

## 桜花塩漬け *Ōka Shio-zuké* Salt-Cured Cherry Blossoms



The best flowers to use for salt-cured *sakura* are deep pink, fluffy looking ***Yaézakura*** blossoms. They are one of several double-flowering cultivars with about 50 petals per blossom (that's why they appear "fluffy"). Ideally, blossoms are plucked just as the tree reaches the *mankai* or "fully unfurled" stage.

The biggest challenge in preparing cured cherry blossoms will be to find fresh flowers that have not been exposed to chemical sprays or other toxic substances (such as exhaust fumes from traffic on nearby highways).

There are various ways to cure cherry blossoms, all include salt and many also use plum vinegar (*umézu*) or another acidic liquid such as lemon juice or apple cider. Below is my preferred salt-acid-salt method that yields vibrantly colored blossoms and a generous quantity of cherry-perfumed salt as a "by-product."

### Ingredients:

- 200-250 *yaézakura* cherry blossoms (about 100 grams/3.5 ounces)
- 4 teaspoons coarse sea salt (about 20% of blossoms by weight) for curing
- 2 teaspoons *umézu* (plum vinegar, a by-product of making *uméboshi*)
- 1 teaspoon coarse sea salt, for final storage

### Procedure:



Wash 100 grams blossoms in cold water and drain. Blot up extra moisture on paper towels. Place the washed and blotted blossoms in a container and toss with 2 teaspoons of salt.

Cover the salted flowers with clear wrap or parchment and add pressure that is the equivalent of twice the weight of the flowers, about 200 grams.

The easiest way to apply weight is with water in a glass jar (200ml/cc water weighs 200 grams, about 3/4 American cup measure). Or, use pie weights, cans or other heavy objects. Weight needs to be evenly distributed across the surface; weights need to be enclosed in a water-resistant cover (closed glass jar, resealable plastic bag). Pickle presses (*shokutaku tsukémono ki*) work especially well.

Keep the weight on for 3 days or until liquid from the blossoms rises to cover them entirely.



Drain the flowers and toss with *umézu*. Let the *umézu*-moistened flowers sit for at least 1 day (and up to 3) in a covered (non-reactive) container to avoid exposure to air.

Spread blossoms out on paper towels. Let the blossoms air-dry for 1 to 3 days. Do not be alarmed if during this time some of the salt from the brine re-surfaces as crystalized salt.

Toss the air-dried blossoms in the additional teaspoon of salt and pack them into glass jars. Be sure to clearly date before storing the cured flowers in a dark, dry cupboard, for up to one year.

Once opened, the flowers loose aroma and darken quickly so I recommend storing cured blossoms in many small jars rather than a single large one.



Just before using salt-cured blossoms, shake off excess salt and set it aside for use as an aromatic finishing touch to fried foods and/or salads or omelets.

BRIEFLY swish blossoms in water, draining and/or blotting immediately to retain as much aroma as possible. Blossoms can be used to make savory Sakura Gohan (KANSHA pg. 25), to steam with fish, *tōfu*, or warm *chawan mushi* or chilled *tamago-dōfu* (WASHOKU pg 285) egg custards.



If you will be using the blossoms for sweet dishes -- cakes, cookies, muffins or frozen desserts -- the salt-encrusted flowers can be re-cured in granulated sugar: BRIEFLY dip the salted blossoms in water and blot dry on paper towels. Place the blossoms in a glass jar and cover generously with granulated sugar. Close the jar and shake to distribute sugar evenly. The blossoms will mellow in flavor after one week. Store on a dark, dry shelf for up to 6 months thereafter.