

Tangerine Dreams

Squeezed into whisky or steeped in a bath—Japanese citrus works its magic on **Adam H. Graham**. ILLUSTRATED BY WASINEE CHANTAKORN



ANY FOOD TRAVELER worth their salt accepts that certain items never taste as good at home as they do at their source. I've sampled zesty olive oils in Italy, sipped tasty zin in Oz, and devoured strange fruit in Colombia... and every one, after being wrapped, packed and hauled home, lost a little bit of magic if not a whole lot of flavor. This rule is also true of Japanese citrus fruits, which, according to Japan's unique Tanaka classification system, exist in 162 varieties, each as subtle and nuanced as you'd expect of something that's been crossbred in the country for 2,000 years.

My first brush with Japanese citrus was in December 2012 on a crazy one-night trip to the island of Yakushima to celebrate my 40th birthday. Long a fan of Studio Ghibli's *Princess Mononoke*, I made the ultimate birthday pilgrimage to the island that inspired it, traveling 60 kilometers offshore of Kyushu (*two hours via Rocket jetfoil*; ¥9,000) to hike mossy, green and ancient cedar forests. As luck would have it, I caught a stomach bug that morning and was more like a limping Ghibli ghoul than the fierce wolf warrior I'd envisioned I'd be. Were my 30s ending with a whimper? I thought the trip was a bust.

The next morning on our drive back to Yakushima's Miyanoura Port, we cruised

past stretches of sun-kissed orange groves punctuated by views of the tranquil azure ocean, and roadside stands selling boxes full of the orange balls for ¥100. These *ponkan*, also known as Chinese honey oranges, are harvested on Yakushima in December. While I sat slouched in the boxy car, queasy from my stomach bug, my guide, eager to redeem the experience, asked if I wanted to taste a freshly plucked *ponkan*. "It will help your stomach," she said. I was skeptical, but acquiesced.

She stopped the car and plucked an armful from a tree and offered me pick of the litter. The peel fell away and the flesh inside was sweet, juicy and especially fragrant, somewhere on the citrus scale between Orangina and Earl Grey. It was instantly edifying, and not only helped restore me, but brought on a wave of nostalgia for my childhood in Florida, where *ponkan* were planted in the late 1880s and are still harvested every Christmas.

A final stop to add some necessary auspice to my visit landed us at Furusato Market near the ferry port, where I stocked up on *ponkan* in all its forms: jars of *ponkan* salt, tubs of *ponkan* miso, dried, desiccated, candied, and even a comforting fresh *ponkan* juice for the voyage back to Kyushu.

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MY SECOND J-CITRUS experience occurred that same night. After crossing monster waves the color of concrete between Yakushima and Kagoshima, I boarded a series of oven-like busses and Shinkansen for a sweltering six-hour trundle to the remote, barren mountains of Oita Prefecture in northeastern Kyushu. By the time I arrived, dusk was falling across ochre Aso-san, a sacred mountain that resembles a sleeping Buddha. My woodsy 12-villa ryokan, **Kai Aso** (hoshinoresorts.com; doubles from ¥78,180 per night) was a hazy blur in the cold, inky night.

During dinner, a full-on snowstorm unleashed from the hoary skies. On the way back to my room, I crunched through piles of powder in my wooden *geta* sandals, clad in a cozy flax *yukata* and silky *obi* jacket. There, on a sheltered terrace aside my private outdoor *onsen*, was a basket of gnarly yuzu with a handwritten note informing me that the peak of the yuzu harvest season fell that night, on *toji*, the winter solstice. Yuzu baths on the solstice—*yuzuyu*—are an ancient Japanese tradition, so soaking felt obligatory. I carefully dropped one of the bumpy orbs into the bath and was met with a face full of yuzu steam and the astringent smell of mandarin, lemon and grapefruit. I then chucked the whole basket in, stripped off my *yukata* and plunged into a zingy citrus bath, watching fat flakes of snow fall on the pine boughs outside as the bobbing yuzu worked their magic on me.

“Magic” is no exaggeration. Yuzu oil contains nomilin, said to encourage relaxation, promote circulation and reduce sensitivity to cold. The fruit itself contains three times the vitamin C of a lemon. After 15 minutes, my skin was like a 30-year-old’s again.

Another memory unfolds in Atami in Shizuoka Prefecture, where my husband and I spent a few halcyon October hours picking our own *dai dai* oranges at Nishijima Farm,

a hilly seaside orange plantation. “The same trees produce fruit that taste totally different,” said the owner, who squeezed fresh orange juice for us while bagging up our handplucked booty. Later that night at the **Risonare Atami** (risonare.com; rooms from ¥41,000 per night), we sipped Izu orange wine and hot tangerine juice while partaking in the property’s fruit barbecue, where orange slices were shish-kebabled like marshmallows over the open fire. There was even a spa featuring citrus facials and wraps. As usual, my visit ended with me combing stores for *mikan* wasabi, ponzu and *tachibana* curd, and impulse-buying bottles of syrupy orange liquors, salted-lemon KitKats and pungent tubes of *kosho* chili paste... much of which still languishes in my fridge today.

THROUGH THE YEARS, other citrus encounters have also left lasting impressions. They include the time on the lonely, windswept art island of Teshima when I rode my e-bike past endless lemon groves. During a sloshy taxi ride in Dōgo Onsen, my white-gloved driver took a wrong turn onto a one-way road through an orange grove where he cursed his way past hundreds of wet, glossy *mikan* trees, many with brown paper bags wrapped around the Christmas ornament-like fruits. While hiking the steep, sunny path to Matsuyama Castle the next morning—part of the city’s famed haiku trail honoring local poet Masaoka Shiki—I stopped at a vendor to indulge in a double-scoop breakfast of *iyokan* and *haruka* gelato, the former like a mandarin-tangerine hybrid, the latter resembling a sweet, tangy lemon. I even penned a haiku to citrus:

*Golden setoka,
You steal all attention from
Patient white blossoms.*

My most recent experience brings us to 2018 and *sudachi*, my favorite citrus. I discovered the green ping-pong ball-sized fruit while traveling through Tokushima, where it is prized for its sour, acidic juice. *Sudachi* is to Tokushima what key lime is to Florida, kaffir is to India, and the bergamot is to Sicily. I was introduced to *sudachi* in the Iya Valley during an epic home-cooked meal prepared by 80-something mama-san and soba-noodle master Reiko Tsusuki, who sang old Iya Valley folk songs while preparing a feast of old-fashioned dishes like crispy shitake tempura and stewed wild greens. It was part of my stay at **Tougenkyou-Iya** (tougenkyo-iya.jp;



doubles from ¥16,150 per night), a constellation of thatched *minka* farmhouses offering everything from tatami mats and *irori* fire pits to electronic Toto toilets and chic Midcentury furniture.

That night after dinner, I retreated to my fireside tatami mat and squeezed a pinch of *sudachi* into a rocks glass with too much Hibiki whisky in it, all the while watching the rising moon illuminate the misty valley, knowing I’d found my precious.

Only that time did I finally understand: You can’t always bring it home. ☺

Private tour operator *Remote Lands* offers customizable 3- to 14-night tours showcasing Japanese citrus, including pickings, tastings, degustation meals and cooking lessons; remotelands.com; from US\$1,700.