



photo at right appeared in Kansha © Leigh Beisch

DAIGAKU IMO 大学芋 Glazed Sweet Potatoes

Syrup-glazed, black sesame-studded *Daigaku* (university) *imo* (potato) first became popular among university students at the turn of the twentieth century. Most recipes for this sweet snack instruct the cook to deep-fry sweet potato chunks first and glaze them afterward in sugar syrup and/or honey. Delicious, though high in calories (and messy to make, a nuisance to clean up).

A long-running Japanese television weekday talk show, Hanamaru Market, had a cooking segment every morning. Finding ways to make classic cuisine simpler and less technically demanding was the theme of most episodes. In the autumn of 2008, one of the broadcasts featured an innovative recipe for *daigaku imo* that immediately topped all previous viewer-rating charts – and it is still referenced today on popular Japanese cooking sites and blogs.

What was so innovative and special about the Hanamaru recipe? It replaced deep-frying with simmering in a sauce that reduced to a glaze. And, it called for vinegar (yes, vinegar) to heighten sweetness so less sugar is needed. Over the years I have “revised” my rendition that first appeared in 2010 in KANSHA (pg 237). I use the PEELS of sweet potatoes left after cooking the centers in other dishes such as Kuri Kinton (recipe available in the Kitchen Culture post for Dec 22, 2019).

Serves 6 to 8 if using the entire potato, 3-4 if only using the peels

2 large *Satsuma imo* Japanese-style sweet potatoes (pictured above, left) about 450 grams/1 pound total weight, unpeeled

1 teaspoon alum powder (*yaki myōban* 焼きミヨウバン see glossary at end of recipe) OR 1/2 teaspoon baking soda

syrup/glaze:

1/4 cup granulated light brown sugar (Japanese use *san on tō* 三温糖 see glossary at end of recipe)

1/4 cup vegetable oil, such as Canola oil

2 tablespoons water

1 teaspoon soy sauce

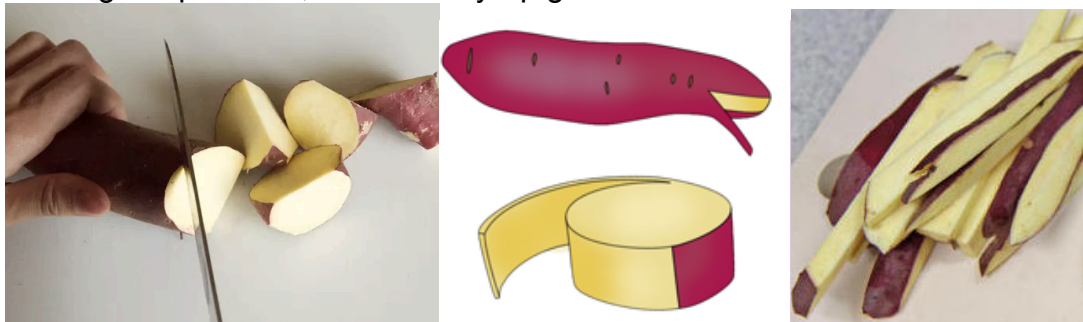
1 teaspoon rice vinegar

1/2 teaspoon kosher salt

garnish:

Black sesame seeds, freshly toasted

If you will be using the entire potato, cut it into *ran-giri* (roll-cut) chunks or thick batons. If you have peels left from having used the potato's yellow center in other dishes, then slice the peels into julienne strips. Soak the potato pieces in cold water (the Japanese add alum – *yaki myōban* – to the water to help hold the color... baking soda has a similar effect) for at least 30 minutes and up to several hours. Drain and pat dry the potato pieces with paper towels. While soaking the potatoes, make the syrup/glaze.



Combine the sugar, vegetable oil, water, soy sauce, vinegar, and salt in a skillet just large enough to hold the sweet potato chunks or strips in a single layer. Place over medium-high heat and bring the mixture to a simmer.

Arrange the sweet potatoes in the pan in a single layer and cover with a circle of parchment paper to keep the surface moist. Cover the pan with a lid, lower the heat to maintain a gentle simmer and cook until the potatoes are tender (a toothpick inserted in the thickest part of a piece should meet no resistance). If the chunks are not yet after 3-4 minutes, add a bit more water and simmer for another few minutes. Check to make sure the sugar doesn't scorch.

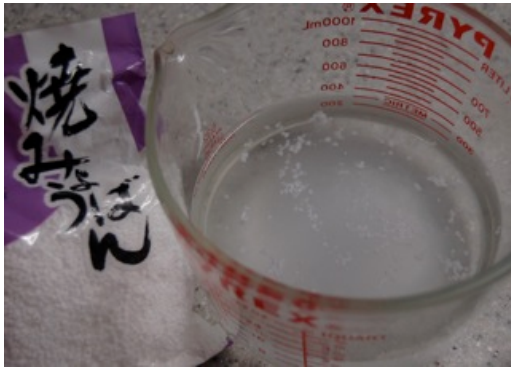


Remove the lid and parchment paper. Jiggle the pan to allow the potato chunks or strips to be coated with the rapidly reducing glaze (the vinegar, by the way, will keep the sugar from seizing after the glaze has cooled). After 6 minutes or so, the water and oil in the skillet will have separated and most of the water will have evaporated.

Transfer the glazed chunks or strips to a plate in a single layer. Sprinkle with the black sesame seeds and cool to room temperature before serving. They keep at cool room temperature for 6 to 8 hours. For longer storage, place them in a covered container and refrigerate for up to 2 days. For optimal texture, bring the potatoes back to room temperature before serving.



GLOSSARY of Terms



YAKI MYŌBAN 焼きミョウバン is Japanese **Alum** (short for aluminum potassium sulfate), it used to be available in American frontier and other households that did a lot of pickling and preserving.

Its primary use is to neutralize certain enzymes that occur naturally in many plants. Without neutralizing the enzymes in those plants, they taste especially bitter and often turn black or grey, and sometimes slimy when boiled.

Baking soda (bicarbonate of soda; formula NaHCO_3) is a base (alkaline) that helps to neutralize certain plant-based enzymes that typically cause a bitter taste and cause those plants to turn black or brown when subjected to moist heat. Although not the same as alum it is often used as a substitute.



Japanese *san on tō* 三温糖 light brown sugar