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The Red Brick Bulletin

Feature: Searching for Spice
JET Spotlight: Maria Semenova

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SEARCHING FOR SPICE

While the rest of Japan is gearing up to head outside and admire cherry blossoms, lying on the grass sipping a nice cold beer, Hokkaido is still covered in a thick blanket of white snow. It may be a while before we can see the ground, but that doesn't stop us from having our fun! A Hokkaido born *dosanko* friend of mine invited me and a couple of others to join him in a family tradition – winter *yama wasabi* picking! I set out to Monbetsu, a town in northeastern Hokkaido to give it a shot!

Yama wasabi, or mountain horseradish, is said to be 1.5 times spicier than the normal green *wasabi* that is associated with Japan, and can be found growing wild in various parts of Hokkaido. This time of year it's buried under at least a few feet of snow, but with the right guide, some shovels, and a little sweat, we were finally able to get our cold hands on some.

Our guide took us to a field that is owned by a friend of the family, where they have permission to come out and pick *yama wasabi* any time they like, as long as they leave enough so that it grows back

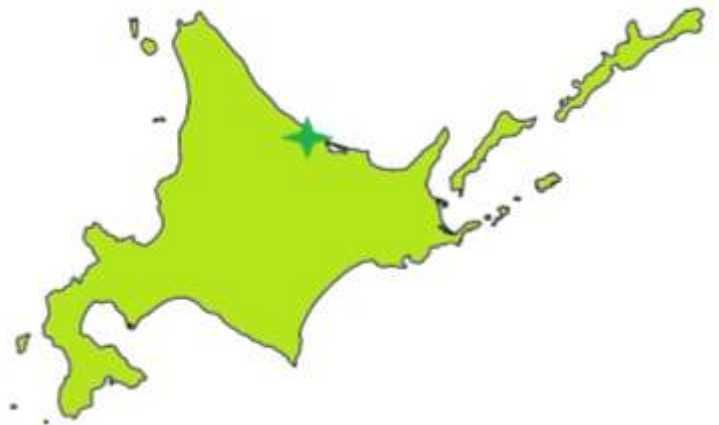
every year.

We put on our snow gear, grabbed our shovels, and set out! Since it's impossible to know exactly where the wasabi is under all that snow, first you just have to start digging. Once you have a hole large enough to see the ground, the search begins. At first we didn't have much luck, pulling up quite a few poor little plants that were, alas, neither *yama wasabi* nor edible. However, after digging what felt like endless holes, we finally hit gold! Once we knew where the sweet spot was, we pulled up one after another, and soon we had enough for our plan: *yama wasabi kaisen don*, or seafood bowls with mountain horseradish. Back to the house we went!

We had all worked up quite an appetite, but first we had to prepare the star of the dish: grated *yama wasabi* soaked in a little soy sauce. The roots were cleaned off, and then we each took turns grating them. If you think onions make you cry, try grating fresh *yama wasabi*! Finally the preparations were done and we all dug in. Most people had their *yama wasabi* on top of their seafood bowls, filled

with fresh salmon, scallops, tuna, and even some fish eggs. Since I am a vegetarian I topped my rice bowl with tofu and avocado, and it was still delicious!

I don't think there is anything so satisfying as eating something that you dug out of the ground with your bare (well, in this case, gloved) hands. The *wasabi* was spicy enough to make my eyes water – just how I like it. If you ever get the chance, I definitely recommend giving it a taste. Having the chance do go out and do this made me feel yet again how lucky I am to live here in Hokkaido. Where else can I go out into a random, snowy field and come home with fresh *wasabi*? Until the next adventure...



More and more holes, but still no wasabi ☹️



After finally finding the right place to dig!



Grating the wasabi. Not pictured: tears.



The almost final product! After this it soaks in soy sauce.



Our hard-earned feast!



Just-picked yama wasabi on Hokkaido fresh fish

HOKKAIDO JET SPOTLIGHT

There are over 200 participants of the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme who call Hokkaido home. We come from all over the world and we all have a very unique experience with the island. In each edition of the Red Brick Bulletin, I will introduce a current JET living in Hokkaido. Each has their own story to tell – let's get to know them!



What brought you to Hokkaido?

A I came to Hokkaido due to my work. I used to study in Japan as an exchange student and I thought that I would like to come back if I had a chance. So when I was on my last year at university in Saint-Petersburg, Russia, I was thinking of my future career and suddenly found out about the JET Programme and the vacant ALT/CIR positions for Russians. So I applied, passed and got the job in Asahikawa. This year is my third year of working as a CIR and I really love my job!

How has your experience been so far?

A I am engaged in many projects at work. Moreover I can create and hold my own events. Apart from interpreting, translating, and assisting delegations, there are international and Russian culture events, cooking classes, school visits, business trips and many other things I do at my work. I am very grateful to my boss, supervisor, and colleagues for providing me with such a wonderful working environment.

Besides my work I got so many "first time experiences" in Hokkaido. This winter, for example, I started alpine skiing and thanks to my amazing teachers I could pass second level skiing ability test. I also tried snowboarding for the first time here and I started practicing aikido about two years ago. I took a ropeway and climbed the top of an active volcano (Asahidake) for the first time. After enjoying that breath-taking view, I thought that I would definitely climb the mountain again but next time via a long hiking course.

Hokkaido is abundant with beautiful natural places and I am trying to visit as many as I can. Famous lavender fields in Furano, the blue pond in Biei, Shiretoko, Kushiro, Lake Akan, Lake Masshu, sakura in Hakodate and many other places have already left a lasting impression on me, but there are still so many things to explore in Hokkaido... I am looking forward to my new adventures!

This is a very difficult question, but what has been your most memorable moment in Hokkaido?

A I think it is the amount of snow and cold apartments/schools on the one hand and the nature on the other. I lived in the western part of

Russia and I have never seen so much snow in my life before. Snow piles that are two meters high in the centre of Asahikawa – in a city with 350 thousand people population, is considered to be normal here. Local people even say that compared to previous years there is almost "no snow" now. Another thing is the cold! Despite the fact all the buildings are equipped with heaters, they are cold during the winter. I still can't get used to it.

One more thing that I will probably always associate Hokkaido with is nature. I really love flowers. The huge fields of lavender and other flowers in Furano are very impressive

but I think that the field of shibazakura (pink moss phlox) in Takinoue is something that I will never forget. Just imagine an immense pink fluffy carpet on the slope! When I was there I could hardly restrain myself from laying down on it.

What's your favorite thing about your region?

A The scenery! Especially the scenery along the Chubetsu river and the view from Chubetsu bridge and Crystal bridge. On my way home I often make a stop to admire sunset and sometimes to take pictures of astonishing views. I also love the penguin walk in Asahiyama zoo. I always recommend it to everyone who is visiting Asahikawa in winter. Cute penguins swaggering along a passage of thousands of people, who try to take the best shot of "the celebrities on the red carpet", with no doubt steals everyone's heart.



Anything else you'd like to share?

A I would like to thank the JET Programme for this great opportunity to experience new things, to meet wonderful people, to do the job I love... Hokkaido is not only a very beautiful place, for me it is also a place where I have met many kind people and learned a lot of different things from them.

Maria Semenova is a 3rd year CIR from Russia. After studying Japanese in university, Maria came to live in Japan, working as a Coordinator of International Relations in Asahikawa, the second largest city in Hokkaido. She speaks Russian, English, and Japanese!