

Last week I wrote about summer vacation in America. Of course I like summer at home because we have a nice long vacation time. But in Japan there are many things that I like about summer, too! Recently it's becoming hotter and hotter. I've started thinking that I won't be able to live through another summer in Japan. So it's a good idea to focus on the good things, too (at least until I stop sweating!). One of my favorite things about summer in Japan is kakigori.

When I first came to Japan about 10 years ago, it was at the end of June, around this same time of year. Everyone said that it was an unusually hot summer, and for me, it was absolutely unbearable. We visited friends in Nagoya and I remember a hot day in Osu Kannon when I nearly passed out. We went to Kyoto and every time we had a meal, I was disappointed to be served hot tea. I just wanted a Coke! I tried my best to be polite, but I was a high school student and I think it was obvious to the older women that I was really uncomfortable. So one day, on the streets of Kyoto near Kiyomizudera, we stopped in a small shop for some kakigori. There were only two choices—strawberry and green tea. I enthusiastically asked for strawberry (I still wasn't used to sweets being flavored like tea) and was thrilled when I got the giant, pink bowl of ice. I still remember how good that kakigori tasted. In America, we have snow cones which are like kakigori. They are served in a paper cone and they look like ice cream cones but of shaved ice. But the ice in Japan is shaved so much finer, and the flavor is so much richer... something about kakigori is so much more delicious than anything I'd ever had at home. And on that hot, summer day when I first came to Japan, kakigori could not have tasted sweeter on my lips.

I think many foreigners must think, "What's so special about a bowl of ice?" But there is something special about kakigori that is more appealing to me than even the most delicious ice cream cone. I love ice cream and I never would have thought that I'd choose kakigori over an ice cream cone. So when my students asked me at our school festival if I'd like to try akafuku gori, I couldn't say no. One of my fondest memories of my first year at Tsu Nishi was the school festival. So many students were eager for me to try new kinds of Japanese food or teach me about their club or class. It was still hot in September, and I was excited to try a new flavor of kakigori. But I was still surprised when I got kakigori with azuki bean paste and mochi on top. I had learned to like matcha-flavored sweets short after my previous visit, so this Mie-style kakigori was really appealing to me. I ate every last drop and really enjoyed it—much to the surprise of my students. It's uncommon to have a snow cone with bean paste and rice balls at home, but it's still delicious!

There are many difficult things about summer in Japan and this year I won't be visiting anywhere cool for a vacation during the hottest time. But there are lots of things that I can enjoy in summer in Japan—not just kakigori—that I can't enjoy anywhere else. So while I might be walking around the office saying, "atsui, atsui," I will try to remember that there are a lot of good things about summer in Japan as well.