

# DANGEROUSLY DELICIOUS

For many, the thrill of sampling *fugu*—Japan’s famously lethal pufferfish—is half the fun. But the more prevalent nonpoisonous farmed variety makes for a less dicey eating adventure.

By Adam H. Graham

I’m jostling through the crowds at the famed Karato Seafood Market in Shimonoseki on the southernmost tip of Honshu. The food stalls heave with glossy uni-crowned nigiri, crispy octopus croquettes, slabs of pink fatty tuna, and *donburi* bowls topped with oysters, salmon eggs, squid and a thousand other things I don’t recognize.

I shift into graze mode and plough through it all like a human Hoover, slurping down what I can get my hands on and trying to see what the other foodies are eating at the next stall of edibles. This is some of Japan’s best and freshest seafood and those here know it. Shimonoseki, however, is known primarily for one thing and it dominates the market: *fugu*.

For the uninitiated, *fugu*, which translates to river pig, is a type of spike-covered pufferfish that’s prized for its delicate flesh and has been eaten in Japan since the Jomon period 10,000 years ago. There are 196 species

of pufferfish worldwide, but 22 species are consumed in Japan with *torafugu*, (tiger pufferfish) considered the premier puff daddy. There’s just one hitch to the stuff. It can kill you. Its lethal, heat-stable neurotoxin—50 times strychnine—has no known antidote. If it is ingested, your body will become paralyzed while you consciously die of asphyxiation, a process that can last from ten minutes to four hours. Bon appétit.

This stops nobody at Karato market from wolfing down *fugu*. It seems to create a feeding frenzy. I’ve heard about the economics of scarcity but who knew the economics of toxicity could create such demand? Pufferfish is everywhere here in Yamaguchi Prefecture, on *noren* curtains, on delivery trucks, manhole covers, paper lanterns, and on official post office boxes. But it turns out that *fugu* is not always poisonous. Nowadays it seldom is.


The root cause of the fish’s poison, *fugu* wholesaler Eiji Hata of Hatasuisan tells me, is a type of algae the fish eat off rocks in the wild ocean. But 90 percent of *fugu* fish on plates in Japan are farm-raised today. Thus, there is no rock algae for them to eat. So, no poison in their organs.

Important disclaimer: wild *fugu* is poisonous and is widely available and desired by many, so don’t go Hoovering *fugu* indiscriminately just yet. Also, bear in mind that farm-raised *fugu* still needs to be prepared

by a licensed *fugu* specialist according to Japanese law. Before strict laws and licensing were introduced, Japanese *fugu* deaths were in the hundreds every year. However, according to the Japanese Ministry of Health, there have been only three deaths from *fugu* poisoning in Japan between 2008 and 2018.

For many, this blowfish bombshell may minimize the dark allure of eating something so lethal. For me, however, it increases my love of it. I always liked *fugu* just fine, but didn’t think its flavour was worthy of death. The alleged tingle on the tongue and sense of euphoria said to come from eating it seemed like nothing more than good PR. So, I’d always avoided *fugu* when I could and cautiously ate it when it ended up on my plate.

But armed with news of its sanitisation, I set off on a Yamaguchi road trip to fulfil my *fugu* fantasies. In Hagi, an ancient pottery town, I buy *fugu* chopstick rests and packets of *fugu-chazuke*, a tea with wasabi and freeze-dried *fugu* to drown rice in. I spy *washi fugu* lanterns strewn among the many signature goldfish lanterns in the quaint merchant town of Yanai. At a knife



From left: Pufferfish, or *fugu*; *fugu* sashimi; Kikugahama Beach in Yamaguchi Prefecture.





shop in Yamaguchi City, I see long mini sword-like *fugu hiki*, special knives designed to remove *fugu*'s poisonous bits with surgical precision. After touring the 9-kilometre-long Akiyoshido Cave, one

of Japan's largest caverns, a friendly shop owner hands me an intricate *fugu* origami.

I'm now well-versed in all things *fugu*. But feasting is the best part of this crash course. *Fugu* is available year-round, but is best from October to March, peaking from December to February when pufferfish fatten in the cold ocean. At Ryokan Otozure in the sleepy onsen town of Nagato, my excellent kaiseki meal includes a flight of *fugu*. First is a savoury cold *fugu* gelee, then translucent slices of *fugu* sashimi served with three kinds of soy—*tosa* made with bonito, sweet *marusan* and Nagato *kiwado marusan* shoyu. A crunchy tempura *fugu* is also included. The *fugu* pairs excellently with Chasselas from the Swiss Lavaux, “a fondue wine” that fifth-generation ryokan owner Kazuhiro Otani says is the best white to pair with Japanese food.

The feasting continues back in Shimonoseki at **Kaze No**

**Umi** (rooms from ¥30,000), an elegant seaside hotel where I am served a plate of *fugusashi* (*fugu* sashimi) arranged elaborately in the design of a chrysanthemum, a symbol of death in Japan and a beautiful, somewhat macabre, form of presentation. It is served with ponzu and julienned scallions to wrap inside the sashimi. After dinner, I sip on a smoky and brothy *hire-zake*, a drink of dried *fugu* fins steeped in hot sake, which is unexpectedly delicious. I also eat *fugu* in various other forms; shabu, *karage*, miso, charcoal grilled and *zousui* porridge with an umami-rich *dashi* made from *fugu* bones. I didn't see it, but I bet *fugu* ice cream even exists.

*Fugu* liver is considered a delicacy by many, but it's still illegal despite petitions to the Japanese government to lift the ban. This has created a vast underground *fugu* liver market, but the risk is not worth it. Nor is getting deported for breaking Japanese law. Besides, I feel better about eating *fugu* knowing that it's not going to, you know, kill me. I'm an adventurous eater, but sometimes you have to say no. Or to put it in blowfish terms, “fugudaboutit”. 🌐



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