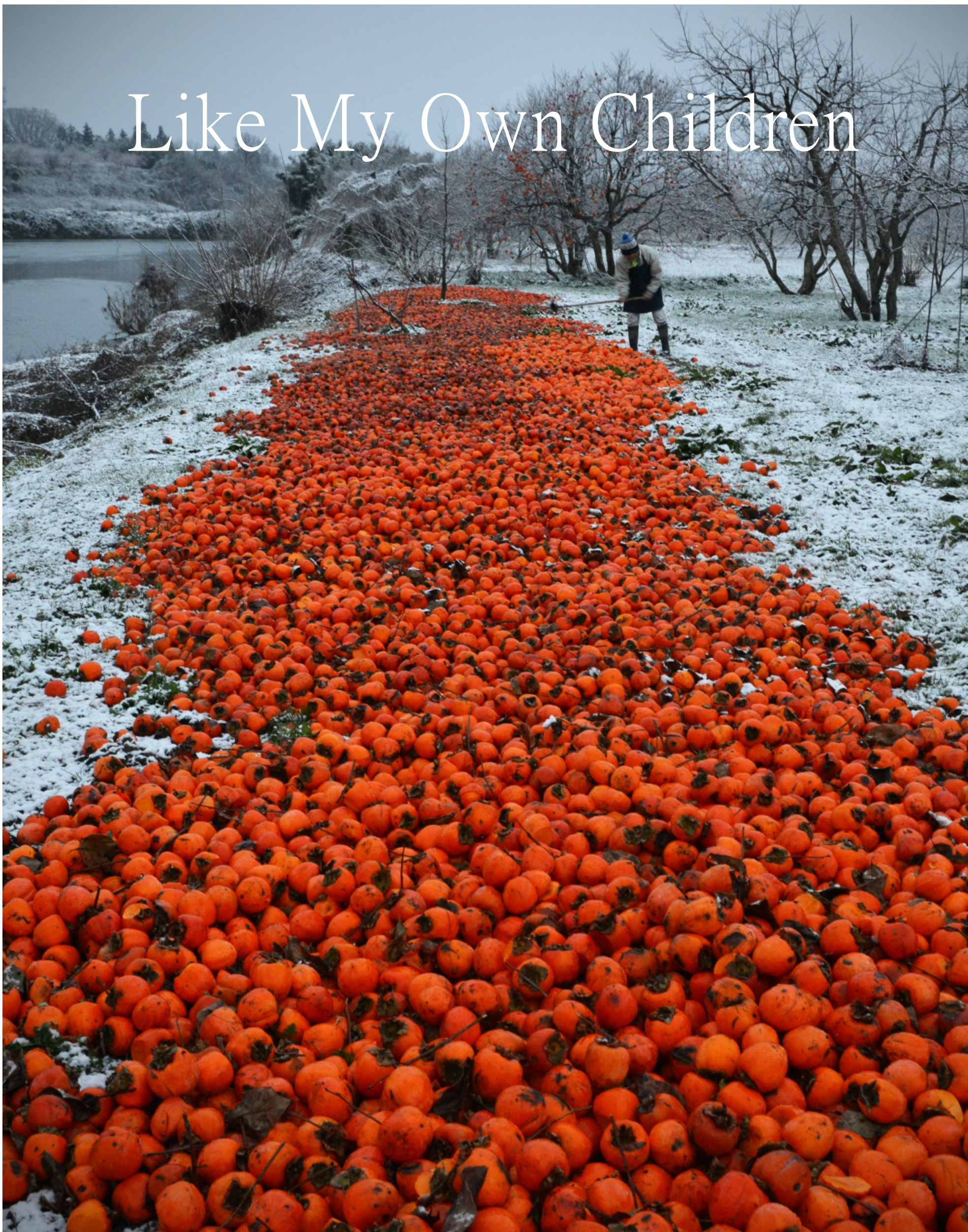


Like My Own Children





Hikichi removes the persimmon he cannot use for processing. He says that it's better not to leave them on the branches for next year's crop

PHOTO&TEXT
BY YUKI IWANAMI



Date City, Fukushima Ampo Persimmons of Isazawa

FUKUSHIMA, Japan - "It's like killing my own children". Kazuo Hikichi, 56, says as he shakes the branches of the persimmon trees. The fat ripe fruit drop to the ground with soft thuds. The Isazawa region of Yanagawa Town in Date City, Fukushima is famous for its *Ampo-gaki*, sweet dried persimmons. But Hikichi is not harvesting the fruit. He is only collecting them for disposal. The effect of the nuclear accident prevents him from processing them into the delicacy.

The nuclear accident in 2011 has even affected this quiet village over 60km from the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station. Testing revealed small amounts of cesium from the persimmon fruit. Compared to fresh fruit, the drying process removes moisture from the persimmon and, ratio by weight, increases the level of radioactive cesium about fourfold in the dried product. A voluntary ban of the *Ampo-gaki* was decided. The farmers were crushed, but during the bitter cold winter, they stripped the bark and cleansed the persimmon trees with pressure washers hoping to resume production the following year. Thanks to these

measures, some districts designated as "production recovery model areas" have started production from last year. Orchards qualify as this "model area" only if its fruit is tested in the early stages of growth during spring, and eighty percent measure less than the strict standard of 10 becquerel per kilogram. In addition, when ready for harvest, the fully grown fruit must measure less than 7Bq per kilogram or the entire crop from the orchard is voluntarily withheld from processing. In an effort to ensure safety, further measures are taken at the agricultural co-op where the dried and finished product goes through a nondestructive testing machine. This year, areas designated as the "model area" have risen threefold.

The *Ampo-gaki* was born here in Isazawa, and the process of fumigating the fruit with sulfur prior to drying distinguishes it from other dried persimmon. The process, which took a hint from California golden raisins and was perfected for the persimmon in Isazawa, sterilizes and prevents mold, keeping the fruit from browning and leaving a deep orange-golden color. The persimmons are popular in

the large cities around Tokyo and the Kansai region as well, and had grown to become a nationally recognized brand. Ironically, the nuclear accident coincided with the 90th anniversary of its creation.

Until the disaster, Hikichi used to produce five tons of *Ampo-gaki* yearly. Production resumed to a ton last year. This year, he was requested to produce about half of what he used to by the Ampo-gaki Restoration Council, a group involving the Ministry of Agriculture, Date City and others. It's not that he can't make more, but for various reasons, including the limited size and amount the inspection equipment can handle, production ended up at two tons and much of the fruit had to be thrown out.

Besides producing persimmons, the full-time farmer grows peaches and cucumbers. As the eldest son, Hikichi was raised to learn how to farm rather than study textbooks. Winter days after school were spent peeling persimmons until his hands turned black from the tannin rich juice. Making *Ampo-gaki* was all part of daily life, by that suddenly changed and was taken away. For the first year of



Hikichi's wife, Yoriko, 56, packs the finished product late into the night. During the Ampo-gaki season (November through February), farmers continue working from 5 o'clock in the morning to 9 in the evening



Persimmon resting on the drying racks. The quality of the finished product depends on the humidity and climate, and great care is taken during the drying process



Hikichi's father, Kishichi, 82, hanging up persimmon. Regardless of age, the man responsible for starting large scale production of Ampo-gaki in the Hikichi family still actively pitches in



Taking a break and chatting with the helping farmers



Okazaki fumigates the persimmon with sulfur and smoke starts filling the room. He says the process is the most difficult and important

the voluntary ban, Hikichi was too busy cleansing the trees to even consider what was happening. But on the second year when there was nothing left to do, emptiness set in. Besides being overwhelmed by uncertainty, he started contemplating what these persimmons had meant to him. During the bitter winters, the poor villagers of Tohoku had to leave for the cities to find work as migrant laborers. But the *Ampo-gaki* brought prosperity to the villages and changed all of that. Hikichi sought meaning in how the persimmons had continued to sustain the people.

Since last year, Hikichi travels to Tokyo to take part in fairs promoting Fukushima's products, business and tourism, and welcomes tours to his farm where visitors can experience fruit skinning. To familiarize the product to the local children from an early age, he organizes school trips too. These were the solutions he came up with to "keep the ninety year tradition alive".

I met Jiro Okazaki, 54, and his wife Michiko, 56, back in the autumn of 2011 when they were throwing out the persimmons they had just picked. When they had finished, the sun had already set and Okazaki was left in the dark with his hand against his small truck, head slumped low. "It's so frustrating. What are we doing

this for" he had said. This winter, I found Michiko at the town's local produce stand along with her friends, calling out their offerings to the passing shoppers. Her bright smile may have boosted sales of the *Ampo-gaki* which were flying off the shelves. Michiko had been coming up with original recipes like Ampo-topped pizza crust and Ampo wrapped in shiso leaves, receiving advice from experts and having visitors sample them. I remembered how she had told me three years ago, "We are not finished yet".

Before the *Ampo-gaki* are packaged, specks of dust, chaff and any remaining skin is carefully removed by hand, one by one. So much care and effort is put in before the product is finished and the co-op ensures safety by strict self-imposed standards and rigorous testing.

I once asked Hikichi why he was always smiling as if nothing ever happened, even when he was throwing out his persimmons. "I'm crying while doing this, yes I am. But you know, you just have to smile and keep going". The rebirth of the *Ampo-gaki* has only just begun.

Translation by Taro Konishi



Michiko selling produce



Farmers pick off the persimmon fruit. This year's good crop only led to more fruit being thrown out



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