

## TOP 4 AKITA PREFECTURE SPECIALTIES



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One of the great things about Japan is that every area has their own regional specialties, or *meibutsu* (名物; literally “famous thing”). Food is a common specialty, but there are things that go beyond the belly to satisfy your other senses as well. Some of the things for which Akita Prefecture (秋田県) is known are its rice products and crafts.

**Kiritanpo** (きりたんぽ; pictured in the top image) is a kind of rice cylinder. Rice is cooked, promptly smashed until it's nearly a paste, and then it is formed into a cylinder around cedar skewers and toasted over a fire. The cylinders are then served either with sweet *miso* paste or, more famously, as a kind of dumpling or noodle in soup or *nabe* dishes. It isn't truly a noodle, but in a soup, it reaches a kind of noodle-like consistency. The shape of the *kiritanpo* also lets it keep some of the soup inside of it while you eat it, giving you a little burst of soupy flavor—much like how a macaroni noodle can deliver an extra bit of sauce or cheese.

*Kiritanpo* isn't the only well-known rice product coming out of Akita, though. There is a wide variety of **sake** (日本酒; *nihonshu*) brewed in Akita as well. The core ingredients of *sake* are water and rice, and so high-quality spring water and good rice makes the best *sake*. There are many kinds of *sake*, and in that way it is very similar to wine. Some well-recognized types of *sake* are *ginjo* (吟醸), *daiginjo* (大吟醸), and *junmai* (純米). *Ginjo* is made with rice that has had at least 40% of the outside layer of the rice milled away. It usually has a nice, fruity fragrance, but this will vary from brewer to brewer. *Daiginjo* is similar, but the rice is even more polished and the fragrance even more pronounced. *Ginjo* and *daiginjo* are made with rice, *koji* (a kind of fungus used for fermentation), water, and distilled alcohol. *Junmai*, on the other hand, is only made with rice, *koji*, and water. The resultant *sake* is therefore more closely connected to the quality of rice used. There is also no set rule as to how thoroughly milled the rice must be used when brewing *junmai* sake. There are reputable breweries of these kinds and many more throughout Akita Prefecture.



Twenty-five types of Akita junmai.

Stepping away from rice products, Akita is also rich in clay and the region has its own distinctive **pottery** styles. Some pieces are left unglazed, showcasing the natural beauty of the local clay. Others are glazed by dripping material onto the clay, creating flowing, natural patterns that suggest movement while still leaving some of the natural clay exposed. These are typically deep blue or teal glazes. There are mugs, *sake* cups, bowls, and even sculptural pieces.



Simple handmade clay figures from Akita.

Another notable craft practiced and perfected in Akita is **ginsenzaiku** (銀線細工), or “silver wire craft”. Traditionally, silver was mined from the Ani Mine (阿仁鉱山; *ani kozan*), one of the oldest and largest mines in Japan, with a history stretching from 1309 all the way to 1978. However, in more recent history, the Ani Mine became more well known for its copper. Silver from all over the world is used in the practice of *ginsenzaiku*. *Ginsenzaiku* works are made with 0.2 mm (32-gauge, 0.008in) pure silver wire—essentially pure silver thread. In the modern era, creating metal thread isn't particularly amazing, but without the aid of modern machinery it is quite a difficult and time consuming process—especially when considering the fact that the process begins with rocks with bits of metal lodged in them. Pieces are made by hand and with simple tools. Accessories such as brooches and other pieces of jewelry are common, as well as things like picture frames.



Some examples of Akita ginsenzaiku.

Ceramic goods, silver goods, and many other locally-crafted pieces, sweets, and *sake* are available throughout Akita, but are easily found in the **Akita Prefectural Goods Plaza** (あきた県産品プラザ) of Akita City's Atorion (アトリオン) building near Akita Station.

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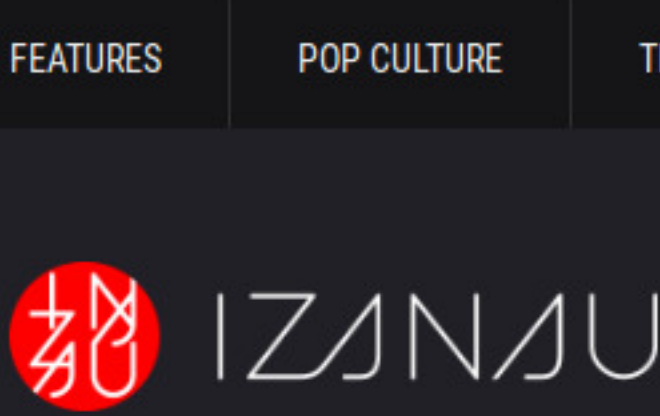
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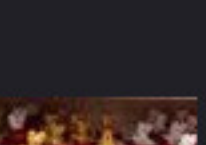
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