

# Japan's farming could be going to seed - TPP

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MEDIA MIX

By **PHILIP BRASOR**

"Tis the season for predictions, and last week Hiromasa Yonekura, the chairman of the Japan Business Federation (Nippon Keidanren), told Asahi Shimbun he believed Japan will decide in 2013 to take part in the **Trans-Pacific Partnership** talks. Yonekura is also chairman of **Sumitomo Chemical**, which in 2010 signed a tie-up agreement with American agrichemical giant **Monsanto**, so TPP, which would remove many existing trade barriers between the United States and Japan, is something Yonekura has a stake in.

Media discussions of TPP usually focus on Japanese farmers who fear the import of cheaper foreign produce, but the Yonekura connection implies a more elemental agricultural concern: seeds. The deal **Sumitomo** and Monsanto struck is to develop a "new platform" for Monsanto's genetically modified crops. Monsanto is the world's largest seed company, a position it achieved by selling seed modified to produce plants that withstand its own herbicide, Roundup, thus making farmers dependent on the company for both products. The partnership *encourages Monsanto to develop a new set of GM seeds and weed-killers with Sumitomo's help, probably based on the latter's own brand of herbicides.*



Preserving traditions: Chef Masayuki Okuda (above) holds a *tonojima* cucumber in "Yomigaeri no Reshipi (Reviving Recipes)," a documentary directed by Satoshi Watanabe that explores heirloom seeds and farming in Japan. HARUYA TOUKAIRIN



The agricultural ministry restricts the cultivation of GM crops, and while Japan allows some GM food to enter the country it has to be labeled as such. *Scientists question the safety of GM food.*

If Japan joins TPP, *the U.S. could sue to have such labels removed*, just as Monsanto did when California tried to make GM indications mandatory, and the company won that suit. More significantly, TPP could open Japan to GM seeds, thus making it possible for Monsanto to dominate Japanese farming the way it dominates agriculture in every other country where GM has gained a foothold.

The French documentary "***The World According to Monsanto***," reveals that subsistence farmers in Paraguay and Mexico are vanishing because of the encroachment of GM farmland, which "contaminates" any produce in its vicinity. Though Mexico does not allow GM crops, DNA from such plants have been found in local produce; and while Monsanto's GM crops are not harmed by its own herbicides, other crops are. The Roundup sprayed on a GM field can affect a neighboring non-GM field.

Seeds are the essential materials of life, since *all* food production is based on them. Vandana Shiva, an activist who is fighting Monsanto in India, says in the documentary that in terms of world domination "seeds are more effective than bombs."

Japan may have already lost. A recent series of articles in the Asahi explained how two Japanese companies, Takii and Sakata, account for 87 percent of all the seeds planted in the country. These seeds, however, are produced overseas, which essentially means that Japanese agriculture is controlled by foreign influence. Making seeds is difficult and time-consuming, so the average farmer buys them from these two companies. Being dependent on foreign seeds is the same as being dependent on foreign produce. Much is made of Japan's food self-sufficiency rate, which at 40 percent is considered low. Given that the crops grown here are from foreign seeds, the self-sufficiency rate is effectively even lower.

These seeds are hybrids, not GM (though some experts believe they involve GM processes), and bred for optimum traits. In Japan, *this means uniformity*. Wholesalers are interested more in a vegetable's appearance than in its flavor, so farmers get more money for produce whose shape and color adhere to accepted norms. Anything that deviates is rejected, even if it tastes the same or even better.

This convention has almost destroyed so-called heirloom agriculture — the farming of vegetables specific to a locality. Heirloom vegetables tend to be grown by farmers for

their own personal consumption, but the economics of agriculture in the past four decades has wiped out entire species of indigenous produce.

Thanks in part to a new documentary, heirlooms are making a small but significant comeback. "***Yomigaeri no Reshipi (Reviving Recipes)***" was a minor theatrical hit last fall, and it is now being revived nationwide. Director Satoshi Watanabe focuses on half a dozen heirloom vegetables, at least two of which were thought to be extinct, and shows how they are cultivated for consumption.

The process is painstaking, and the texture and flavor of the produce require a different approach to preparation. The *tonojima* cucumber, grown in Yamagata Prefecture, is too bitter for a salad, but Chef Masayuki Okuda, who has made it his life's work to create recipes for heirloom vegetables, has found new ways to take advantage of these special traits.

Some may find the subject too refined, but Watanabe's point is that food production should not be dictated by economics. Heirloom vegetables may not be cost-effective, but they support local economies and are an integral part of regional ecosystems. The growing of *hoya kabu* (turnips) in the mountains of Yamagata requires a slash-and-burn technique that maintains a forest's health; *and the genetic diversity of heirlooms checks the spread of plant diseases.*

The farmers Watanabe interviews don't think as much about money as they do the continuation of their lifestyles, and while many are elderly, there is an increasing number of younger farmers who want to carry on these traditions. As Hiroaki Egashira, an assistant professor at Yamagata University, explains, it's a matter of food sovereignty, the right of a particular group of people to grow and eat what they want.

It's a right being denied those Mexican and Paraguayan farmers depicted in the Monsanto film. The preservation of heirloom seeds is essential and directly threatened by the incursion of GM seeds, whose patents are owned by multinationals.

The Asahi articles, which cover the "***Yomigaeri***" movie and seem to have been inspired by it, touch on this aspect, but so far the only mainstream media that has directly reported on the Monsanto relevance is the tabloid Nikkan Gendai.

It deserves more attention. *"Yomigaeri no Reshipi" is being screened through Friday at Uplink in Shibuya, Tokyo; (03) 6825-5503.*

<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/text/fd20130106pb.html>