in schools, migrating quite widely throughout the Pacific Ocean, traveling some 40 degrees both north and south of the equator. The bonito swim north during the summer, in waters near Japan, and thus the “first bonito” signal the arrival of summer. They travel to the waters off the northeast coast of Japan and, in the fall, return to the southern seas. These fish are called “returning bonito” and they are prized for their high fat content and rich taste.

One can imagine that Makurazaki’s fishermen were

fishing for bonito long before dried bonito technology was brought here in 1707. In the age of the sail, the fishing grounds were principally in the area around Okinawa, but with the modernization of fishing vessels around 1900, fishermen gradually expanded their range until they were able to pursue bonito year-round, traveling even into equatorial waters. The fishermen would haul their catch to a nearby port and take measures to preserve it before returning to Makurazaki, but when it became possible to quick freeze the fish aboard the fishing boats, this enabled them to bring a catch from the middle of the Pacific directly back to Makurazaki.

At present, Makurazaki is the leader in bonito fishing and dried bonito production.

## The Gifts of Technology and Time

Very few people know the time and effort required in the production of a single dried bonito. Without fail, those who witness the process first hand express a sense of wonder.

Even now, we at Matoba Fisheries continue to protect painstaking production methods that date back some 300 years. Bonito that have been quick frozen out at sea are thawed and sectioned by hand. They are then boiled, boned and shaped by applying a bonito paste to any cut or crevice. Next, they are slowly smoked for two weeks. The driest of our products, called honkareboshi, mature under a layer of mold and require anywhere from three to six months to produce. As no step in the process is particularly well-suited to automation, this work is performed by hand and relies heavily on the expertise and experience of skilled artisans. One tense moment follows another, and a momentary distraction can adversely affect the outcome.

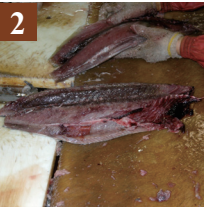
When a honkareboshi product is cut in half, the inner surface gives off a beautiful shine like that of a precious stone. It would not be an exaggeration to say that dried bonito is a treasure from the sea that, through hard work, has been transformed into a jewel. This would not be possible without artisans who have learned traditional methods handed down across time.

Here at Matoba Fisheries, while contributing to Japanese food culture with the production of honkareboshi and other dried bonito products, we have also procured advanced facilities for the slicing, grating and packaging of dried bonito. Thus, while making use of and transmitting traditional technology we are also applying advanced technology to the development of a large number of new food products as we strive to be an active, all-around food producer.

## The Making of Honkarebushi



After cutting off the bonito’s head and gutting it, it is cut in half and the spine is removed.



The fish is then cut in half again. The two back sections are referred to as “male” sections and two belly sections are “female.”



The sections are lined up carefully in trays taking care not to alter their shape.



These trays of bonito are submerged for 60-90 minutes in water that is 90-95 degrees Celsius, just below the boiling point.



After cooling, the smaller bones are carefully removed by hand. Half of the skin is then removed from the two back sections and 1/3 from each of the two belly sections.



A bonito paste is used to fill in cracks and smooth out any irregularities. This improves the ultimate shape of the finished product and prevents any mold from forming beneath the surface.



The bonito sections are then smoked using the wood from oak and other hardwood trees.



Sections that have been dried 10-15 times are called arabushi or “rough timbers.” Any tar or fat is carefully scraped off the surface.



Stored in a very humid environment for 2-3 weeks, a layer of blue-green mold forms. This mold is harmless and results from a breakdown of fats that renders the final product all the more tasty.



The pieces are then dried in the sun before being placed in humid storage once again. This cycle is repeated 3 or 4 times.



After a minimum of 6 months of work, the honkarebushi is ready to eat.

## A Word from the President

### Dried Bonito: A Fundamental Part of the Japanese Diet

In the half century since establishing this company in 1956, we have strived to express true flavor. We started out as wholesalers of dried bonito, but in 1975, in an effort to meet our customers’ needs, we began to make our own bonito packs and other dried bonito-related products under the brand name Futamaru. Literally “Double Circle,” Futamaru is intended as a playful reference to the “Mato,” meaning “target,” in my family name.

We have also introduced a new brand called Katsuo-ya, a line of products particularly suited for high-quality gifts. In recent years, in the pursuit of

expediency, true taste has been largely neglected by the food industry. It is in times like these that we must rigidly protect our traditional production methods and provide our customers with products that are safe, reliable and satisfactory. I strongly believe that this is our duty to our customers and we will keep this in our hearts as we earnestly undertake the production of fine products.

Shinya Matoba

President and Managing Director