

'Natto' consumption slump spurs makers' creativity

By KENSUKE TENRYAKU

MITO, Ibaraki Pref. (Kyodo) Makers of "natto" fermented soybeans are frantically trying to stop a slump in consumption by turning out new products or publicizing positive health effects.

A company in Ibaraki Prefecture has meanwhile been holding a course for children to gain the experience of making natto, which is a staple for many Japanese.

According to some scholars, natto made from steamed soybeans combined with soybean bacteria for fermentation has been in existence in Japan since the Yayoi Period (about 400 B.C. to A.D. 300).

Natto peddlers emerged during the middle of the Edo Period (1603-1868). The Imperial Japanese Navy was among those that adopted natto as regular fare during the war because of its profusion of protein and vitamin B-2.

According to the Statistics Bureau of the Internal Affairs and Communications Ministry, consumption did not slow down after the war and the average household spent about ¥4,200 on natto in 2002. But it dropped to about ¥3,800 last year.

To turn the tide, some natto makers have introduced



Yasuko Inoue, 39, and her 4-year-old daughter, Ai, scoop up "natto" in a class on making the fermented soybeans in Hitachiota, Ibaraki Prefecture, in early October. KYODO PHOTO

products containing distinctive flavors, including black rice vinegar, kimchi and the taste of egg, which goes well with natto.

They've also come up with fermented soybeans with collagen to attract female consumers who take the protein as a beauty aid.

An official of the Japan Natto Cooperative Society Federation said sales of new products account for about 10 percent of the total, adding the federation hopes they will attract people turned off by natto's distinctive smell.

Industry sources said the attraction of natto is its low price, which is in the range of ¥100 for a set of three packs. But the traditional affordability poses a problem for natto makers, because it is difficult for them to add the cost of developing new products to prices.

Some company people attributed the slump in sales to a heat wave in the summer, which apparently drove consumers away from natto's sticky feeling.

Another factor cited was fake information about natto's weight-loss effects on a popular TV program broadcast in January.

Natto maker Kume Quality Products in Ibaraki Prefecture has been offering a course every year for the past 10 years to about 500 children and their parents on how to make natto by hand.

About 20 people participated in the course held early this month. They mixed the soybeans with natto bacteria and wrapped them up in paper-thin sheets of wood in a triangular shape. The soybeans were allowed to ferment for a few days and delivered to their homes.

"I want to try a variety of natto cuisine," homemaker Yasuko Inoue, 39, said. Her 4-year-old daughter, Ai, said she enjoyed the class.

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