

A New Strain of Rice Born in Jingu's Sacred Field: *Isehikari*

In the autumn of 1989, a series of typhoons struck the Ise region. The morning after one such storm, the head farmer of the sacred field (*shinden*)—where rice is cultivated as an offering to Ise Jingu—discovered two rice plants standing tall and unbroken among the flattened Koshihikari.

Subsequent trials and studies revealed that this rice was a new strain: highly resistant to lodging, with high yields, and strong resistance to disease. For generations, rice grown in the sacred field had shown unusually frequent mutations, leading people to say that a force beyond human understanding dwells there.

At the time of the imperial succession from the Showa to the Heisei era, these miraculous grains—seen as a divine gift from the Great Goddess—were carefully preserved at Ise Jingu. Because they ripened later than Koshihikari, in 1993 they were provisionally named *Late Koshihikari*.

The following year, the Yamaguchi Prefectural Agricultural Experiment Station analyzed *Late Koshihikari* and found that its grains were small and round, resembling Norin No.1, the parent of Koshihikari. In 1995, Yamaguchi's skilled farmers cultivated it, and it surpassed most recommended varieties in both yield and taste.

Then, on January 16, 1996—the year marking the 2000th anniversary of the enshrinement of the Grand Shrine—this rice was named *Isehikari* by Sakai Shoguji, then Deputy High Priest of Ise Jingu, as a prayer for eternal prosperity.

At Ise no Sato, with the cooperation of the “Yamaguchi Isehikari Association,” we began cultivating *Isehikari* again in 2019 near its birthplace, the sacred field.

In 1999, Shizuoka University conducted a genetic analysis of *Isehikari* seeds and determined that they carried genes of late-ripening tropical japonica rice, which had arrived in Japan prior to the Jomon period.

Isehikari is exceptionally resistant to wind and rain. Although it grows more slowly than other rice varieties in the early stage after planting, its roots stretch deeply during this period, strengthening its resistance to lodging. In 2004, when repeated typhoons brought gusts up to 50.5 m/s, other rice plants were blown down, yet *Isehikari* stood proudly unbowed. With shorter lower internodes and thicker stalks, its roots are said to be 1.5 times stronger than Koshihikari.

Quality analysis revealed *Isehikari* to be a typical hard-textured rice, ideal for sushi. It is also well-suited to authentic Western dishes such as paella and risotto.

The development of pure rice sake (*junmai-shu*) from *Isehikari* was carried out in 1998 at the Yamaguchi Prefectural Industrial Technology Center, producing a sake that far exceeded expectations. The result was introduced to the local brewing industry as an exceptional rice “good for both eating and drinking, without tiring the palate”—a quality found only in *Isehikari*.

The word “ine” (rice plant) has long been regarded as “i-no-ne,” meaning “root of life.” Rice has sustained Japanese lives since ancient times. In an era when the demand for Western food grows and farmland declines, *Isehikari*, born in the sacred field of Ise, may well be considered a gift shown to us by the gods.