

Ota Tofu

By Will Matsuda

Ota Tofu, a small storefront in Portland's east side, is a cultural and culinary landmark in the Pacific Northwest. Founded in 1911, the tofu factory has fed the city's Japanese American community for more than a hundred years. It is the oldest operating tofu producer in the country.

The story of Ota Tofu begins in 1905 with the arrival in Portland of Saizo Ota, who was born in Japan on April 14, 1881. The Ohta brothers (they changed their name to Ohta when they arrived in the United States) and Mr. Nagaro opened Ohta Tofu on Northwest Third Avenue and Davis Street in 1911, in the area known today as Old Town Chinatown. The shop later moved to 322 Northwest Fifth Avenue.

Just weeks after the United States declared war on Japan in 1941, on February 19, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066, which incarcerated 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry, including Saizo Ohta and his wife Shina, the co-owners of Ohta Tofu. The U.S. government forced the couple to leave their home and business in Portland, and they were eventually held at the Minidoka Relocation Center in Idaho.

Many Japanese American businesses on the West Coast were closed, countless business owners had to liquidate their equipment and property, and farmers had to sell their land for a fraction of what it was worth. According to the Densho Project, an organization dedicated to preserving the history of those who were held in American concentration camps during World War II, the economic losses suffered by Japanese and Japanese Americans as a result of Executive Order 9066 were between one and three billion dollars (adjusting for inflation, \$16 to \$47 billion in 2021).

Saizo Ohta died at Minidoka, reportedly from a basal hemorrhage caused by hypertension and chronic nephritis. He was sixty-one years old. It is likely that Ohta Tofu was closed when the Ohtas were ordered into confinement, but when the owner of the shop's building heard about Saizo's death, she decided to hold the property until Shina Ohta returned. Because of that gesture, Shina Ohta was able to restart Ota Tofu's production when she returned to Portland in the summer of 1945.

During the 1950s, the tofu factory's name was changed from Ohta to Ota Tofu to reflect the accurate spelling of the family's name. The company moved to its current location on 812 Southeast Stark Street in 1981. The Ota family owned the company until the Ogata family bought it in February 2019.

Ota Tofu continues to churn out fresh tofu for customers. Ko Ota, the only direct descendant of Shina and Saizo Ohta who was still working at the shop in 2022, arrives at three in the morning every day to oversee the cooking process, which involves coagulating soy milk into curds and pressing them into blocks of varying firmness. Demand for tofu has increased, as people eat more non-meat protein, and many tofu manufacturers have adopted a fully automated process, which is faster and less expensive. Ota Tofu continues to make tofu in the traditional way, by hand.

Ota Tofu remains an important part of the regional food landscape. At a small counter outside the production room on Stark Street, customers can purchase fresh tofu, soy milk, and agedashi tofu, which is fried in-house. The company plans to open a second tofu production facility and retail store in North Portland by the end of 2023. Supermarkets in Portland and as far south as Eugene sell Ota Tofu products, and many Asian American restaurants in the city source their tofu from the shop on Stark Street.

Sources

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