



The Washoku Way

Japan's Nuanced Approach to Food



MAFF

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Preface

For many people around the world, sushi is the most familiar type of Japanese cuisine. Yet while it is easily had in cities small and large across the globe, there are many aspects to making it well that are less familiar. Line-caught fish, for example, are preferable to netted hauls for a proper sushi topping. The sharpness of the knife and how deftly it is used greatly affect the flavor of sushi as well. Concerns like these are why Japanese cuisine, known as washoku in its homeland, intrigues chefs and other food lovers with its breadth and depth.

This book introduces the great variety washoku offers, in foods ranging from the traditional to the innovative and the casual to the formal. In its pages you'll also find a host of reasons why the washoku approach to cooking and eating is not only delicious, but one of the healthiest choices you can make.

Though its overall land mass is limited, mountainous Japan has abundant rainfall, plentiful snowmelt, and a vast network of underground water channels that feed its paddy fields and

crops. This ease of cultivation has spawned a remarkable food culture where the old ways are still very much in place. The ancient wisdom of curing, preserving, and fermenting foods still thrives today, and is why we have dashi, miso, soy sauce, and sake—integral parts of Japanese cuisine that are used around the world.

The washoku approach stresses that these blessings of nature be handled with care and gratitude. The ingredients we use are the very source of life itself, so nothing is wasted. Respectful of the environment, washoku celebrates our coexistence with all living things on earth.

And washoku is pleasing to the eye. Its visual harmony stems from a mindful balance of flavor, color, and method of preparation, as well as the eclectic mix of well-made crafts used for tableware. As you enjoy a washoku meal, take a moment to savor the experience with all five senses. A truly rich world beckons.

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Vegetables

What is washoku?

Referring not only to Japanese cuisine both traditional and modern, but to the larger realm of Japan's food culture itself, the term "washoku" is written with the characters *wa*, meaning harmony, and *shoku*, or food. Intrinsic to the concept is the notion of balance, an idea that plays out in nutritive terms as well as contextual ones relating to the ways foods are prepared, presented, and enjoyed. Let's begin our exploration of washoku with a look at the vast array of fresh produce and other ingredients it draws upon, as well as the most fundamental components of a washoku meal.

Selective cultivation behind Japan's rich variety of produce

While at base washoku refers to the traditional Japanese meal consisting of rice, miso soup, side dishes, and pickles, in the context of food culture the term extends to special celebratory meals such as those made for annual events, as well as to issues of etiquette in preparation, in service, and at the table.

Whatever the context, washoku wouldn't be washoku without the rich variety of produce made possible by Japan's climate and its terrain that stretches long distances from north to south. Four distinct seasons—or five if the early-summer monsoon is counted—

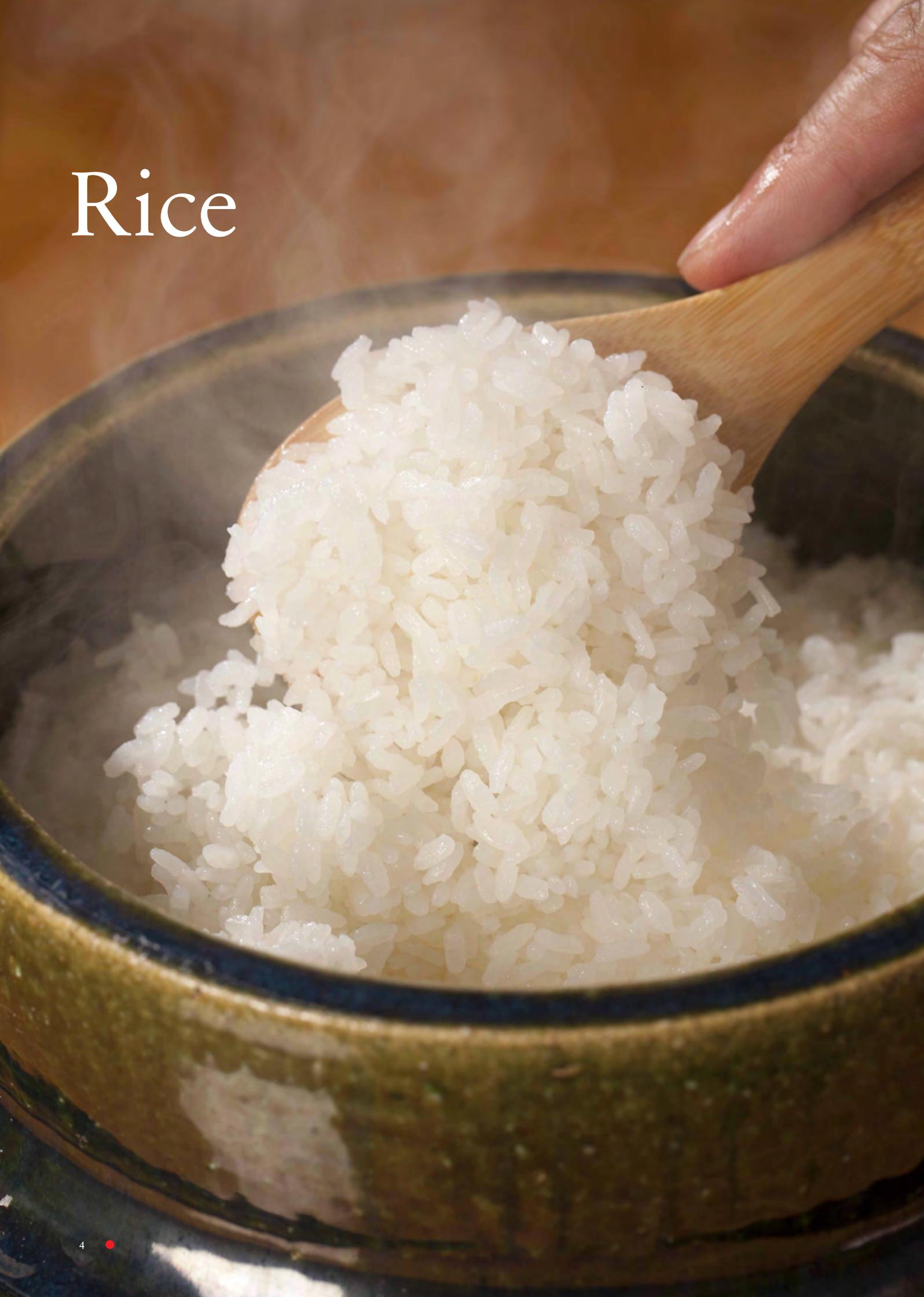
yield produce unique to each, a diversity that is reflected in the cuisine. The varying climates and elevations encountered from one end of the country to another offer chefs a vast range of regional produce from which to choose. Moreover, vegetables grown in Japanese soil owe their excellent flavor firstly to a naturally abundant supply of high-quality soft water, and secondly to selective cultivation that has stepped up taste as it has increased yield.

As many as 150 types of vegetables are sold in Japan, including imported varieties that have taken root here. Heirloom varieties, such as the iconic ones

from Kyoto, Kaga (Ishikawa prefecture), and Edo (Tokyo), have been grown long since before selective cultivation took on, and interest in their unique qualities continues to rise. Defined as produce grown in the same region by more than three generations of farmers using cultivation methods unique to the area, these native strains heighten the appeal of Japanese produce.

Throughout the country, more and more initiatives are underway to preserve heirloom varieties for subsequent generations, a movement that will only gather momentum as more chefs come to taste the difference.

Rice



Steamed, pounded, or brewed, it's central to the washoku diet

Rice is a staple for populations across the globe, and especially in Asia. Of the two subspecies of Asian rice, Indica and Japonica, the former represents 80 percent of world consumption. The latter, however, is the variety most commonly eaten in Japan. Lustrous, luscious, and sticky when cooked, Japonica rice delights the palate with its subtle, sweet taste. With its outer layer of bran removed, polished rice is almost wholly starch and therefore easy to digest.

The basis of the washoku diet, rice at one time served as currency in Japan, and still today it is accorded the respect deserved of a staff of life. Cooking it well is an involved process that demands presoaking, measuring the right amount of water, and adjusting the flame, but today's kitchens luckily benefit from the full-automatic rice cooker, which simplifies everything.



In Japan, freshly steamed rice is most favored, but the Japonica variety is tasty even when cold—and that's why rice balls fill countless lunch boxes every day. A highly versatile ingredient, rice can be steamed together with seafood and vegetables, dressed in vinegar as is done when making sushi, and transformed also into sake and Japanese *wagashi* sweets.

Mochi rice cakes are made with a glutinous strain of Japonica rice that's steamed, pounded, and formed into round or square shapes that store well and keep for a long time. Believed to possess divine powers, *mochi* is served in *zoni* soup on New Year's Day in homes across Japan in recipes that vary from region to region and indeed, from family to family, to honor and welcome that spirit. An enormous variety of sweets are made of glutinous rice as well.



Hard *mochi* cakes soften with heat; they are often eaten with soy sauce and toasted nori seaweed—a filling and healthy snack.

Mochi and onigiri samples by Waketokuyama



About 70 grams, or one handful, of freshly steamed, piping-hot rice is shaped into a triangle (most commonly) for the tasty bites known as *omusubi* or *onigiri*, but shapes and sizes do vary.

What makes rice grown in Japan so good?

Good water makes good rice—and that's as true in the paddy as it is in the kitchen. Blessed with plentiful rainfall, Japan is ideal terrain for growing rice. Long decades of select cultivation based on close observation and backed by research have produced high-yielding, better-tasting varieties. Advanced milling technologies play a part as well. Masaaki Funakubo of the Tokyo-based rice shop Funakubo Shoten says, "Fine adjustments can be made to achieve the best mill rate for each strain of rice. When polishing off the bran, we take great care not to remove the umami part of the grain. And we keep our rice in a humidity- and temperature-controlled granary?" Proper storage of the rice prior to milling affects its ultimate taste when served on the table. Lastly, today's electric cookers with state-of-the-art functions steam this precious grain for us perfectly.

At Funakubo Shoten, raw grains are taste-tested during milling and kept carefully in climate-controlled storage.

okomemo-funakubo.com

Fish





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1. A fresh haul from Toyama Bay on the Sea of Japan, which teems with a vast variety of fish. 2 & 3. Seafood brought to port at Kurobe in Toyama is sold to *nakaoroshi* middlemen at the morning auction and sent on to destinations around the country and abroad; demand for Japan's top-quality catch is particularly high in Hong Kong. 4 & 5. Seafood dispatched by air from Tokyo's Tsukiji Fish Market in the morning reaches Hong Kong by the afternoon and arrives at dinner tables on the same day.

Tricks of the trade for keeping it fresh

Some 4,200 varieties of fish swim the waters of the Japanese archipelago, where long coastlines stretching northeast to southwest cover climate zones from the cool temperate to the subtropical. Because of that sheer abundance the Japanese love fish, and not only the saltwater varieties. Freshwater denizens like *ayu* sweetfish and carp are cherished delicacies of inland regions.

Advanced storage, transport, and quality-control systems aside, delicious seafood is widely available throughout Japan firstly because of the highly developed techniques and tools used to handle fresh catch. Tsukiji, the central wholesale fish market in Tokyo, handles tons of fish from all ports of Japan, yet visitors are often amazed that there are no fishy off-odors. Maximum freshness of fish is in fact maintained by the *ikejime* spiking technique, which destroys the brain and spinal cord instantly. This humane, stress-free method both paralyzes muscular reflex, preventing the buildup of lactic acid that sours the flesh, and retracts the blood to the gut cavity, resulting in a better-colored and more flavorful fillet.

The Tsukiji market is fitted with both seawater and freshwater taps, and workers are adept at using ice shaped and cut to all sizes to accommodate different species. Masaru Harada, head of the *nakaoroshi* intermediate wholesaler Dairiki Shoten, comments, "Fishermen's hauls are first sorted by cargo shippers at each port according to the size of the fish, then they are transported to Tsukiji to intermediate wholesalers like us, who prepare the catch to order for contract clientele, delivering to retailers and restaurants. This division of labor has evolved over several decades of fine-tuning, and is unique to Japan."

Tsukiji receives fish caught in Japanese waters within a day; hauls landed at ports close to Tokyo at dawn reach the market that same morning. And when the fish arrives on the chef's butcher block, it's not merely cut up to become sashimi. A single-ground knife of the highest quality, honed to razor-edged sharpness, is used to slice the fillet swiftly without dulling its umami savoriness. From ship to port to market to table, every care is taken in this nation of fish-lovers to ensure that each morsel is as tasty as it can be.



Wagyu

Grown with care for fine marbling

Wagyu beef is hailed by chefs and diners around the world for its unparalleled tenderness and aroma when grilled. Even a thick cut of top-grade Wagyu steak is so succulent that it literally melts in the mouth. That texture is owed to well-balanced marbling, known as *sashi* in Japanese. It's a factor of not only the species but also long months of careful growing at cattle farms.

“Compared with other cattle that mature in about 24 months, Wagyu raised to yield the finely marbled cuts of meat known as *shimofuri* take about 30 months to mature,” says Atsushi Kato, owner of a Ginza restaurant that specializes in Yamagata beef. Water and feed largely determine the meat's taste. Japan has abundant high-quality water; research and constant tinkering have created superior feed. “Precise butchering and vacuum-packaging of primal cuts also ensure the quality of what reaches the table,” adds Kato.

In premium Wagyu such as that shown above, the density of marbling determines the grade of each cut. At right is Yamagata steak grilled rare and served at the Kato Gyunikuten restaurant. Its inherent umami bursts forth with just a few drops of soy sauce and freshly ground wasabi, to taste.

Kato Gyunikuten
www.katogyu.co.jp



Wild plants and sea vegetables

Bounty of woods and water

Edible wild plants, collectively known as *sansai*, and mushrooms figure big in washoku not only for their nutritive benefits and flavor, but also for their distinct seasonality. Butterbur buds arrive early in the year; bracken, angelica tree sprouts, and bamboo shoots in turn herald the advent of spring. They are commonly blanched and dressed with miso and vinegar, or deep-fried and served as tempura. While there are cultivated varieties of mushrooms in Japan, wild ones feature prominently as autumn treats, the most prized of which are fragrant matsutake served grilled or steamed in a small earthen pot.

Mineral-rich marine algae have been widely eaten since time immemorial in Japan. Most common are wakame and nori, which are used both fresh and dried. Kombu kelp is chiefly sold dried and features in many dishes, although its primary use is as an ingredient for dashi stock, addressed on pages 38–39. Because it has auspicious associations kombu is used widely in celebration foods, and in dried form it is a typical offering of Shinto rituals.



On the left is dried wakame seaweed, and on the right dried kombu kelp. Both are rich in vitamins and minerals, and feature prominently in stocks and soups.

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Edible wild plants such as angelica tree buds, bracken, and field horsetail shoots bring a breath of spring to the table.

©Tohru Minowa/a.collectionRF/amanaimages



Ichiju sansai
One soup and three dishes

Composing a complete washoku meal

The most common formula of washoku home cooking, the *ichiju sansai* concept maintains that in addition to rice and pickles, there should be one soup (*ichiju*) and at least three other dishes (*sansai*), ideally made by different methods, such as simmering, grilling, and so on. The main dish might be traditional fare, such as yellowtail broiled with sweetened soy sauce. Or it might be a Western-Japanese hybrid like a breaded and deep-fried *tonkatsu* pork cutlet or a hamburger patty topped with gravy—dishes introduced to the washoku diet after Japan opened its ports to the world in the Meiji period (1868–1912). But whatever form they take, the soup and other dishes play second fiddle to white rice, the assumed center of the meal.

The written record is unclear as to when exactly the *ichiju sansai* formula was established, but we do know that it is depicted in a Heian-era picture scroll dating back to the 12th century. Until the early 20th century, meals were typically served on an individual tray with legs, just big enough to hold one soup and three small dishes. When entertaining, two or more trays were used; between them they would carry *niju gosai*, or two soups and five dishes. In other words, an *ichiju sansai* meal signifies an ordinary repast.

During the Heian period (794–1185) extravagant *daikyo ryori* feasts were prepared to entertain guests in the aristocratic circle. Later, the samurai warrior class invented their own multitray *honzen ryori*, while at Buddhist temples monks prepared vegetarian *shojin ryori*. In the late 16th century, *cha-kaiseki* for the tea ceremony was established. The kaiseki cuisine we know today—sumptuous multicourse meals featuring many dishes meant to be enjoyed with sake—emerged from these many influences in the Edo era (1603–1867). In Meiji, foreign styles brought new recipes to the washoku table; hybrid dishes have long since become regular fare in home cooking. Today as in those bygone eras, freshly steamed rice and a well-balanced assortment of other dishes never fail to make happy diners.



True to the *ichiju sansai* formula, the meal on the opposite page consists of rice, miso soup with tofu and scallions, pickles, and three dishes: yellowtail broiled with sweetened soy sauce; raw turnips and carrots dressed in vinegar and topped with chrysanthemum petals; and simmered taro with sweetened ground meat. Photos 1, 2, and 3 above show other common *sansai* options: flounder stewed in soy broth, roast ginger pork, and simmered meat and potatoes seasoned with soy sauce and sugar.

The chopsticks, chopstick rest, rice bowl, square plate, half-moon plate, small bowl, and oval bowl at left are by Kurashi no Utsuwa Hanada. The soup bowl is by Jihei Murase (Kamon Kogei). The main serving vessels shown above are by Kurashi no Utsuwa Hanada.



Celebratory foods



Festive fare for special gatherings

Washoku is an integral part of traditional observances and most special occasions in Japan. The New Year holiday—the most significant of the year—and watershed events such as weddings always revolve around the feast to be shared. As in so many cultures where family members, friends, and colleagues gather to “break bread” with one another, washoku, too, is a force that deepens both family ties as well as those of the larger community.

In Japan, each year’s regular observances and celebrations are deeply connected with ancient ways in which auspicious ingredients and foods were used to expel evil spirits and invite good fortune. Glutinous rice steamed with red beans is often served on felicitous occasions today; indeed the dish was originally devised to exorcise evil spirits. *Osechi ryori*, the New Year’s feast, uses such auspicious foods prominently, from black soybeans expressing wishes for health and longevity, to syrup-glazed dried anchovies symbolizing prayers for a plentiful harvest. And *osechi* features recipes that keep longer than everyday fare, so that housewives, too, can take a break from cooking during the first three days of the year.

Toso, a kind of medicinally spiced sake, is also imbibed at New Year’s, to expel evil spirits and invite a long healthy life. Typically served with it is *zoni*, a soup cooked with various vegetables, fish cake, and *mochi* rice cake in a dashi stock seasoned with soy or miso. As the shape of the rice cake, the combination of ingredients, and the seasoning of the broth all vary by region, *zoni* is a wonderful example of regional diversity in a washoku dish that all Japanese know and associate with their fondest food memories.

Toso, shown on the opposite page in an ornate lacquer vessel, is made of equal parts of seven plant extracts, including bellflower and *sansho* Japanese pepper. The mixture is steeped in sake or mirin and drunk during the New Year holiday. Auspicious *osechi* foods from left are *kuromame* black beans, *tazukuri* dried anchovies, and *kazunoko* herring roe.

Toso serving set by Yamada Heiando
Mini-plates by Kurashi no Utsuwa Hanada



At rear is Kanto-style *zoni* with square *mochi*, chicken, *kamaboko* fish cake, *komatsuna* mustard spinach, daikon, carrots, and *yuzu* citron in a seasoned dashi broth. In the foreground is Kansai-style *zoni* with round *mochi*, *ebūmo* taro, daikon, and shavings of dry-cured bonito in a white miso soup.



Glutinous rice steamed with red beans is believed to expel evil spirits and invite happiness.

Soup bowls and tray by Jihei Murase (Kamon Kogei)
Rice bowls by Kurashi no Utsuwa Hanada

Washoku

form and style

Washoku is clearly multifaceted. But regardless of whether your meal comes in one dish or many, or whether the chef or someone else serves you and where, underlying the experience is the single unifying spirit of *omotenashi*, or hospitality that stems from a sense of communion. Its ultimate expression is seen in *cha-kaiseki*, the formal meal served prior to the tea ceremony.

A bowl of simmered autumn delicacies features fragrant matsutake mushrooms, green beans, and plump, late-season *hamo* pike conger garnished with a puree of *umeboshi* pickled apricot. *Yuzu* citron zest adds a fragrant grace note. The lid of the bowl is adorned inside with a chrysanthemum bloom gorgeously rendered in gold *makie* lacquer.





Cha-kaiseki

Autumn bounty: pomegranates, persimmons, matsutake mushrooms, chestnuts, akebi chocolate vine. Even the medley of leaves conveys a lush sense of the season.

Sharing the pleasures of the table

Hailed for its healthy, low-calorie, nutritionally balanced qualities, Japanese cuisine, known as *washoku* in its homeland, gained popularity abroad from the 1980s onward first in the United States and then elsewhere. In recent years interest in *washoku* has redoubled; an estimated 55,000 Japanese restaurants now operate overseas. While it was sushi that first entered the collective consciousness outside of Japan, other specialty foods—tempura (lightly battered deep-fried fish and vegetables), yakitori (bite-sized chicken and vegetables grilled on skewers), and ramen (egg noodles in a hearty soup), for example—have since emigrated as well, becoming regular choices for diners in cities across the world.

And now *kaiseki*, the traditional multicourse meal associated with banquets and other special occasions, has also garnered a following outside of Japan. With its emphasis not only on finely prepared and artfully presented dishes but also on the selection of tableware and a sense of the season, *kaiseki* offers the total Japanese dining experience in a way that sushi and other one-off foods do not. But what is *kaiseki*, exactly? In order to examine that, let's first address *cha-kaiseki*, the meal served as part of the formal tea ceremony, and from which *kaiseki* evolved.

Cha-kaiseki begins with a tray of rice and soup and concludes a few courses later with a freshly whisked serving of *matcha* green tea. The legendary tea master Sen no Rikyu (1522–1591) perfected this style of meal, taking his inspiration from *shojin* cuisine, a form of vegetarian cooking derived from the dietary customs of Buddhist monks. Rikyu's rustic *wabicha* style of tea ceremony carries on today in *cha-kaiseki* gatherings and is the foundation of the basic “one broth, three dishes” approach to serving a complete meal with rice that is the very heart of *washoku* itself.

Kaiseki differs from its forerunner in several ways. First, the sequencing of courses is more flexible, open to the interpretation of the chef in charge. Second, the *bassun* course is much more sumptuous than that served in the tea ceremony. Third, rice is offered only at the end of the meal. Moreover, the enjoyment of tea is not central to a *kaiseki* feast.

Yet both styles of meal share in common the practice of reflecting a rich sense of the season—in the choice of ingredients as well as in their presentation—and both embody *omotenashi*, a spirit of hospitality driven by fine attention to context and detail.

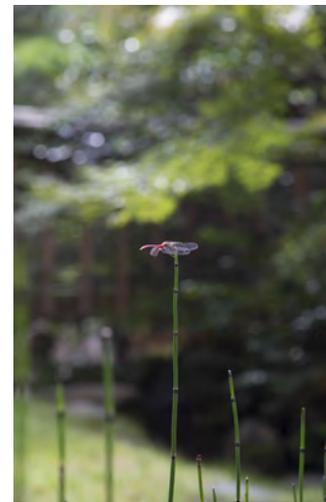
Kunio Tokuoka, the third-generation owner and executive chef of the renowned Kitcho flagship in

Arashiyama, just outside of Kyoto, explains the nature of the two styles this way: “In the tea ceremony, host and guests join together to create a sense of unity known as *ichiza komryu*. Gathering in a small tatami room, they sit closely together on their heels, their knees almost touching. The host prepares the tea in front of his guests, who take turns sipping from the same bowl and passing each fresh serving to the next in line. They also share a tray of sweets, carefully selected by the host for the occasion, in the same way. These rituals serve as a kind of template for connecting with others, a way to deepen your relationship with them.”

“Within the structured framework of *cha-kaiseki*, the preparation and enjoyment of tea are vehicles for creating that sense of unity. Modern-day *kaiseki* shifts the focus of the gathering to a more relaxed enjoyment of the dishes served.”

Selection of fresh ingredients symbolic of the season is one of the most important principles in *washoku*. With today's advanced distribution networks, ingredients from all corners of Japan arrive at the kitchen almost as fresh as when they were harvested. Moreover, ingredients are appreciated according to their different stages of seasonality: in addition to “right in season” flavors, there are “late in season” ones that can be used to evoke the passing of the season, and “first in season” tastes to herald the arrival of the next.

With imagination as his or her guide, a master chef translates this bounty into sumptuous presentations for the mind, eyes, and palate. In summer, a single bloom or petal might be used as a serving dish; in autumn, colored leaves provide a decorative flourish. In winter, bamboo leaves or a sprig of nandina brushed with snow become poetry on the plate. All of these nuances reveal the care taken to craft not just the meal, but your experience of it. Such is the real delight of *kaiseki*, and of *washoku* itself.



Top: A dragonfly heralds the arrival of autumn in the garden of the flagship Kitcho restaurant in Kyoto.

Middle: Yuan, the tea house at Kyoto Kitcho, was built to mark the 88th birthday of Kitcho founder Teiichi Yuki.

Bottom: All meals at Kyoto Kitcho end with *usucha*, the less formal of the two forms of *matcha* green tea served in the tea ceremony.

Ichiza konryu—communion of host and guests



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Served exclusively as part of the formal tea ceremony, *cha-kaiseki* is not to be found at any restaurant. Nonetheless, its essence remains at the heart of today's multicourse *kaiseki* cuisine, and of *washoku* in general. Let's take a closer look at what it's all about.

Some 400 years ago, the tea master Sen no Rikyu perfected the minimalist *wabicha* style of tea ceremony in response to the elaborate *honzen ryori* banquets of his time. His approach addressed not only the design of the tea room and implements used, but the style of meal served as well. Whereas the highly ritualized banquets for auspicious occasions typically involved three separate courses, each consisting of multiple dishes, Rikyu moved away from this extravagance toward a more intimate communion of host and guest, devising a simplified meal served on a single tray. His *ichiju sansai* solution of one soup and three dishes offered rice and soup followed by *mukozuke* (a dish to accompany sake), a stewed dish, and a grilled dish. One or two of these are served on a large platter, a practice that enables the food to be brought to the table at the peak of readiness, and facilitates service as well. As each guest takes his or her portion before passing the fare to the next individual, the host is spared trouble and all convened contribute to the fellowship of the table—a perfect embodiment of Rikyu's vision.

Whatever the number of courses served, the utmost care is taken in a *cha-kaiseki* meal to evoke a sense of the season. This is accomplished through the strict use of fresh ingredients, the selection of tableware, and poetic gestures and contextual references reflected in the menu and its presentation.

1. Placed before a guest sitting on the tatami mat, a legged lacquer tray holds bowls of freshly steamed rice and miso soup (left and right, respectively) in the front, and a *mukozuke* dish at rear. Only a mouthful of rice is served; likewise, the soup bowl is filled halfway. The choice of miso used to prepare the soup—red, white, or a blend—is made according to the season. Guests first partake of the rice and soup, sip some sake, and finish with the *mukozuke*, a name that refers to its placement on the tray “beyond” (*muko*) the other two servings. The first of the three *sansai* dishes in the *ichiju sansai* formula, *mukozuke* is typically a vinegared dish to whet the appetite. Shown here is crab and other ingredients served on chrysanthemum-shaped Raku ware.

2. Just as the guests are about to finish the rice and soup, warm sake and a stack of cups are brought in. The guest of honor takes the cup on the top and passes the rest to the next person, who follows suit. After taking a sip of sake, each guest sets his or her cup down on the tray and enjoys the *mukozuke*.



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3. This simmered dish, also called *wanmori*, is the second of the three *sansai* components of *ichiju sansai*. As it is a main course of the tea ceremony, extra care is taken to select ingredients that reference the season. These are served with a clear broth ladled to just barely cover them. Here, redspotted grouper and fragrant matsutake mushrooms topped with *yuzu* citron zest are presented in a lacquer bowl embellished with an ornate design of gold *makie*. Following this dish, a second serving of sake is offered.

4. A grilled item is typically the third and final dish of the *ichiju sansai* presentation. From this course onward, the food is plated large, to be shared among the guests, who each transfer a serving onto his or her now-empty *mukozuke* dish. The main guest takes a portion first and passes the food to the next; care is taken to be swift so that the freshly grilled fare remains hot for all. A boned fillet of fish is often featured in this course, as it is easy to eat. Here, tilefish lightly sprinkled with salt and garnished with chrysanthemum petals is served in an Oribe bowl crafted around the late 16th century.

5. Next comes the *azuke-bachi* course, named for its style of serving: the host “entrusts” (*azukeru*) his guests with the bowl, from which they serve themselves. As this part of the meal is enjoyed with steamed white rice, flavor-rich fare such as deep-fried *agemono*, vinegared *sunomono*, or a *takiawase* medley of separately cooked items is typically served. Shown here is a *takiawase* of deep-fried tofu balls, simmered pumpkin, Manganji green peppers, small yams, and julienned ginger. This course and the next are especially suited to the enjoyment of sake.

6. In a ritualized exchange, the host offers to serve rice, but the guests decline, offering instead to help themselves. Such mindful gestures of communion embody the time-honored spirit of *cha-kaiseki*.

7. The host presents the last round of sake along with delicacies arranged on an immaculate unvarnished cedar tray. This course takes its name, *bassun*, from a traditional measurement referring to the tray’s size, approximately 24 centimeters. At this relaxed juncture, the host may now move around the room as he or she and each of the guests pour sake for one another. These congenial exchanges are a shared moment of merriment before the subsequent rituals of the tea ceremony are conducted in hushed reverence.

The *bassun* course shown here features soft ginkgo-nut dumplings and prawns flavored with a touch of pickled bonito tripe. In *cha-kaiseki*, this course typically features two foods—together representing the bounty of land and sea, as here, or juxtaposing meat or fish and a vegetable. The contrast between such duos is further expressed in the style of cooking and their arrangement on the tray.

8. A pitcher of *yuto* and pickles are served to conclude the meal. *Yuto* is hot water, lightly salted, that has been poured over the crisp, slightly charred rice left at the bottom of the kitchen pot. (Today, parched rice is sometimes used instead.) Following the teachings of Zen, the point is to leave nothing to waste, so this flavored water and pickles are used to clean up even the last remaining grains of rice in one’s bowl. Normally two or three kinds of seasonal pickled vegetables are served, such as *mizunasu* eggplants, leafy greens, and kombu kelp. Having wiped their bowls clean, the guests conclude the meal by placing their chopsticks on the tray in unison, a gesture of thanks that also indicates to their host that they have finished eating.

At this point, all guests will leave the room in order that it may be prepared for the tea ceremony.

Presentation



With fall flowers in green bamboo vases and lanterns fashioned from the thin shavings of daikon radish, this *basun* platter, prepared in October, speaks to the season.

The *omotenashi* spirit—what to convey, and how

At once spectacular and refined, the *hassun* course never fails to elicit murmurs of delight when it is revealed. Delicacies prepared for the number of guests in attendance are arranged on the tray, with care given to ensure that the presentation is equally pleasing from any seat or angle. Stunning in its embodiment of the season, *hassun* served at Kyoto Kitcho is truly a jewel in the crown of Japanese haute cuisine.

The name *hassun*, meaning 24 centimeters, derives from the size of an unvarnished square cedar tray commonly used in *cha-kaiseki*. When served as part of modern *kaiseki*, the *hassun* platter is designed in balance with the rest of the meal's courses, and reflects the hospitality of the host by bringing the essence of the season to the table dynamically, in a highly entertaining way.

“The five flavors of sweet, sour, spicy, bitter, and salty; the five colors of red, green, yellow, black, and white; and the five preparation methods of grilling, stewing, deep-frying, steaming, and serving raw—these are the basic principles of *washoku*, modeled on the doctrine of yin-yang and the five elements of Chinese cosmology. At Kitcho we add another set—the five senses of sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell,” says executive chef Tokuoka. In Japanese cuisine there must be a considered balance among all of the five flavors, colors, and cooking methods; no one element in a set should overwhelm the others. This thinking applies to all courses, but is most evident in the *hassun* platter.

“How a mixed variety of foods is arranged on the plate is an area where *washoku* differs greatly from Western cuisine,” Tokuoka observes. “One basic approach is to compose a series of three-dimensional triangular forms. This creates a kind of aesthetic visual stability. But too much stability is boring, so asymmetry is introduced. A little deviation from the rules is fun, exciting. Of course, there are limits as to how far one should go. You have to know where to rein in, so as not to disrupt the overall balance.”

For Tokuoka, color is key to achieving balance in presentation. “Plate composition is all about taking control of color. Colors provide visual stimulation, which creates energy. *Santen-mori*, a display of three kinds of appetizers, has the visual stability of a triangle. To this, you can add a splash of color with your choice of serving



plate, for example. It's all about creating interest, some element of intrigue on the plate. For inspiration, I turn to nature. I think about how I'd like our customers to feel, and what I'd like to convey. I think a great deal about what each will take away from the experience. Nothing matters more.”

The sumptuous *hassun* platter on the opposite page is brought to the table before the guests have finished the previous course, enabling them to feast their eyes on its mesmerizing display. This timing whets the appetite and heightens anticipation for the moment when the waitress returns to portion out individual servings, as shown above. The five delicacies of soy-marinated trout roe, *tamagoyaki* omelet, simmered prawn, stewed beef tongue, and ginkgo dumplings are then arranged on each guest's plate with care given once again to spatial balance.

The right tool makes all the difference



Knives

Thinly sliced flounder sashimi is garnished with julienned leeks. Drawing the single-ground *yanagiba* knife toward you diagonally as you cut renders slices with a smooth, clear surface, enhancing their texture and flavor.

With its temperate climate year-round, Japan is blessed with a great variety of fresh produce in every season. An amazing diversity of fish and other seafood resides in its waters. In addition, rice and other types of grains, edible wild plants, and plentiful sea vegetables are all essential ingredients to Japanese cuisine. Yet without expertise and the right tools, this bounty would never come to the table.

In the washoku kitchen, the knife is undoubtedly the most important tool. When honed to perfection and used properly, the right knife brings out and enhances the flavor of all that it meets. There are more than 20 types of Japanese kitchen knives made for different foods and purposes, ranging from the *deba* blade for gutting and filleting fish, the *usuba* for cutting vegetables, and the *yanagiba* for slicing sashimi, to special-purpose blades such as those used to prepare *hamo* pike conger, eel, or noodles. Most Japanese knives are single-ground, their blade honed to a bevel only on one side. When cutting fish, the basic technique is to pull the knife toward you.

Proper cutting technique, as well as careful honing of the blade, is critical to the flavor of sashimi. A dull knife crushes the fibers of the slices, bruising the flesh and spoiling its texture. In this way, sashimi, an iconic dish in Japanese cuisine, is a real showcase of the chef's prowess, the superior quality of the knife, and its proper care.

To any chef, knives are stock-in-trade; in the professional washoku kitchen, no chef is without his or her personal arsenal. Some may be passed down or given by a mentor; others are purchased independently. It is not uncommon for chefs to use their knives for as many as 20 or 30 years.

It goes without saying that the sharpening of knives is a daily task for the dedicated washoku chef. Proper maintenance of each one of these handcrafted instruments acquaints the cook with its unique features, enhancing ownership as well as one's ability to bring out the best flavors of whatever ingredients may be at hand. That's kitchen wisdom with an edge to serve all creative endeavors well.



Far right: The *usuba* blade is used for rotary peeling of paper-thin sheets. Held in the left hand, a vegetable such as daikon is rotated toward the beveled side slowly, while the eyes follow the line where the cutting edge rests.

Right: The paper-thin sheets may be rolled into cylinders and sliced crosswise to produce *ken*, or needle-thin slivers. Translucent slices can be used to adorn sashimi and *hassun* platters, for an attractively limpid effect.

1. *Hamo-kiri*: a hefty blade, for scoring the flesh of filleted pike conger in order to break up its many fine bones.

2. *Yanagiba*: long-bladed, for yielding smooth, clean sashimi slices as the blade is pulled toward you through the flesh.

3. All-purpose chef's knife: double-ground, for cutting meat and vegetables.

4. *Usuba*: for vegetables, as when julienning or rotary peeling.

5. *Deba*: thick-bladed, for gutting and filleting fish and cutting meat.

6. Small-sized chef's knife: also called "petit knife"



Clockwise from front:
Lacquer bowl decorated with cherry-blossom-shaped mother-of-pearl inlays, copied after Oda Urakusai's "Meigetsuwan" (Meigetsuin Temple Bowl).
Ceramic pieces by Shirai Hanshichi in the shape of a paper lantern and a plover, both symbols of spring.
Serving dish for *mukozuke*, painted with cherry blossoms and red Japanese maple leaves and shaped like a knot, copied after an incense container by Nonomura Ninsei.

Spring

often arranged with earthenware pieces that exude warmth. Poetic references to the season are revealed not only in painted patterns such as flowers, birds, and snowscapes, but by the very shapes of dishes as well. Our sense of touch also speaks to us of the season—the cool, crisp feel of sparkling glass, for example, versus the warm, earthy impression yielded by the textured surface of an unglazed piece of pottery.

"In Western dining traditions it is customary to acquire a set of dishware and cutlery from the same line of the same brand," comments Tokuoka. "The

Tableware

Eclectic designs for interest and play

The celebration of each season is an integral part of the *omotenashi* spirit of hospitality, and one of the greatest delights of the washoku tradition. A sense of the season is conveyed not only through masterful preparations of choice ingredients, but also by the careful selection of dishes and other serving vessels. Bowls adorned with a design of cherry blossoms might grace the table in spring; in summer, glassware and dishes that impart a cool, refreshing feel, such as blue-and-white china, prevail. In autumn, dishes depicting colored foliage set the mood, while in winter the table is more

Summer



Clockwise from front:
Blue-and-white medium-sized plate, said to have been custom-made in China in the 17th century for a Japanese client.
Boat-shaped *mukozuke* dish, custom-made by Baccarat in the Taisho period (1912–1926) for a Japanese client.
Lacquer bowl painted with *make* gourd flowers.
Shallow Shigaraki-ware bowl with a reddish tint, evocative of summer, by Sugimoto Sadamitsu.



Autumn

Clockwise from front:
 Raft-shaped plate, by Rosanjin.
 Lacquer bowl with *makie* design of autumn night.
 Cylindrical *mukozuke* vessel, by Rosanjin.
Mukozuke bowl painted with autumn plants, by Eiraku Shozen.
 In the tea ceremony, October is a month of *nagori*, or parting—a time to savor the last remaining tea of the previous year's harvest and mark nature's descent into winter. Rustic vessels, or those showing signs of repair, are favored, as they reflect the somber mood in their imperfect state of beauty. Come November, the *kuchikiri* or seal-breaking ceremony is held, marking the beginning of a new season of tea with the first opening of jars of tea leaves that were plucked in the spring.

Not having one formal or casual dinner set to rely on, a washoku host selects for each table setting a mix of dishware that speaks to the occasion. A sense of *mitate*, a tea-ceremony aesthetic, also applies. *Mitate* refers to the substitution of some unexpected article in place of a formal utensil. It is about making do, in the frugal sense that tea masters such as Rikyu espoused, but also about engaging one's imagination with a sense of play meant to please those who partake of the meal. "The choice of tableware," says Tokuoka, "is a statement of the season as well as of your own personal creativity."

set may be monogrammed or painted with the owner's family crest, and passed down through the generations—this unity of design on the table is valued. By contrast, in the washoku tradition we mix and match an eclectic range of tableware at every meal. On the table may be pieces made of different materials—earthenware, porcelain, lacquerware, glassware, metalwork, and so on—as well as those made in different periods and regions, and sometimes even different countries. There are no rules, other than the overarching principles to mark the season and entertain others with a sense of delight.



Winter

Clockwise from front:
 Rectangular plate exuding warmth, by Raku Tannyu.
Mukozuke bowl with design of snow on bamboo, by Shirai Hanshichi.
Mukozuke dish shaped like a Japanese pepper cone cracked open, which is a symbol of winter, by Rosanjin.
 Lacquer bowl with *makie* decoration depicting a boat transporting firewood, copied after a design by Tawaraya Sotatsu.

Sushi



Shimofuri, a choice cut of fatty tuna, is melded onto its bed of rice in this classic *nigiri-zushi*.



Yosuke Imada of Ginza Kyubey places freshly formed *nigiri-zushi* on a serving plate. When offering an *omakase* tasting menu, he keeps a careful eye on the pace of each diner.



Shari is key to sushi's quality of flavor. At Kyubey each batch is made with 4.5 liters of freshly steamed rice spread into a shallow wooden *bandai* tub. Dashes of vinegar and salt are then folded in using cutting motions with a flat wooden spatula.



Edomae *nigiri-zushi* shown above from top left are *shimofuri* marbled tuna (appearing twice), *tai* sea bream, *akami* lean tuna, *kue* kelp grouper, *akagai* ark shell, *sumiika* cuttlefish, *uni* sea urchin, *kobada* gizzard shad, simmered *hamaguri* clam, steamed *awabi* abalone, salt-grilled *anago* conger eel, and basted *anago* conger eel. At top right is pickled ginger, or *gari* in sushi parlance.

Crafted for balance

Sushi has many forms, but the style best known outside Japan is *nigiri-zushi*—also called Edomae, referring to its Edo (early Tokyo) origins. Predating it is *nare-zushi*, whereby a skinned and gutted fish is stuffed with rice and salt-cured for deepened flavor, as well as for transport. *Haya-zushi*, or “fast sushi,” emerged in the mid-Edo period (1603–1867). Its sour taste derives not from natural fermentation but rather from the vinegar that is mixed into the rice. *Haya-zushi* evolved in two main ways: Kansai-style *bako-zushi* presses the flavored rice and fish together in block-shaped form, while the Edomae *nigiri-zushi* of the Kanto area serves up the fish on bite-sized morsels of rice.

Yet *nigiri-zushi* is far more than a slice of raw fish on rice. The toppings, known as *neta*, are cured or otherwise prepped by methods appropriate to each, or that reflect the chef's own flair. Equally important is how firmly the sushi rice, known as *shari*, is pressed into shape. “It has to be firm enough to remain intact when lifted, but still loose enough to melt softly in the mouth,” says Yosuke Imada, owner-chef of Kyubey, one of Tokyo's renowned sushi bars. There is also a practiced art to slicing the *neta* for optimum flavor and texture; the best sushi demands years of expertise. Different toppings are cut to different sizes and thicknesses, depending on the part and firmness of its flesh.

“When sushi is eaten, its *neta* and *shari* must strike a perfect balance. A good chef knows how to achieve this almost by instinct,” says Imada, who wields a knife made to a specific weight, length, and thickness of blade. Sushi quality is also determined by the catch itself: line-caught fish, rather than netted ones, are preferable as the flesh is less likely to be bruised. Over its long history as a means to preserve and enjoy seafood, sushi has developed into a culinary art reflecting the skills of fishermen, those who bring the catch to market in pristine state, knife artisans, and the chefs who delight us with their creations.

Ginza Kyubey
www.kyubey.jp

Tempura



Drawing out and sealing in color and taste

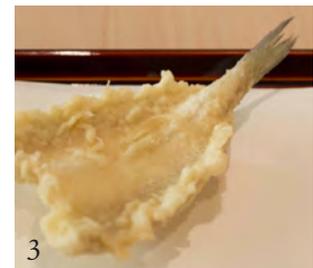
Dating back to the Edo period, when enterprising minds offered up freshly fried daily catch at food stalls near present-day Tokyo Bay, tempura is made by dipping seafood and all manner of vegetables in a light batter of flour, water, and eggs before deep-frying. Today it is one of the most prominent types of washoku cookery, as well known as sushi or soba.

Fumio Kondo, owner-chef of the Ginza restaurant Tempura Kondo, is renowned for his elegantly fried tempura. At a time when seafood was the main draw at most tempura restaurants, he gave equal focus to vegetables, sourcing organically grown, pesticide-free produce and perfecting his frying technique so that the vivid colors and essential flavors of each ingredient burst forth.

Precisely because it involves such a simple cooking method—batter-dipped and deep-fried—tempura is a real litmus test of a chef's skills. Kondo uses only sesame oil, blending his own mixture of cold-pressed and roasted varieties. One of his signature dishes is sweet potato. Cooking it slowly at 170°C for over 30 minutes, he renders it delightfully crisp on the outside yet fluffy and moist inside. His julienned carrots are another double treat—first for their crunchy bite and then for the sweet flavor that slowly spreads on the palate.

“Making tempura well is all about keeping the right moisture retention. That’s what seals in the flavors, and it’s the trickiest thing to do,” says Kondo. “Each offering should be crisp on the outside but tender and just moist enough inside.” Kondo adjusts frying temperatures and times for each ingredient, and listens to the oil to gauge the process.

The point has less to do with frying the food until it is done, and more to do with leveraging each ingredient’s natural water content so that it steams in itself with the careful application of heat. When tempura is done well, the food’s essential flavor will come forth cleanly the very moment you bite into it.



1. Lightly battered and fried until just crisp on the outside, prawns seem to stand to attention. 2. With its internal moisture nearly vaporized, asparagus has an intensified flavor to match its bright color. 3. Japanese whiting is a classic tempura treat. 4. Green beans are quickly clustered together at the last moment before they are removed from the oil. 5. Thickly sliced sweet potato is almost like a baked confection.



Carrots are rotary-cut into paper-thin sheets, julienned, and dusted with flour. Next, they are dropped into the batter for a thorough coating. Finally, they are plunged into 180°C oil, stirred, and gathered together just before they are lifted out.

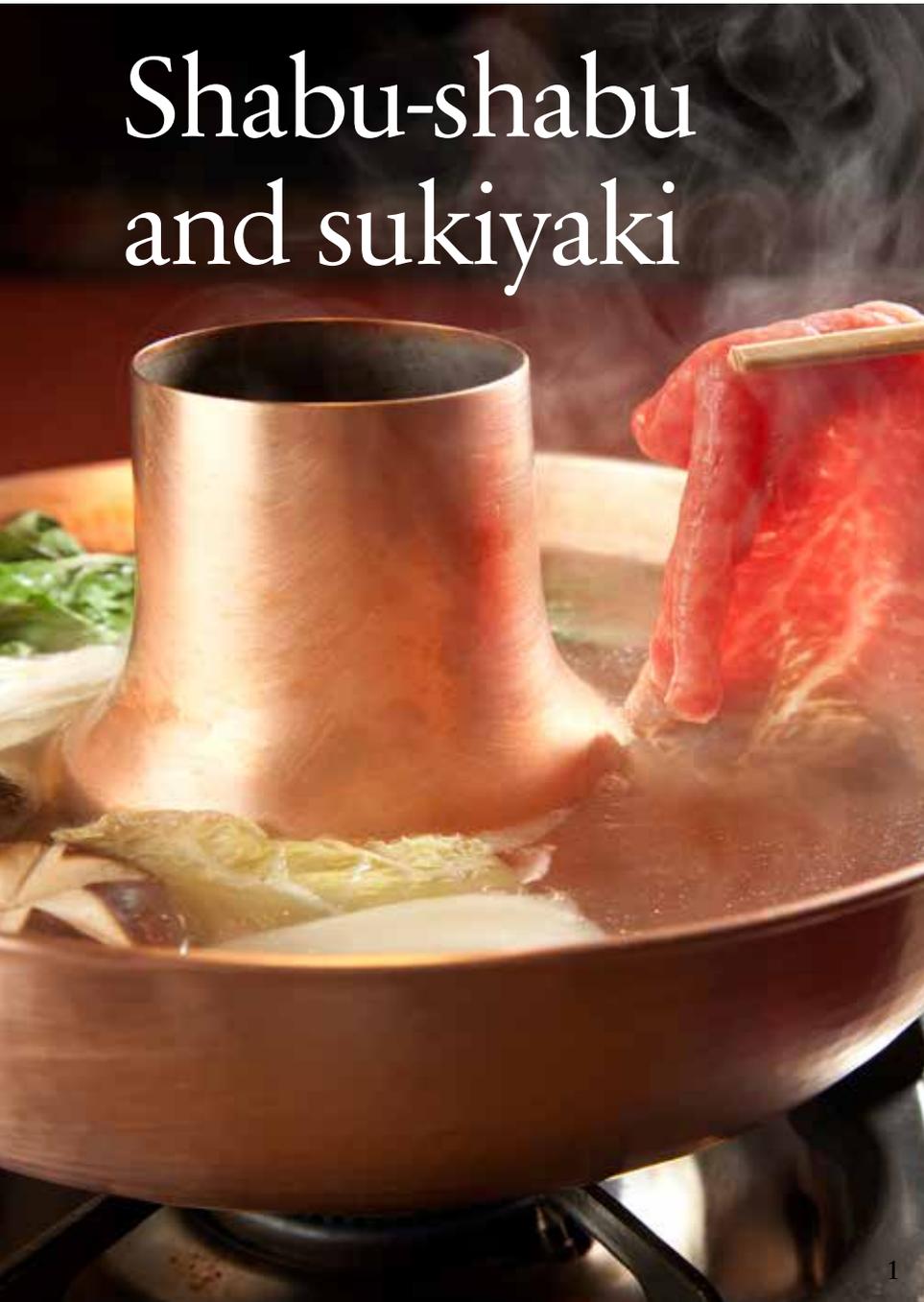


After serving as executive chef at the Yamanoue tempura and Japanese restaurant at Hilltop Hotel in Tokyo's Ochanomizu area, Fumio Kondo opened the eponymous Tempura Kondo in Ginza. His published works include *Tempura no zen shigoto* (All about Tempura).

Tempura Kondo
Sakaguchi Building 9F
5-5-13 Ginza, Chuo-ku, Tokyo
Tel. 03-5568-0923



Shabu-shabu and sukiyaki



Two sumptuous ways to enjoy Wagyu

Two hotpot dishes, shabu-shabu and sukiyaki, are probably the best-known meat dishes of washoku. The first cooks paper-thin cuts of beef (or pork) in a clear broth, highlighting the meat's essential flavor. The second seasons the beef with a *warishita* blend of soy sauce, mirin, and sugar. Both are prepared together with vegetables and tofu.

With shabu-shabu, the slices of meat are swished once or twice in a boiling pot of dashi stock, then dipped into a choice of flavored sauces to eat. Other ingredients, such as vegetables, tofu, and slender *shirataki* noodles, flavor the pot as well. Typical dipping sauces are ponzu and sesame.

Sukiyaki has enjoyed enduring popularity in Japan as an upscale treat since its introduction in the late 1800s, when eating meat was hailed as part of the country's sweep toward modernization. When cooked Kansai-style, the beef is partially stir-fried and then topped with *warishita* to finish cooking, while the Kanto way simmers the meat together with other ingredients in *warishita* from the start. At the Tokyo sukiyaki restaurant Echikatsu, a waitress prepares and serves the meal for you. She pours the *warishita* in a pan, carefully arranges the meat with vegetables and tofu, and removes it while it is still partially red. This is had with a dipping sauce of beaten raw egg, which enhances the rich umami flavor of tender marbled beef.

1. Shabu-shabu is a healthy way of eating meat, as its excess fat extracts out into the boiling broth. 2. At Echikatsu, a waitress serves the sukiyaki for you in a Japanese-style room overlooking a garden. 3. It takes practiced knife skills to cut the thin slices required for sukiyaki. 4. The fresh beef is tastiest when rare or medium rare.

Echikatsu
2-31-23 Yushima, Bunkyo-ku,
Tokyo
Tel. 03-3811-5293





Translucent fugu sashimi is deftly arranged from the outer edge of the plate in *kiku-zukuri* style, after the shape of a chrysanthemum bloom.

Fugu



Only the edible parts, from top left: fillet and three sheets of skin. From bottom left: lips, *kama* section beneath the gills and around the pectoral fins, *shirako* milt sacs, dorsal fin, pectoral fins.



Among several species of blowfish, *torafugu* puffers caught in the Seto Inland Sea of Japan between October and March are prized for their delicate flavor.



Kuniyoshi Yamamoto is the third-generation owner-chef of Tsukiji Yamamoto, a century-old fugu specialist in Tokyo. Milt crepe and others of his original creations fill out the restaurant's traditional menu of fugu classics.

Tsukiji Yamamoto
2-15-4 Tsukiji, Chuo-ku, Tokyo
Tel. 03-3541-7730
www8.plala.or.jp/tsukijiyamamoto

Licensed chefs turn poisonous fish into seasonal delicacy

Torafugu is a species of blowfish sought for its delicate white flesh, yet its liver and other viscera contain a lethal amount of tetrodotoxin, a potent nerve poison. In Japan only specially licensed professionals are allowed to prepare this delicacy; they separate the edible and toxic parts following strict rules mastered over a long certification process that involves apprenticeship and a battery of tests.

Owner-chef Kuniyoshi Yamamoto of Tsukiji Yamamoto in Tokyo is an expert in blowfish preparation. In recent years an increasing number of restaurants have begun to offer farm-raised fugu, but Yamamoto serves only two-year-old wild *torafugu* weighing a minimum of 1.5 kilograms—the best of the lot, at the peak of flavor. He closes his restaurant from April to September, when the fishing season has ended.

These days the fish arrives with its poisonous parts already removed by licensed specialists at Haedomari Port in Yamaguchi prefecture, a major collection point. For chefs, the real magic of fugu preparation lies in the creation of sashimi—this is where they display their finesse. Blowfish meat is naturally fibrous; thick cuts render pieces that are too chewy to eat. Sashimi is therefore sliced into ultrathin pieces using a knife with a fine blade made especially for the purpose. Yamamoto arranges each one slightly raised at the edges, like petals, a flourish made possible by the flesh's high gelatin content. His presentation is as practical as it is lovely to look at: each artful slice comes away easily with chopsticks. And nothing is wasted: the skin is jellied, the milt served in soup, and the fins steeped in hot sake. Presenting all of the edible parts deliciously is also part of the magic.



Shojin ryori

Healthy food for the spirit and body

Both a style of cooking and a protocol for eating practiced at monasteries in China during the Song dynasty (960–1279), *shojin ryori* was brought to Japan by Buddhist monks about 700 years ago. At the meditation hall of Daitokuji temple in Kyoto, Zen monks eat a vegetarian *ichiju issai* lunch of one soup with one dish and rice such as the simmered vegetables and rice cooked with barley shown above at right. All three of their daily meals are frugal fare, just enough to keep hunger at bay. At Daitokuji, these meals and their preparation are considered part of the monks' ascetic training.

From late in the Muromachi era (1336–1573) to the Edo period (1603–1867), a *bonzen*-style vegetarian meal was served at Daitokuji to visitors such as daimyo lords, tea masters, and prominent merchants who arrived there to practice

zazen meditation. A more elaborate version of what the monks were eating, *bonzen* meals offered foods such as tofu, *yuba* soy-milk skin, *namafu* wheat gluten, and *natto* fermented soybeans in addition to vegetables. For occasions like an ancestral memorial service, daimyo and other dignitaries sometimes brought their own ingredients and had meals prepared for them by cooks at the temple's licensed caterer—now known as the restaurant Daitokuji Ikkyu.

Diners at Ikkyu can enjoy much the same meal as was served centuries ago—a style that is said to have influenced the *chakaiseki* cuisine later developed by tea masters for the formal tea ceremony. While *bonzen*-style *shojin ryori* is more elaborate than what is served at the meditation hall, both share the same spirit of eating in balance and wasting nothing.



At Daitokuji Ikkyu, a restaurant by the temple grounds whose kitchens have been in operation for more than 500 years, visitors can enjoy a meal like the one shown at top on the red lacquer tray.

Daitokuji Ikkyu
20 Murasakino Shimomonzen-cho,
Kita-ku, Kyoto
Tel. 075-493-0019
www.daitokuji-ikkyu.jp



Osamu Ueno's kitchen at Kigawa is the stage where he entertains his customers. Both à la carte dishes and multicourse menus can be enjoyed at its spacious wraparound counter.

Naniwa-kappo Kigawa
1-7-7 Dotonbori, Chuo-ku, Osaka
Tel. 06-6211-3030

Itamae kappo

The counter culture experience

A Japanese term, *itamae* literally means “in front of the cutting board.” *Kappo*, on the other hand, is derived from a Chinese word written with characters meaning “to cut” and “to cook,” and signifies two modes of preparation: serving dishes raw, such as sashimi, and cooking with fire. Together *itamae* and *kappo* refer to the type of intimate restaurant found in Japan today where the chef himself presides at the counter and diners order their dishes from him one by one. Conversation is welcomed; more often than not it's a highlight of the experience. If the chef has procured some premium sea bream, for example, customers can request how they would like to try it—as sashimi, simmered, or grilled, for example.

Kigawa in Osaka is one of the pioneer *itamae kappo* restaurants. Second-generation owner-chef Osamu Ueno says, “While naturally I do some prep work beforehand, my preference is for customers to enjoy something made freshly on the spot to suit their own fancy.”



1. Colorful arrangements of sea bream, squid, and ark shell sashimi delight the eyes and palate.
2. Tennoji turnip and grilled sea bream grace a clear soup.
3. Osamu Ueno serves a dish of *shiro-amadai* tile-fish broiled with dried mullet roe.



Culinary journeys around Japan

Despite its limited land area, the Japanese archipelago stretches across climate zones from the cool temperate to the subtropical. That diversity gives rise to a vast array of foods, seasonings, and cooking styles from region to region—a real boon for travelers and food lovers alike.

Bento lunch boxes

Whole histories of style and regional flair

Bento boxed lunches have gained a fast following overseas, especially in France. Prompted by the limitless array of accessories in designs ranging from the cute to the refined, more and more people are taking on to this creative way of styling a movable meal.

An invention of convenience, the boxed lunch originated in Song-dynasty (960–1279) China and arrived in Kyoto in the late 1300s. It soon spread throughout Japan; today, every corner of the country boasts its own bento made with local fare.

Initially, three-tiered *jikiro* baskets of woven bamboo were used by the Japanese for spring blossom-viewing picnics and autumn excursions to enjoy the foliage or gather mushrooms. Toward the late 1500s, the *sageju* set of wooden boxes, serving plates, and sake

flasks and cups evolved, later flourishing during the Edo period (1603–1867), when it spawned many new bento styles. Around the late 1600s, theatergoers packed their own bento to have at kabuki performances; by the mid-1800s, the theaters themselves began selling *makunouchi* bento for their patrons to enjoy at intervals between the plays.

With the arrival of steam engines in the Meiji era (1868–1912), *eki-ben* boxed meals started selling at station platforms. Today there are innumerable varieties of such takeaway lunches throughout Japan, and travelers from near and far seek them out for the tasty local specialties they feature. In 1937, a high-end Japanese restaurant in Osaka launched the famous Shokado bento. Presented in a quartered square box, it

was named after the early Edo-period painter, priest, and tea master Shokado Shojo (1584–1639), who had appropriated just such a box, commonly used by farmers to store seeds, as his paint kit.

In its four compartments the Shokado bento neatly holds such basic categories of washoku as rice, sashimi, a *namasu* dish of vinegar-dressed fish and vegetables, a simmered dish like *takiawase*, a *yakimono* grilled item, or an *aemono* cooked salad—all of which can be prepared to taste good when cool or at room temperature. The freshest in-season ingredients are arranged with care to achieve a balance of harmony using the five colors red, yellow, green, white, and black in this quintessentially Japanese culinary art form, one that food lovers everywhere now claim as their own.

Hassun

Milt dressed with vinegar, *komatsuna* mustard spinach, salmon roe, rolled omelet, prawn, beef tongue simmered in sweetened soy sauce, and others.



Takiawase

A simmered medley of bamboo shoots, butterbur stalks, broad beans, wakame seaweed, and young *sansho* pepper leaves.

Sashimi

Sea bream, *iwatake* lichen with gold leaf, squid, Chinese yam, *mizuna* pot-herb mustard, pumpkin, and wasabi.

Rice

Steamed white rice sprinkled with white sesame seeds.

Shokado bento by Kyoto Kitcho



The Edo-style *makunouchi* bento began as a meal to have between kabuki plays, but has since become a standard type for any occasion.



Wrapped in fragrant bamboo leaves, pressed *masu-zushi* trout sushi from Toyama prefecture is a classic *eki-ben* meal from that locale.



Arranged on a bed of rice, shredded scrambled eggs and *soboro* minced chicken cooked in sweetened soy sauce are a colorful and filling duo.

Local fare

Across the country, a wealth of flavors on the daily table

Lying in the Pacific Ocean off the northeastern coast of Eurasia, the Japanese archipelago stretches from the cool temperate zone in the north to the subtropical in the south. A unique feature of this arc of islands is the collision of warm and cold currents swirling off its long eastern seaboard.

Thanks to that geographical placement as well as its mountainous terrain, Japan is blessed with four distinct seasons, and its different regions boast diverse climates. Its ocean waters are in turn nurtured by the soil of natural woodlands that cover 67 percent of the country's land mass. These factors support a wealth of edible plant and animal life from sea and land; within that rich setting, each region has its locally grown foods and styles of cooking that have evolved apace.

As varied as their tastes and cooking styles are, all regions of this island country share one dish in common that appears without fail in celebratory menus for festivals and other auspicious occasions: sashimi. For such a prevalent dish, the body of collective wisdom on proper handling for freshness is, naturally, extensive. Only the finest catch is filleted, expertly sliced, and aesthetically arranged for eating. A well-established system of distribution ensures that fish gets to market, and to each home or restaurant table, in the best condition. While sashimi is the simplest dish imaginable, the

remarkable range of fish caught in different areas and available at different times throughout the year make it one that's hard to tire of.

Sushi is another favorite dish made in homes throughout Japan to mark such special occasions as the New Year holiday, spring Girls' Festival, and autumn harvest celebrations. Its forms vary widely from region to region: one finds tossed *chirashi-zushi*, rolled *maki-zushi*, pressed *oshi-zushi*, layered *kiri-zushi*, fermented *nare-zushi*, *tsutsumi-zushi* wrapped in persimmon or bamboo leaves, and *inro-zushi* stuffed in fried tofu, *konnyaku* jelly, or bamboo shoots. As these many examples suggest, sushi is the unquestionable star of regional fare.

Rice steamed together with other ingredients to make *takikomi gohan*, or, as it is called in some areas, *ajimeshi*, is another dish that lends itself well to distinct local styles. Most often it is seasoned with soy sauce.

Another shared feature of Japan's regional cuisines is balance. Again, *ichiju sansai* is the rule of thumb for a well-composed meal: rice is accompanied by a bowl of soup and a number of sides, also called *okazu*. These might be fish; *nimono* simmered dishes made with leafy and root vegetables, dried foods, and soybean products like deep-fried and freeze-dried tofu; and *aemono* cooked salads featuring vegetables or seaweeds dressed in sesame, walnuts, tofu, miso, or vinegar.

Locally harvested pickled vegetables are also favored.

Simmered *nimono*, the mainstay of *okazu* side dishes, are cooked in dashi stock made from dried foods that are rich in umami savoriness—cured bonito shavings, dried kombu kelp, or dried anchovies, for example—and are seasoned with such flavorings as soy sauce, miso, mirin, and sugar. Root and sea vegetables feature prominently in most regional recipes.

Hotpots are a popular dish cooked in all parts of Japan in the colder months. Typically seasoned with miso or soy sauce, they are a particularly well-balanced and nutritious way to enjoy local produce, and the experience of gathering with others around a simmering pot to share not only the meal but good conversation as well makes this style of food all the more inviting.

Some regions have traditionally eaten noodles as their staple rather than rice. Types and cooking methods vary from place to place, but representative are wheat-flour noodles such as *kenchin* udon, flat *boto*, and the wider *okirikomi*, all of which are cooked in flavored soups with vegetables; and *kate-soba* buckwheat noodles, cooked with vegetables and served cold with a dipping sauce.

Such mineral-rich, nutritionally balanced foods and the “slow” approach to preparing and enjoying them are the very heart of washoku.



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1. Tossed *chirashi-zushi*, a favorite home-style celebratory dish. 2. *Chikuzenni* braised chicken and vegetables. 3. *Kiritanpo* toasted rice dumplings. 4. *Saba-zushi* vinegared mackerel on rice. 5. Flat *hoto* noodles. 6. Mushrooms grilled *boba-miso* style on a magnolia leaf.

1. Plate and rice scoop courtesy of Kurashi no Utsuwa Hanada
 2. Bowl courtesy of Kurashi no Utsuwa Hanada
 3. Earthen pot courtesy of Kurashi no Utsuwa Hanada
 4. *Saba-zushi* made by Izuu of Kyoto
 5. Bowl courtesy of Kurashi no Utsuwa Hanada

Dashi stock

The savory base of washoku, rich in glutamates

The defining flavor element in washoku, dashi stock is made from such dried foods as kombu kelp, *katsubushi* cured bonito, and shiitake mushrooms. Dashi is indispensable to all soups, simmered or braised dishes, and noodles; it even flavors *aemono* cooked salads. Its distinct savoriness is called umami, well known in culinary circles abroad and widely considered the sixth taste after sweet, sour, bitter, spicy, and salty.

Umami derives from certain amino acids and nucleotides naturally contained in marine and agricultural products. When these raw materials are dry-cured, umami becomes condensed. *Katsubushi* has the most concentrated umami savoriness, and is probably the most frequently used dashi ingredient. Not surprisingly, a

long artisanal process of many weeks is involved in its creation: the fish is filleted, simmered, deboned, dry-smoked, cured with mold spores, and sun-dried to yield its rock-hard form and complex umami taste.

Anchovies, kombu, and shiitake mushrooms in their dried forms are other ingredients commonly used to make dashi. These may be used singly or in combination, depending on the dish. Regional traditions and family preferences also come into play in determining how dashi is made. Animal-based and plant-based ingredients work well together, enhancing the other's flavors and yielding depth—this synergistic effect is why cured bonito and kombu are often combined. In contrast to the vaunted *fonds* of French cooking, dashi is fast and easy

to make, requiring nothing but these dried ingredients, water, and a few minutes of time.

The key to making a proper full-bodied dashi is temperature control. To draw a pure-tasting stock without bitter off-flavors, you should begin with cold water and slowly heat the ingredients to no higher than 80°C, or barely boiling.

The water-soluble glutamates in a well-made dashi stock have an intense umami and a tantalizing aroma that are enhanced by such principal washoku seasonings as soy sauce and miso. The fact that such flavor can be extracted in a flash in any home kitchen, even by a novice cook, is owed to the labor-intensive steps involved in each ingredient's production, whether curing or sun-drying or both.



Place pieces of kombu in a saucepan of cold water, allowing them to soak for 30 minutes. On medium heat bring to about 80°C, when tiny bubbles form just before the boiling point. Add bonito shavings to the pan, let sit for a minute, and then strain through a cloth or paper filter.



A special tool not unlike a carpenter's plane is used to shave a block of *katsubushi*. With its water content greatly reduced over the long curing process, *katsubushi* is rock-hard and difficult to shave, but the intense flavor released when those shavings meet hot water is well worth the effort.

Dried shiitake

With a rich aroma that tickles the nose, shiitake dashi is indispensable to *shojin* cuisine, the vegetarian cooking of Buddhist temples. Soak dried shiitake mushrooms overnight to rehydrate.



Dried kombu kelp

Thick dried kombu makes a clean and understated dashi. It is often combined with cured bonito shavings for a classic washoku stock. Soak the fronds in plenty of water for half an hour and cook at 80°C for a minute.



Katsuobushi cured bonito shavings

A central ingredient of dashi, shaved bonito can be used alone or in tandem. For the best flavor, shave just before using.

Niboshi

Dried anchovies produce an aromatic dashi rich in taste. Remove the heads and guts, and soak in plenty of water for 3 hours.





At Kakukyu Hatcho Miso in Okazaki, Aichi prefecture, miso makers fill giant cedar casks with 6 tons of miso, pile 3 tons of river rocks on top, and let the mash ferment for at least two years.



1

Miso

Highly versatile
biotic goodness

Miso, like soy sauce, is a healthy fermented product that plays a pivotal role in seasoning washoku fare. Both condiments share roots in China, yet as early as 1,300 years ago had already evolved to suit the Japanese diet. By the late 1500s they had become authentically Japanese seasonings with a savory aroma and intense umami quite unlike those of their Chinese counterparts.

Traditionally an important source of protein, miso can be divided into three types: that made solely of soybeans, a kind made with rice, and a third made with barley. The latter two use soybeans as a secondary ingredient.

As it is produced from locally harvested ingredients, miso varies in color, flavor, and taste depending on where it is made. Likewise there are a multitude of recipes throughout Japan for its use. It is often simmered down, for example, with minced

fish or meat and vegetables to yield condensed pastes that are eaten with rice or used in dips and sauces. Partially sun-dried daikon radish or salt-cured eggplant and other vegetables are often marinated in miso. And miso is, of course, the essential seasoning for its eponymous soup—an indispensable companion to rice in the washoku diet.

Miso makes an excellent marinade for fish and meat as it aids preservation, removes unpleasant odors, and adds savory flavor. The oilier blue-backed fishes like mackerel are often stewed with miso to mitigate their briny scent. Boiled daikon, turnips, or jellied *konnyaku* are commonly served with miso-based sauces, while the dish known as *dengaku* takes miso as its main seasoning; tofu pieces are grilled, spread with the paste, and lightly roasted.

Commonly used in sauces for *aemono* cooked salads, miso also blends well with

such regular components of Western fare as oil, butter, and cream. Tremendously versatile, it is one of the greatest features of washoku.

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1. Hatcho miso is a classic deep-flavored soybean paste. 2. White Saikyo miso made with rice is a representative style of miso from the Kansai region. 3. Reddish-brown barley miso has a salty taste. 4. Kakukyu Hatcho Miso has a five-century history.

www.hatcho-miso.co.jp



1



2

Soy sauce

The ultimate natural flavor enhancer

An indispensable, all-round seasoning for washoku, soy sauce comes in a few colors and flavors—some are dark, some light, some almost colorless, and some faintly sweet. *Koikuchi* dark soy sauce is the standard type used in all parts of Japan, but its flavor and aroma vary from region to region. *Usukuchi* light-colored soy sauce is popular in Kyoto and its surrounding areas. Colorless “white” soy sauce is used in Nagoya and its environs, and sweet-flavored soy sauce is characteristic of cooking in Kyushu.

Dark-colored soy sauce is essential in Japan as a dipping sauce for such universal favorites as *nigiri-zushi* and sashimi. This full-bodied sauce with concentrated umami and a subtle bean aroma is said to help soothe the nerves. Dark soy sauce is an excellent marinade for grilled fish and meat, and its light hint of vanilla in the nose makes it a fine match for fruity compotes and sauces or dishes featuring berries. Added to stewed fish, dark soy sauce ameliorates the smell and ups the umami factor. As the intense color of *koikuchi*

soy sauce can dull the vivid brightness of vegetables, for some dishes light *usukuchi* or colorless “white” soy sauce is combined with an umami-rich dashi instead.

Soy sauce is also used to flavor *takikomi gohan* meals of rice steamed together with other ingredients. When added to fried rice or pilaf as a finishing touch, soy sauce imparts an appetizing roasted aroma. A must seasoning for *aemono* cooked salads, soy sauce is also perfectly compatible with all kinds of oil.



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1. The makers of Yugeta soy sauce in Saitama prefecture use wooden vats to ferment the product.
2. The freshly pressed, unpasteurized liquid is bottled immediately upon filtering.
3. Owner Yoichi Yugeta.
4. Full-bodied unpasteurized soy sauce is an ideal match for sashimi.

yugeta.com



Sake

Carefully milled rice is washed to clean it of residual *nuka* powder and then soaked in water before the steaming process begins.



Preparation of cultured *koji* grain is the heart of the brewing process. Rice is steamed for two days as its temperature is closely monitored, then inoculated with *Aspergillus oryzae* spores to begin fermentation.



In sake creation, advanced techniques and traditional ways coexist. Wooden beams stretch over fermentation tanks within the Ozawa Brewery west of central Tokyo. www.sawanoi-sake.com



Stirring the *moromi* mash to release its waste gas is an important task for the brewmaster, who is responsible for the success of the fermentation and ultimately, the final flavor profile of the sake.



Over a complex process demanding great technical skill as well as seasoned intuition, what began as milky-white grains of rice is transformed into pure, crystal-clear sake.



The star of any brewery's product portfolio, *daiginjo* labels are made with highly polished rice and the most labor-intensive techniques.

An integral part of Japan's culinary tradition

Sake is liquor brewed from rice. Its most basic ingredients are 1.3 parts water to 1 part rice, as measured by weight, and the magical *Aspergillus oryzae* mold, which provides the enzymes necessary to break down the starches inherent in rice to fermentable glucose and still other sugars that shape its flavor.

The complex and subtle flavors produced by these few and simple ingredients vary from region to region and indeed, from brewery to brewery. And just as there are different grape varieties in wine, there are different rice strains in sake.

From milling the rice to pressing and filtering each precious drop of the *moromi* mash into the liquid we know and love is a labor-intensive process requiring two to three months. The many delicate steps in-

volved along the way are another factor behind the great variety of flavors found in sake produced by different breweries.

The role of the *toji* brewmaster cannot be underestimated. He is in charge of selecting the raw materials and managing the entire production process. With sharp discernment acquired through years of experience, he closely monitors the changes that occur in the temperature and composition of the *moromi* mash as it ferments. Using biotics to his advantage, he guides the natural workings of *A. oryzae* to craft a sake that befits his brewery's product profile and reputation.

As sake is brewed mostly in winter, any one batch of it is enjoyed at various stages of maturity through the one-year consumption cycle. From late winter to spring,

freshly pressed sake arrives on market. Over the next months and through the summer it ripens, acquiring a richer, more mellow taste. These natural changes in its flavor profile are part of its allure, and dovetail with the appreciation of seasonal nuance that is such a focal point of washoku. As such, the enjoyment of sake is intrinsically tied to the Japanese culinary tradition.

Combined with time-honored techniques, cutting-edge technologies have enabled a mesmerizing array of sake today. With its wide-ranging aromas and flavor profiles, sake complements not only washoku, but other world cuisines as well. As its popularity abroad continues to grow, more people are showing interest in the particular styles and distinctions of Japan's many brewing regions.

Condiments

Building blocks of good flavor



Vinegar

Japanese vinegars include the most commonly used clear or “white” vinegar made from polished rice, and a reddish-brown vinegar, known as *akazu*, which is made from the lees left over after sake is pressed from its *moromi* mash. *Akazu* undergoes three years of ripening, and consequently acquires a characteristically more intense and full-bodied flavor than the naturally mild ordinary vinegar. This mature vinegar is commonly used at fine sushi restaurants in Tokyo. Another type of vinegar is *kurozu*, or black vinegar, which also is made from rice but exposed liberally to the sun during fermentation. And there are vinegars made from other grains and fruits, though the volume of production is a mere fraction compared with that of rice vinegar.

The accepted wisdom in Japan is that one should eat a vinegared dish when fatigued or lacking appetite, so *aemono* cooked salads dressed with vinegar are regularly served in the sweltering days of summer. Undoubtedly vinegar is a great appetite stimulant; it's also effective at removing fishy odors from seafood and preventing food poisoning. Added to small fish cooked in soy sauce, vinegar takes the edge off the saltiness and makes the fish so tender that even the calcium-rich bones can be digested easily; it also helps preserve the dish longer. When small fish are grilled or deep-fried whole and then marinated in vinegar, similarly

they can be easily eaten from head to tail. White-fleshed fish, mackerel, *kobada* gizzard shad, and *mamakari* Japanese shad are often marinated in vinegar for the antibacterial effect and to gain a good balance between salty and sour tastes. A few drops of vinegar tenderize meat and enhance its flavor as well as diminish any greasy aftertaste. Vinegar-pickled turnips and ginger stimulate the appetite; the latter, known as *gari*, is the standard accompaniment to sushi. Vinegar promotes the secretion of saliva, and thus aids digestion, while it also lowers blood pressure and reduces both visceral fat and blood lipids. Its pleasantly tart savoriness and antibacterial properties have contributed as much to the development of Japan's sushi culture as have the abundance of good rice and fish.

Mirin

Made by fermenting a mixture of *shochu* distilled spirits, rice that's been cultured with the *Aspergillus oryzae* mold, and steamed rice, mirin is a sweetener unique to Japan. Less intensely sweet than sugar, it has an understated, mild flavor. A few drops of it rid egg dishes of their eggy smell and freshen a pan of stewing fish. While miso and soy sauce are the two most basic washoku seasonings, mirin is often used to enhance a dish's umami. Mixed with either of those two, it makes

an excellent basting sauce that brings a nice glaze to grilled or simmered fish. *Kabayaki*-style grilled eel basted with mirin and soy sauce is a mouthwatering Japanese classic. Mixing mirin and soy sauce with fruit nectars, berries, pureed tomatoes, or tomato paste opens a wealth of finger-licking marinade possibilities for beef, pork, and poultry.

Salt

Three types of sea salts are used in washoku: coarse-grained, fine-grained, and roasted. Less common are *moshio*, or salt extracted from seaweed, and *yamajio* mountain salt made in the Okuaizu area of Fukushima prefecture. Coarse-grained salt is used to wilt vegetables for pickling and cure fish for grilling, while fine-grained salt and *moshio* are used as seasonings. In Kyoto, sake-infused salt is used to season simmered vegetables and clear soups.

Sugar

The unrefined black cane sugar of Okinawa is rich in minerals. Used to prepare braised pork belly, it not only freshens the smell of the meat, it helps reduce blood lipids as well. *Wasanbon* sugar made in Tokushima prefecture has a subtle, enticing flavor and is an essential ingredient for *wagashi* sweets.

Yakumi

Piquant, peppery, and zesty kicks

A culinary term for the herbs and other natural raw botanicals used in washoku to spice and garnish foods, *yakumi* convey a poetic sense of the season as they bring both antibacterial and flavor-enhancing properties to dishes. They also stimulate the appetite with their verve and bright scents.

Yuzu is a citrus fruit prized for its elegant fragrance. It is used throughout the year, but in different guises: in spring its young leaves, blossoms, calyxes, and baby fruits are harvested; in summer its young green fruit arrives in markets; as the days shorten its mature yellow fruit appears. *Yuzu* zest is often used in clear soups and simmered dishes, while its juice brightens sauces.

Sansho pepper also enlivens washoku across the seasons. Its buds and blossoms garnish clear soups and simmered dishes. Young *sansho* berries enhance simmered dishes, while powder made from their dried mature fruit is a must flavoring for grilled eel.

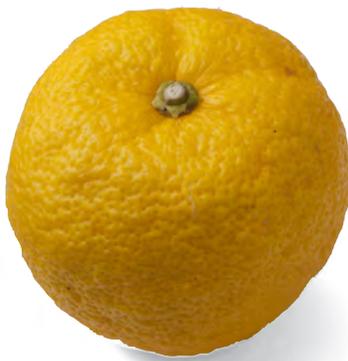
Wasabi mitigates the risk of eating raw fish, preventing food poisoning with its pungent antibacterial properties. Freshly grated, it is a classic accompaniment to sashimi, *nigiri-zushi*, and soba noodles, whose delicate bouquet is counterbalanced by its nose-tingling punch.

Shiso perilla comes in two types: red and green. Its young buds garnish sashimi and diminish its fishy smell. Its bright green leaves are used to set off the pinks and reds of sashimi to advantage.

Myoga zingiber has a subtle scent and a taste similar to ginger. It is used to flavor and garnish both sashimi and noodles. An early-summer and autumn crop, *myoga* is now cultivated throughout the year.

Ginger, or *shoga*, is grated and served with sashimi, and in pickled form, known as *gari*, it always accompanies sushi. It warms the body and also has strong germicidal powers, which is why it is often used in stews made with blue-backed fish and steamed dishes in winter.

Negi belongs to the leek family, and its green and white forms are used widely, in soups, simmered recipes, hotpots, *domburi* rice dishes, and noodles. *Negi* has a calming effect. Like all *yakumi*, it brings a mild scent and a crisp spiciness to washoku dishes.



Yuzu

Sansho



Wasabi



Shiso



Myoga



Shoga



Negi



Wagashi

Confections for every season

Wagashi is the term used to distinguish traditional Japanese sweets from their Western counterparts, which are known as *yogashi*. *Wagashi* come in an astounding variety of shapes and styles, and are variously classified according to the cooking method used, such as steaming or baking, or by their water content, namely the uncooked and very moist *namagashi* or *omogashi*, the less moist *han-namagashi*, and dry *higashi* sugar candies.

There are the high-end *jo-namagashi* served to guests, used as gifts, and presented at the tea ceremony, and the common *dagashi* loved by all children and eaten as snacks.

Wagashi sweets served at the tea ceremony are a universe unto themselves, with a vast array of designs and ingredients. *Omogashi* are served with thick *koicha* tea, while *higashi* are offered with thin *usucha*. Within *omogashi* are many varieties like *kinton*, a sweet ball typically made of bean paste and coated with colorful flakes, and soft *gyuhi* cakes made of glutinous rice powder and sugar. Both *omogashi* and *higashi* convey seasonal themes in their designs and colors, the former typically with abstract nuances of color and form, and the latter with representations of plants, flowers, and themes such as spring cherry blossoms, flowing water in summer, autumn leaves, and bright winter peonies.



Omogashi sweets (above) and *higashi* dried confections (below) by Tsuruya Hachiman



Yokan, a dense block of sweet azuki-bean paste, and *manju*, a ball of dough filled with the paste, are often presented at the tea ceremony, but they are also standard confections regularly sent as gifts or served to guests.



Teacups and saucers by Tosai

Japanese green teas

A dose of instant serenity

A cup of tea soothes when we are tired and takes the edge off when we feel restless. There are many kinds of green tea in Japan, and each has a calming and healing effect. Each type has its optimum water temperature for brewing the perfect cup. But whatever the type, Japanese green tea is meant to be enjoyed on its own without sugar, milk, lemon, or honey. Follow the steps here for brewing the perfect cup, and take a moment to relax and appreciate the subtle taste and aroma of its liquor.

Gyokuro is the finest of Japanese teas, with complex layers of sweetness and umami. The leaves of its well-fertilized bushes are shaded from sunlight before harvest, and only new

leaves are picked, to be processed immediately. As *gyokuro* is high in caffeine, brew with water well below the boiling point at about 65°C. Sip a small amount at a time, rolling it on the tongue before swallowing. For an afternoon treat, serve with sweets that do not overwhelm the tea's delicate profile, such as mild *nerigashi* confections made with rice flour and bean paste.

Sencha is the most commonly served green tea. Its bushes are grown in full sunlight, but like *gyokuro* only the new leaves are harvested. To brew, use water that is 70°C to 75°C. *Sencha* has a full-bodied umami and sweet taste, though less pronounced than *gyokuro*. With this brew as well, sip a

small amount and roll it on your tongue. Enjoy the second pot for the slight bitterness of tannin, and the third for the lingering fragrance and refreshing astringency. Sweets are best served with this final, third pot of tea. *Sencha* can be infused with cold water, too.

Bancha is made from leaves and stems left to grow on the bushes after the first *sencha* harvest. This tea is rich in catechins and vitamin C. To brew, infuse with boiling water and turn off the heat just before the water begins to boil again. *Hojicha* is a woody tea made from *sencha* or *bancha* that has been roasted. These three forms of Japanese tea are drunk daily, often with a meal. *Bancha* in particular is an excellent match for fatty foods.

Casual washoku around town

Mori-soba arrives on a bamboo tray with a *tokuri* flask for the dipping sauce and a *choko* cup with which to eat the noodles.

On these pages we take you on a culinary tour of everyday washoku favorites, from traditional fare dating back to the Edo period (1603–1867), to adaptations of Western cuisine that caught on after Meiji (1868–1912), when Japan opened

its ports. Even with these casual offerings, a dedicated washoku chef never rests in the quest for excellence. These foods may be fast, but their production is anything but—a spirit that’s been upheld through the centuries.

Soba

A soba maker’s talents determine the flavor, texture, and color of these popular noodles

Soba, or buckwheat, belongs to the knotweed family. The starchy endosperm of the kernel, rich in B vitamins, is ground into a fine powder that is then mixed with water, kneaded, shaped into a flat dough, and cut into long noodles.

Cultivation of soba began in Japan in the 700s. As buckwheat can be harvested within two months of planting even in cold climates, the crops were a valuable source of nutrition in hard times. In the 1600s the noodle-making technique was devised; by the 1800s, as many as 3,700 soba noodle shops were in business in Edo, the castle town that is present-day Tokyo. A beloved fast food of Edoites, soba was also an auspicious dish enjoyed at seasonal and ceremonial gatherings, as the strands of noodles were said to ensure a long life of good fortune.

There are two main ways of eating soba noodles: *mori-soba* is eaten cold, dipping the strands lightly in a strong, soy-based sauce. *Kake-soba* is served hot, with the noodles immersed in a savory broth. The former is simpler, and the better choice for savoring the delicate flavor of the buckwheat itself.

Edo-soba Hosokawa, a soba specialty restaurant in Tokyo, prepares some of the finest soba noodles in the capital. In his quest for flavorful buckwheat grown in mineral-rich soil, owner-chef Takashi Hosokawa visited more than 200 farms to source this main ingredient. He runs his soba grains through a hulling machine and grinds them with a millstone in a corner of his restaurant. He uses no other flour than that

which he mills himself on the spot.

“Soba counts among the very simplest of dishes in the washoku tradition. The quality of the main ingredient directly affects its taste,” he comments. Hosokawa makes soba noodles by hand from scratch, drawing on years of practice. “Soba noodles are difficult to make because the flour does not contain enough gluten for the dough to hold together. That’s why I carefully grind buckwheat seeds to a fine powder. This makes the dough easier to gather and roll out. How much water to add depends on the season, the weather, and the ambient humidity?”

Once the water is stirred into the soba flour and until the noodles are cut, it takes approximately 20 minutes to prepare one batch. Speed and precision are key, in order to preserve the delicate flavor and fragrance of the buckwheat. Once ready, the freshly cut noodles are boiled for 20 seconds, plunged into cold water to firm them up, and arranged on a *seiro* bamboo tray for *mori-soba*.

When your tray of *mori-soba* is served, pour some dipping sauce from the provided flask into your *choko* cup, adding chopped scallions and wasabi to taste. Next, take up a few noodle strands with your chopsticks, dipping only their ends in the sauce, and slurp them up without chewing too much, enjoying their delicate fragrance and the smooth way they glide down the throat. With each mouthful, the complex flavor of dipping sauce carefully prepared from dashi stock comes through, another facet to this simple and ever-popular dish.



1. Water is added gradually to finely milled buckwheat flour and the dough evenly kneaded with the fingertips and palms. The amount of water required is about half of the weight of the flour.

2. The dough is rolled out into a thin round sheet about 50 centimeters long, and folded multiple times into layers.

3. To make noodles of even consistency, a special ruler is placed on the layered dough, which is then cut into strips of 1 millimeter in width.



Takashi Hosokawa, who has worked in kitchens since his teens, spares no effort in obtaining the best buckwheat for his soba noodles.

Edo-soba Hosokawa
1-6-5 Kamezawa,
Sumida-ku, Tokyo
Tel. 03-3626-1125



Shokudo eateries

Authentic home-style cooking

Sugamo Tokiwa serves freshly steamed rice and piping-hot miso soup along with 50 kinds of mouthwatering home-

style dishes. You can assemble your own meal by selecting a main entrée such as sashimi, grilled fish, stewed fish, or a breaded deep-fried item, and a side dish like blanched greens dressed with soy sauce, potato salad, or grated daikon with dried baby anchovies. With rice, miso soup, and pickles added to your tray, you now have a fully balanced washoku meal. The homey atmosphere of the restaurant belies its discerning approach to sourcing only the best ingredients. Seafood is purchased daily at the fish market; the rice is grown by independent farmers in Akita prefecture. But

Tokiwa's greatest appeal is that you can enjoy these delights at reasonable prices, and never tire of their abundant offerings even if you were to eat there every day.

1. Tokiwa opens early to serve breakfast.
2. A *teishoku* set meal with grilled whole rockfish.
3. The no-frills shop is sparse, clean, and comfortable inside.
4. Jumbo-sized shrimp, breaded and deep-fried, are a bestselling item.

Sugamo Tokiwa
3-14-20 Sugamo, Toshima-ku, Tokyo
Tel. 03-3917-7617
www.kousinnduka.co.jp



Udon

Noodles boiled to just-right firmness for each customer

Rather than aim for consistency, owner-chef Yoshihiro Hiraoka goes one better with his udon noodles: he fine-tunes their size and softness to each customer. He serves thinner noodles to his female customers, for example, and thicker ones to the hungry lunchtime crowd. To those on the run, he offers noodles cooked to “just right” firmness; to diners sitting in at a more leisurely pace, perhaps enjoying

sake with their meal, he serves the noodles cooked al dente, so they'll hold up longer. “After the dough is kneaded from wheat flour and water, it's left to stand for a day. But once it's rolled out and cut it has to be cooked immediately,” he says, explaining the timing behind the care he invests in each serving. Like soba, udon is eaten warm or cold. Of the former, *kama-age* udon is served in the water in which the noodles cooked, with a dipping sauce on the side; *kake-udon* presents the noodles in a soy-based stock with a variety of toppings such as tempura, vegetables, and eggs.

1. Hiraoka opened his udon shop in his twenties. He offers other dishes and a fine selection of sake.
2. He boils the noodles with meticulous care, pinching to check for firmness four or five times for every batch.
3. *Kama-age* udon, ¥850. The dipping sauce is made with a classic kombu and bonito stock. Customers add chopped scallions and crunchy bits of deep-fried tempura batter to taste.

Kamachiku
2-14-18 Nezu, Bunkyo-ku, Tokyo
Tel. 03-5815-4675
www.kamachiku.com



1

Unagi

Plump fillets of grilled eel,
soft on the tongue

Served *kabayaki*-style, long slender eels, called *unagi* in Japanese, are filleted, grilled, and basted with a sweet and savory soy-based sauce. Most commonly, *unagi* prepared this way is served over a bed of steaming white rice in a lacquer box or a bowl. Considered the ideal energy boost, the dish is especially popular in the hot sultry summer. In the Kansai region of western Japan (primarily Osaka and Kyoto), eel fillets are dipped in sauce and grilled, while in the eastern Kanto region (Tokyo and its environs) the eel is steamed first and then basted for grilling.

“At Nodaiwa,” says Masayoshi Ichikawa, who has been working in the kitchens of this Edo-style establishment for more than 40 years, “before steaming we grill the fillets without sauce in a preliminary step known as *shirayaki*. Then we steam them thoroughly for an hour to 90 minutes to remove excess fat”

After steaming comes the main grilling process. The fillets are dipped in a basting sauce made of soy and mirin, and grilled over a charcoal fire. These steps are repeated four times, allowing the sauce to permeate the fillets and deepen the flavor. Each tender morsel will literally melt in your mouth.

1. *Unaju* is grilled eel served in a lacquer box over steamed rice. At Nodaiwa it arrives with eel liver in a bowl of clear soup.

2. Skewered fillets are placed in a large bamboo basket to be steamed.

3. It takes practiced skill and deft hands to monitor and constantly adjust the strength of the fire.

4. Having joined Nodaiwa as an apprentice 40 years ago, Masayoshi Ichikawa now manages the kitchens of the main and branch restaurants.

Nodaiwa
1-5-4 Higashi-Azabu, Minato-ku, Tokyo
Tel. 03-3583-7852
nodaiwa.co.jp



2



3



4

Yakitori

Wielding charcoal fire to cook each part to perfection

Yakitori, or grilled morsels of chicken on skewers, is one of the most popular poultry dishes in Japan. Torikashin, in Tokyo, tempts customers with a vast menu featuring nearly every edible part of the bird, from the fleshy uropygium at the tail, to the neck meat and diaphragm in addition to more common offerings like thighs, wings, and offal.

Owner-chef Tadakazu Yasuda says, “We source birds that are 70 to 120 days old, as their meat has the best balance of flavor and tenderness.” Before grilling, the meat is cut into uniform pieces and atomized with sake, a step that enhances both luster and flavor. Salt is the main seasoning. Parts that lack flavor, such as gizzards, are lightly grilled and then dipped in a marinade of soy sauce, mirin, and red wine. High-quality Bincho charcoal is preferred, for its strong dry heat.

“The meat is ready when the outside is crispy and the center just done. And judging that is something that takes a lifetime to master,” says Yasuda intently. As you bite each glistening piece off the skewer, its fragrant juices fill your mouth. As if by magic, white meat and liver are left sublimely rare in the center.



1. An assortment of yakitori: each part has its distinct flavor. Grilled vegetables complement the servings. Torikashin uses premium Bincho charcoal. As it neither gives off smoke nor imparts a smoky taste, the delicate flavor of the chicken comes through.

2. Before grilling, salt is sprinkled from a height of 30 centimeters, for even seasoning.

3. Tadakazu Yasuda honed his skills at six different yakitori restaurants before opening his own.



Torikashin
Netsu Building B1F
3-14-1 Kita-Aoyama, Minato-ku, Tokyo
Tel. 03-3499-0810



1. Simmering in the partitioned pot is an array of such savory morsels as deep-fried *ganmodoki* tofu balls with minced vegetables, steamed *hanpen* and tubular *chikuwa* fish cakes, shellfish, eggs, and potatoes.

2. Cabbage rolls stuffed with ground meat bring added flavor to the soup.

3. The must condiment for *oden* is *karashi* yellow mustard. Sharp and

hot, it enlivens each morsel while highlighting their distinct flavors.

4. Owner-chef Hisashi Ishihara, at right, still presides over the *oden* pot at age 84. With him is his successor in waiting, Toshiki Matsui.

Ginza Yasuko
7-8-14 Ginza, Chuo-ku, Tokyo
Tel. 03-3571-3467
www.ginzayasuko.com

Oden

The humble hodgepodge, brought to new heights with select ingredients

A savory dish of many different kinds of fish cakes and vegetables simmered in dashi stock, *oden* is enjoyed piping hot. When prepared Kanto-style the stock is seasoned with soy sauce; in Kansai, salt is used. Ginza Yasuko in Tokyo serves *oden* cooked in a rich broth that goes particularly well with sake. In addition to customary *oden* morsels, Yasuko offers such original items as *konnyaku* jelly seasoned with hot pepper, and *kiritanpo*, a savory tidbit of mashed rice pressed on cedar skewers and toasted. Dai-kon radish is a particularly popular item; Yasuko sources theirs from different regions each season to get the best ones on the market. Greasy or strongly flavored ingredients are eschewed, so as not to disturb the subtle balance in the soup. Hisashi Ishihara, the second-generation owner-chef, suggests that “a good balance is struck by having some 30 kinds of offerings in the pot, each absorbing the flavors of the others. *Oden* is really like a Japanese-style bouillabaisse—a mixture of seafoods and vegetables cooked together.”

Donburi

Rice and a side dish,
all in one

Donburi are hearty single-dish meals of rice served in a deep bowl and topped with richly flavored fare such as tempura or seasoned sashimi or roe. Moderately priced *oyako-don* is a highly popular lunchtime choice. In a special one-portion pan, chicken and eggs are cooked in dashi stock seasoned with soy and mirin; the whole is then slid over its bed of rice. At the restaurant Sawacho, once the chicken has cooked in its seasoned broth, the chef pours in one beaten egg to cook until it bubbles, then adds another, careful to keep the mixture light, airy, and velvety on the tongue. Eating the freshly steamed rice in the same mouthfuls as the savory topping is the great appeal of *donburi*.



1

1. The umami flavor of chicken and eggs seeped into warm rice explains the mouthwatering appeal of *oyako-don*.
2. Each individual serving of *oyako-don* is made fresh, upon receiving an order.
3. Two beaten eggs are used per serving, but they are poured in two batches to ensure that they remain soft and creamy.



2



3

Sawacho
5-15-11 Minami-Azabu, Minato-ku, Tokyo
Tel. 03-3447-0557



1



2



3

Tonkatsu

Borrowed from Western cuisine,
and reconceived to complement
rice with full-flavored pork

Breaded pork is deep-fried and served with thinly chopped cabbage in *tonkatsu*, a dish that the specialty restaurant Ponta in Tokyo calls *katsuretsu*, after the term cutlet. While some shops serve both pork fillets and loins, Ponta chef Yoshihiko Shimada offers only the latter, carefully preparing them to his family recipe. Trimming the fat, which he uses as oil, Shimada slowly fries each breaded loin at the low temperature of 120°C. The slow fry imparts a light golden color to the jacket, and sends aromatic juices flowing as you slice through the thick yet tender cut that arrives. Despite the pale look and tender bite, thanks to its frying in lard the cutlet has a depth of flavor that particularly suits its rice and miso soup accompaniments.

1. A 3-centimeter cut of pork loin is pounded and shaped.
2. The breaded loin is slid into a pan of bubbling lard.
3. Yoshihiko Shimada is the fourth-generation owner-chef of the century-old Ponta in Tokyo's Ueno district. His great-grandfather was a chef in the Imperial Household kitchens.
4. Finely shredded cabbage, a standard garnish of *tonkatsu*, sets off the full flavor of the meat and aids digestion. The sauce has a sharp kick.

Ponta Honke
3-23-3 Ueno, Taito-ku, Tokyo
Tel. 03-3831-2351



4



Sapporo



Hakodate



Yamagata



Kitakata



Tokyo

Ramen

Multiple ingredients yield its complex savory flavor

Japanese ramen, a classic trinity of soup, noodles, and toppings, has its roots in China. Whereas the Chinese version is served with an all-purpose broth that also flavors stir-fried foods and other dishes, ramen soup in Japan is prepared especially for this dish.

Until the 1950s or 60s, ramen in Japan, too, had been served in a Chinese-style, all-purpose soup. Gradually, ramen chefs began to work on their recipes to refine and distinguish their shop's own flavor profile. Those efforts have spawned today's diverse range of soups that sport plenty of local and individual flair. Japan's ramen chefs went on to finesse the dish as a

whole—even the noodles now vary greatly from north to south across the country.

Among the locale-specific recipes that have gone mainstream are Sapporo ramen from the northernmost main island of Hokkaido, and Kyushu ramen from the south. The latter is renowned for its stock based on pork bones, and there are many different versions, notably those made in Hakata, Kurume, and Kagoshima.

In general ramen stocks take as their base chicken or pork bones, seafood, or combinations of the same, seasoned with soy, miso, or salt. Whatever the recipe, the soup invariably has plen-

ty of umami flavor and body. The noodles may be extra-thick, thick, thin, or frizzled. Toppings such as *chashu* roast pork and pickled bamboo shoots also vary from place to place. In Sapporo ramen, vegetables are stir-fried and mixed with the soup in a wok; this mixture is then poured over the noodles. A typical bowl of ramen holds seven to eight ingredients, but there are those made with over 30 of them.

These many factors combine to produce not only the concentrated taste experience we know and love as ramen, but the delight of discovering original versions in every region and locale where it is made.



Yokohama



Kyoto



Wakayama



Tokushima



Onomichi



Hakata



Tsuke-men dipping noodles



Nabe-yaki hotpot ramen



1



2

1. *Chashu* roast pork is an indispensable ramen topping. Wet-cured and cooked over long hours, the soft, flavor-rich meat is thinly sliced and placed over the noodles.

2. A ramen chef keeps a close eye on a vat of boiling noodles. Competition over the past two decades has yielded countless more varieties and better-tasting ramen.

This page and opposite were created with cooperation from Shin-Yokohama Raumen Museum. www.raumen.co.jp



1. Brought to the table automatically, the *tsukidashi* appetizer is a sort of cover charge; shown here are potatoes and carrots cooked with soy sauce and sugar. Behind it are items from Shinsuke's regular menu: tuna and scallions dressed with miso and vinegar; and roasted wheat gluten with seasoned miso.
2. Regulars relax into their drinks and food. Don't be shy to ask the chef about his recommendations as you choose from the menu items posted on the wall.
3. Sake is warmed in 180-millimeter flasks to customers' preference—tepid or hot. Of course, some prefer it cold.

Shinsuke
3-31-5 Yushima, Bunkyo-ku, Tokyo
Tel. 03-3832-0469

Izakaya

A Japanese-style pub for relaxed bites and brews

People gather at *izakaya* to enjoy sake or beer over good conversation. At Shinsuke, the fourth-generation owner-chef offers beer and the one brand of sake that has been a fixture on the menu since the pub was first opened. Here, food plays a supporting role to the drink: all dishes are served singly, without sides, but the vast array—over 40 kinds—more than makes up for it.

Sitting at the counter, where you can engage in conversation with the owner or chef in charge as well as fellow diners, is another highlight of an evening out at an *izakaya*. You can order what you like at your own pace, and the congenial atmosphere makes it as easy to go alone as it is with a group of friends.

Okonomiyaki

Savory griddle cakes—crispy on the outside, warm and fluffy inside

The *okonomiyaki* pancake is made with a wheat-flour batter that holds together such hearty ingredients as eggs, meat, and shredded cabbage. There are two types: a thicker one originating from Osaka, and a thinner style, hailing from Hiroshima and filled out with soba noodles. Since its early days as a street food following World War II, Hiroshima-style *okonomiyaki* has risen to attain national fame as that city's specialty. In Tokyo, the restaurant Bon serves Hiroshima-style pancakes cooked on a custom-made steel *teppan* grill. Owner-chef Mitsuru Ishimatsu considers this food “one of the best ways to enjoy cabbage, period.” The shredded leaves fill each crisp griddle cake along

with soba noodles and meat; the whole is capped with a thin egg omelet and brushed with a special sauce. Adding to its depth of flavor are such condiments as dried fish powder, white sesame seeds, and deep-fried tempura crumbs.

1. A whisked batter of wheat flour, eggs, and water is thinly spread in a circle on the skillet. Shredded cabbage and other ingredients are piled on top of the pancake while soba noodles cook separately alongside. Topped with a thin egg omelet, the pancake is then placed on top of the fried noodles.
2. The treat is brushed with a spicy-sweet sauce.
3. Sprinkled with dried bonito shavings and powdered nori, your *okonomiyaki* is now ready to cut and enjoy.

Bon
Shibata Building B1F
8-33 San'ei-cho, Shinjuku-ku, Tokyo
Tel. 03-3357-9129



It takes 20 or so minutes for the shredded cabbage that fills an *okonomiyaki* griddle cake to cook. At Bon in Tokyo's Shinjuku ward, Mitsuru Ishimatsu relies on years of practice to judge the best timing to turn each one.



Washoku words to know

Spice up your conversations about Japanese cuisine, and season your further washoku studies, with these terms and concepts addressed in this book.

<i>Aemono</i> cooked salads ——— 34, 36, 39–41, 44	<i>Kurozato</i> cane sugar ——— 44	<i>Shari</i> sushi rice ——— 27
<i>Agemono</i> deep-fried dishes — 19, 28–29, 50, 53	<i>Makunouchi</i> bento ——— 34–35	<i>Shimofuri</i> choice fatty cuts of meat or fish ——— 8, 26–27, 30
<i>Azuke-bachi</i> course ——— 19	<i>Matcha</i> powdered green tea ——— 17	<i>Shojin ryori</i> temple cuisine — 11, 17, 32, 39
<i>Bancha</i> coarse green tea ——— 47	<i>Menrui</i> noodle dishes ——— 36, 48–50, 54	<i>Shokado</i> bento ——— 34–35
<i>Cha-kaiseki</i> tea-ceremony feasts ——— 11, 14, 16–19, 32	<i>Mirin</i> ——— 13, 30, 36, 44, 51–53	<i>Sunomono</i> vinegared dishes — 18–19, 34, 44
<i>Gyokuro</i> premium green tea ——— 47	<i>Mochi</i> rice cakes ——— 5	<i>Su</i> vinegars ——— 44
<i>Hassun</i> kaiseki course — 14, 17, 19–21, 23, 35	<i>Mukozuke</i> dish to accompany sake ——— 18–19, 24–25	Sushi styles ——— 26–27, 36–37
Heirloom produce: Edo, Kaga, Kyoto — 3	<i>Nabe</i> hotpots ——— 30, 36, 45, 55	<i>Takiaiwase</i> medley of simmered items ——— 19, 34–35
<i>Hinshu kairyō</i> selective cultivation ——— 3	<i>Nakaoroshi</i> intermediate wholesalers ——— 7	<i>Toso</i> spiced sake ——— 13
<i>Hojicha</i> roasted green tea ——— 47	<i>Namasu</i> vinegar-dressed fish and vegetables ——— 34	Tsukiji Fish Market ——— 7
<i>Honzen ryori</i> multitray cuisine ——— 11, 18	<i>Niboshi</i> dried anchovies ——— 39	Umami ——— 5, 7–8, 30, 36, 38, 40–41, 44, 47, 53–54
<i>Hoshi-shiitake</i> dried shiitake ——— 39	<i>Nimono</i> simmered dishes ——— 36	<i>Unagi kabayaki</i> basted grilled eel — 44, 51
<i>Ichiju sansai</i> , one soup and three dishes ——— 11, 32	<i>Okazu</i> accompaniments to rice ——— 36	<i>Usukuchi</i> light-colored soy sauce ——— 41
<i>Ikejime</i> spiking technique ——— 7	<i>Omotenashi</i> hospitality — 14, 17–18, 21, 24	<i>Wagashi</i> and other sweets ——— 5, 44, 46
Kaiseki multicourse feasts ——— 11, 17	<i>Omusubi</i> and <i>onigiri</i> rice balls ——— 5	<i>Warishita</i> seasoning ——— 30
<i>Kaiso</i> sea vegetables: kombu, nori, and wakame ——— 9, 38–39	<i>Osechi ryori</i> New Year's cuisine ——— 5, 13	<i>Wasanbon</i> sugar ——— 44
<i>Kataba bocho</i> , a single-ground knife ——— 7, 23	<i>Oyako-don</i> chicken and egg over rice — 53	<i>Wayo-setchu ryori</i> , Western-Japanese hybrid cuisine ——— 10
<i>Katsuobushi</i> cured bonito ——— 38–39	<i>Sansai</i> wild plants ——— 9	<i>Yakimono</i> grilled food ——— 18–19, 34, 50–52
<i>Kotikuchi</i> dark-colored soy sauce ——— 41	<i>Sashi</i> fatty marbling ——— 8	<i>Yakumi</i> herbs and aromatic botanicals — 45
<i>Koji</i> cultured rice grain ——— 43–44	<i>Seimai</i> , the milling of rice ——— 5, 43	<i>Zoni</i> soup ——— 5, 13
<i>Kome</i> : Japonica rice ——— 5	<i>Sekiban</i> glutinous rice steamed with red beans ——— 13	
<i>Koromo</i> batter for tempura ——— 28	<i>Sencha</i> green tea ——— 47	

Front cover: An elegant yet whimsical design of mollusks graces a jet-black tray of Kaga lacquerware. On it, the five basic colors of washoku cuisine—red, green, yellow, black, and white—are displayed in this auspicious presentation of shrimp, black beans trussed on pine needles, a carved arrowhead bulb, steamed sea urchin on a nugget of crabmeat and egg, and a single grilled ginkgo nut.

Asadaya

23 Jikken-machi, Kanazawa, Ishikawa
Tel. 076-231-2228
www.asadaya.co.jp

Back cover: A rich array of seasonal and heirloom produce inspires chefs throughout the year in Japan. Shown here with a colorful assortment of peppers, *yuzu* citrons, wasabi, turnips, winter squash, and fall fruits are a cut of finely marbled Wagyu, sea bream, and spiny lobster.

Kyoto Kitcho

58 Susukinobaba-cho, Saga Tenryuji, Ukyo-ku, Kyoto
Tel. 075-881-1101
www.kitcho.com/kyoto

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