

At the start of 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic is still ongoing. Although travelling is basically restrained internationally, and only limited possible within Japan, Nohoho will publish a series of background articles about travelling to Ishigaki and Okinawa. Rather than providing concrete suggestions for shops or companies, the articles focus largely on general, non-partisan information from a broader perspective. Hopefully, it will provide insights to those who plan to travel to Okinawa and Ishigaki once the situation allows, or to those who do manage to travel to the islands within the current situation. All information is the personal view of the author and the author underlines the importance for travellers and locals alike to follow the local guidelines against virus prevention. The first article is about food.



## Nohoho presents... Eating (out) in Ishigaki

For foodies, or for those, who are simply into having a meal, Ishigaki island offers a wide range of restaurants and different types of foods and drinks. The majority of the establishments are located in the downtown area of the island, but several restaurants can also be found on the south side of the island, in and around Kabira- and Yonehara areas, plus some others scattered around the island. This article will not directly introduce names of shops, but it aims to provide some additional information to enhance any gourmet experience on the island, especially for non-Japanese speakers.

Originally part of volcanic mountains and with a subtropical climate, Ishigaki island is blessed with fertile soil and plenty of both sunshine and rain. On land, various products are grown, while the surrounding ocean offers marine delights. The richness of the island is reflected in the variety of dishes offered at restaurants through typical local food, or through cuisine from other regions in Japan and countries, yet still using largely local ingredients.

To get an idea of what the island has to offer during the relevant season, a visit to the JA Yurachiku Farmers Market or the Public Market in the Euglena Mall, both in downtown Ishigaki, will give a good impression on what products are available. You will find all kinds of vegetables here, largely all grown by small farmers on the island. For those living in mainland Japan or, like the author, originally from Europe, there are a lot of unknown products. They probably show more similarity to items from Southeast Asia than with Japan. If you have a rental car and drive around the island, you might also bump into unmanned stalls where fresh produce is offered that can (and should) be paid with small cash in a little box.

On top of various vegetables, the island also has a significant line-up of locally produced fruits. With several kinds of pineapple being farmed, they are now available almost year-round. Mango is also definitely a favourite during the season (July-August), while other fruits include papaya, passion fruit, dragon fruit, lychee, guava, local *shima* banana, and not to forget Okinawa's popular *shekwasha* citrus fruit.

In addition to veggies and fruits, also several types of herbs are grown on the island. Some include commonly known kinds like mint or coriander. Others are more local such as *chomeiso* or longevity grass, which – as this naming suggests – means long-life grass, and it is believed to contribute to living long, and healthy. One spice worth mentioning here is so called long

pepper, or *pipatsu* as it is called in one version of dialect. Its taste is a combination of pepper and cinnamon and it is said to contribute to burning... body fat.

Meanwhile, the ocean has its offerings of its own, starting with local salt, said to be rich in minerals. Ishigaki and the surrounding islands are however also famous for tuna and *seiika* (diamond squid), and if you are lucky to visit during winter: *kuruma ebi* prawns. Fresh or dried *aasaa* (dialect for sea lettuce, *aosa* in Japanese), which is often eaten as *tempura*, or *mozuku* seaweed are other nutrient blessings from the ocean.

Non-vegetarian readers will however question: what about meat? Judging from a quick drive around the island, it will soon reveal that Ishigaki is indeed rather famous for the local bred *Ishigakigyu* or Ishigaki beef. The branded *Ishigakigyu* beef is one type, but there are also other brands on the Yaeyama islands such as *Misakigyu* beef. A favourite to eat beef among locals and tourists alike is the yakiniku BBQ. However, it is definitely worth trying out other types of beef such as beef *nigiri* sushi, hamburger, sukiyaki, beef soba noodles, and much more. It is worth noticing that – in general – local cows are raised in open farms, and would be qualified as, let us say, happier cows, in comparison to their relatives that end up in the bigger industrial meat market.

Other meat products include pork (*buta*) and goat (*yagi*), the latter being eaten in *yagijiru* goat soup or for the adventurous raw as *yagi* sashimi. Recently local farmers and meat shops are introducing different types of meat and ways to eat them. Although the author can not give a 100 percent guarantee, the goats would usually also qualify as happier goats, living a rather free life until, well, the moment comes. 'Happiest' animals are most likely wild boars (*inoshishi*) eaten throughout the Yaeyama region including stir-fried *chanpuru* or with Yaeyama soba noodles.

## Travelling in Ishigaki amid the COVID pandemic

The situation of COVID-19 and countermeasures are continuously changing. As of January 12, 2021, Okinawa Prefecture is asking restaurants and bars in Ishigaki to shorten their opening hours. Many shops, therefore, close at 22:00. Staff in your accommodation and restaurants will generally be able to inform you about the latest status when visiting restaurants in Ishigaki. All restaurants are implementing countermeasures to prevent the spread of the virus. Customers are asked to wear masks when entering the restaurant and when not eating in the restaurant. Often body temperature is checked and people with 37.5 Celsius body temperature or above are asked to refrain from their visit. Disinfectant gels are commonly placed at the entrance. In some cases, plastic sheets are placed in between tables or at the counter. Some restaurants leave some of their tables unused in order to create sufficient space among groups. As the situation might change, it is better to check the situation before planning a trip or eating out.

Like the rest of Okinawa, *tofu* is also an important part of the local food culture and offers options for vegetarians as well. It is however recommended that persons preferring a vegetarian diet check well with the shop owners, as sometimes animal products are used e.g. in broth or lard for cookies, which not all staff working in the catering industries considers as non-vegetarian.

Food tends to be better enjoyed with drinks and in Ishigaki, the best recommendation for alcoholic drinks is the locally brewed spirits *awamori*. Famous throughout Okinawa, each island often has one or several breweries where this drink is made. Ishigaki has several companies that have quite a long history in making awamori. Why not ask the owner of the restaurant for his or her recommended *awamori*? The brewery of Shirayuri is worth mentioning in particular, as it has a distinct taste creating both fans and less enthusiastic drinkers. *Awamori* tends to match well with local dishes. Should one visit a restaurant of other Japanese or international cuisine then shops are now also offering different types of beer (including local craft beer), wines, Japanese sake and sochu, etc.

All these local ingredients finally end up into dishes such as the local Yaeyama soba noodles, stir-fried *chamपुरu* dishes, tempura, sashimi and sushi, and way more. If you have a chance,

do also try the black *ikasumi* noodles or rice, using the ink from squids. You might have a laugh after when smiling and revealing black teeth. Another highlight might be *somen* noodles, thin noodles using gently fried in sesame oil. The dish is simple, but requires the perfect timing, as the noodles should not be too hard, nor too soft. It is said that, whether to marry into a family or not, would depend on a young lady's ability to prepare this dish.

So where to eat all these delights? In general, a search on one of the established websites will give good suggestions for a satisfying meal. Although the top restaurants are indeed good, it is definitely a good idea to also try restaurants that do not rank high on one of the sites. The island still has a number of hidden gems, be it through wonderful food or an authentic service. The less popular restaurants might not be used to serving foreign customers and appear to be a bit clumsy, or may seem even rude at first glance, but in most cases, the shy character of many islanders is the reason and behind their perhaps unusual behaviour is heartfelt hospitality. A quick inquiry with the staff of your accommodation might lead you to interesting discoveries or a truly local experience. If you encounter other travellers or locals e.g. when enjoying drinks at a bar, you can also ask a local or other frequent visitors for their suggestions for a nice lunch or dinner. Bon Appetit in Ishigaki!



Tuna sushi



Beef Yaeyama soba



Tofu set menu

Despite an increase of foreign travellers before the COVID-19 pandemic, not all restaurant owners or staff are used to dealing with foreigners, be it in Japan or only in Ishigaki. It is not uncommon to find oneself in an awkward situation being rejected when trying to enter a restaurant. This might even be the case when one speaks Japanese, but the owner is somehow bluffed by the looks. In most cases that the author has experienced, it is not a matter of discrimination, but rather an expression of shyness or perhaps clumsiness. Shops may have different reasons to reject people, such as having reservations, having a lack of staff or food (it is not uncommon that restaurants close or reject people if they run out of supplies), or other reasons that they cannot easily explain. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, some restaurants only cater to people they know rather well and ask newcomers to refrain from using the restaurant for now. The better way to handle such a situation is to simply stay calm and patient and, at least in Ishigaki, to simply opt for another venue as there are plenty of restaurants that do look forward to serving you.





## Useful phrases when visiting restaurants in Ishigaki, or Japan for that sake

### Entering a restaurant....

(Checking for seat availability:) There are two of us...

Futari desu ga...二人ですが・・・。

*See the additional box for counting...*

Do you have seats available?

Seki ga aite imasu ka.

席が空いていますか。

I am ...(name) and have a reservation

Yoyaku shimashita ... desu.

予約しました・・・です。

Is it possible to also sit outside?

Soto ni demo suwaremasu ka.

外にでも座れますか。

### In the restaurant...

Excuse me!

Sumimasen!

すみません！

Do you have an English menu?

Eigo no menu ga arimasu ka?

英語のメニューがありますか。

Do you have a recommendation?

Osusume ga arimasu ka?

お勧めがありますか。

That one please! (the one the staff is mentioning)

Sore o kudasai!

それをください！

This one please!

Kore o kudasai!

これをください！

One beer please!

Biiru o hitotsu kudasai!

ビールを一つください。

I can't eat meat.

Niku ha taberaremasen.

肉は食べられません。

Where is the toilet?

Otearai ha doko desu ka?

お手洗いはどこですか。

### Chatting with shop owners and other customers

I am from ...

... kara kimashita.

...から来ました。

Where are you from?

Doko kara kimashita ka.

どこから来ましたか。

Do you have another recommendation for another shop?

Hoka ni osusume no omise ga arimasu ka?

他にお勧めのおみせがありますか。

### Payment

The bill please!

Okaikei o onegaishimasu!

お会計をお願いします。

Can we pay at the table?

Teberu de oshiharai dekimasu ka?

*It is very common to pay at the cashier instead of the table though. Staff is likely to point in that direction.*

テーブルで押し貼りできますか。

Can I use credit card?

Kaado o tsukaemasu ka?

カードを使えますか。

### Other

Thank you!

Arigatou gozaimasu!

ありがとうございます。

*Dailect:* Niifaiyuu!

にーふあいゆー！

It was delicious.

Oishikatta desu.

美味しかったです。

Thank you for the meal.

Gochisousama deshita.

ご馳走様でした。

A standard expression to thank those who prepared and served the meal. Used at the end of the dinner or when leaving the restaurant. Also used towards the persons who pays for the bill.

Of course, you can try to use translation apps, but why not impress your hosts with a little bit of analogue show-off of your skills! Above words are just a selection. Feel free to contact Nohoho if you feel a definitely required sentence is missing!

Counting in Japanese can be quite complicated. The language has a long range of counters (e.g. two persons, three dishes etc.) and they may even change according to one's position (e.g. when talking about yourself as one person (hitori), compared to one customer (ichimei or ichimei-sama). Counters are also different for items, but fortunately there is wording that translates to one thing or item.

1 person:	hitori	ひとり	一人
2 persons:	futari	ふたり	二人
3 persons:	sannin	さんにん	三人
4 persons:	yonnin	よんにん	四人
5 persons:	gonin	ごにん	五人
Beyond this number we definitely recommend a reservation :-)			

#### For Items'

1 hitotsu	ひとつ	一つ
2 futatsu	ふたつ	二つ
3 mitsu	みつ	三つ
4 yottsu	よつ	四つ

5 itsutu	いつつ	五つ
6 mutsu	むつつ	六つ
7 nanatsu	ななつ	七つ
8 yattsu	やつつ	やっつ
9 kokonotsu	ここのつ	九つ



### MEMO

(In case this document is printed why not use the back of the last page for your comments,  
noting recommended shops or language studying!)