10 Great Tastes of Japan

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Japanese Food Culture

A traditional Japanese meal is comprised of rice, which is the staple food, a bowl of miso or clear soup and several side dishes, as well as pickled vegetables. Traditionally, a standard meal consists of one bowl of soup and three side dishes, and this is called Ichiju-Sansai. Low in fat but rich in fiber, Japanese cuisine offers a nutritious balance of carbohydrates, protein, vitamins and minerals. This is one reason for its increasing international appeal.

Japanese food is continuing to evolve. Conveyor-belt sushi restaurants have become quite popular in recent years, both in Japan and elsewhere, as an inexpensive way of enjoying sushi. Plates of nigiri or hand-formed sushi are placed on a conveyor belt that moves past the counter seats, enabling customers to pick their selections. Nigiri-zushi originally became popular as a form of “fast food” for the people of Edo, the former name of Tokyo, when it was introduced in the early 19th century as a simple and inexpensive way of eating the fish caught in what is now Tokyo Bay. Conveyor-belt sushi is simply the modernized version of this traditional fast food.

Nigiri-zushi now enjoys international popularity as a health food, and some of the more unconventional creations these days include sushi featuring avocado, pineapple and other fruits.

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Do try out the recipes! We think they’ll enhance your understanding and appreciation of Japanese cuisine.
Sashimi and Soy Sauce

Sashimi is a Japanese food that consists of thinly sliced fresh raw fish served with a dipping sauce. Initially, such sauces were typically tart in flavor, made of rice vinegar mixed with wasabi or ginger. But once soy sauce became widely available in the 18th century, it was adopted as the main condiment for sushi and sashimi. Today, sashimi is eaten by first garnishing the fish with a small amount of wasabi, then using chopsticks to give it a quick dip in soy sauce. Because the fish used is so fresh, there is no “fishy” odor, but instead a rich, satisfying flavor.

Sashimi is most often served accompanied by thinly sliced vegetables, like daikon radish, perilla sprouts or leaves, and chrysanthemum. Sushi, on the other hand, is served with thinly sliced sweet pickled ginger. Garnishes like these, which enhance the flavor and appearance of the dish, are a hallmark of Japanese cuisine, serving both to evoke a sense of the seasons and to accentuate the delicious taste of sashimi and sushi.

Kinds of Sushi

Originally, sushi was a means of preserving fish by fermenting it with rice and salt. However by the 17th century sushi was being made with vinegar-seasoned rice. In the early 19th century, nigrizushi was invented, with tuna becoming a mainstay ingredient. Today, there are many kinds of sushi besides nigriri. Barazushi is rice flavored with vinegar, salt and sugar mixed with other ingredients including fish, egg and sliced cooked vegetables such as shiitake mushroom, carrot and kamippo, dried gourd strips. Norimakizushi is made by using sheets of nori seaweed to roll up ingredients inside rice. Sushi is a healthy, low-calorie food prepared with little or no oil.

Types of Seafood Used in Sushi and Sashimi

Today, while the seafood ingredients used in nigrizushi vary by season and area, staple species include tuna, yellowtail, red sea bream and squid. The growth of farmed red sea bream and yellowtail has made them a tasty and affordable ingredient. Shrimp, octopus and scallops are also widely used.

In addition to these, sea urchin and ikura, or salmon roe, are used as ingredients in nigrizushi. While tuna is the most common type of sashimi today, it was once considered a low-grade fish. It was not until the 19th century, near the end of the shogunate, that tuna gradually came to be eaten in Japan. At first, it was mainly popular in Edo, today’s Tokyo. In the Kansai area of western Japan, where the custom of eating white-flesh fish like sea bream and flounder remains strong, consumption of tuna is less prevalent than in eastern Japan. Fresh seafood contains healthy proteins, and the omega 3 fatty acids DHA (docosahexaenoic acid) and EPA (eicosapentaenoic acid) found in tuna, red sea bream, yellowtail and mackerel are said to help prevent thrombosis and reduce blood fat.
Sukiyaki

The main ingredients in teppanyaki, sukiyaki and shabu-shabu are red meat and seafood. Among the three, sukiyaki has the longest history. Sukiyaki gets its name from an old-fashioned method of cooking (yaki) meat and poultry on top of a farmer’s spade (suki). Early 19th-century Japanese cookbooks describe a similar dish of grilled poultry and seafood such as yellowtail flavored with grated daikon radish and green onions, eaten with yuzu* soy sauce or wasabi soy sauce. However, after Japan opened the country in 1854, more and more Western food was introduced, and around 1870, the name sukiyaki came to be used to describe thinly sliced beef and green onions simmered in a thick broth of soy sauce, miso, mirin and other ingredients. In the next era, sukiyaki evolved from a stewed meal-for-one into a meal shared from a single pot among family members or close friends. It is nutritionally balanced by the inclusion of green onions, napa cabbage, edible chrysanthemum, mushrooms and tofu.

*Yuzu: a Japanese citrus fruit

In the Kansai region, sukiyaki is prepared by first grilling the beef in the pot, then adding soy sauce, sugar and broth stock in which to boil the vegetable ingredients. In the Kanto region, after a broth made of stock, soy sauce, sugar and mirin has been heated in the pot, the meat and vegetable ingredients are added at the same time. In some regions, hot-from-the-pot morsels are dipped into raw beaten egg to cool them before eating.

Shabu-shabu

While its history in Japan is relatively short, shabu-shabu is said to have originated from Chinese lamb hot-pot dishes. Shabu-shabu starts with a broth in which napa, shiitake mushrooms and tofu are simmered. Thin slices of beef or pork are swirled around in the broth to cook them, and then immediately dipped in a sauce, usually a citrus-infused soy sauce using the juice of the yuzu or kabosu*, or a sesame-based sauce blending numerous ingredients including ground sesame, miso, soy sauce, sugar, sake, mirin, rice vinegar, soup stock, chili pepper and garlic. Each region of Japan has its own variant of this kind of stew, usually eaten during the winter. These include stews based on fish sauce that contain boiled fish, red meat and vegetables. There are also stews made from a konbu seaweed broth stock that contain boiled blowfish and vegetables. These are eaten with a dipping sauce mixture of citrus-infused vinegar and grated daikon and chili pepper.

Teppanyaki

Teppanyaki is said to have originated as meat cooked on an iron griddle made from scrap metal. It has evolved into a cuisine that friends or family members might gather to eat while out camping and typically consists of meat, vegetables and potatoes. In recent years, a popular type of teppanyaki restaurant consists of an iron griddle installed in front of counter seating, allowing customers to watch the chef cook steaks, seafood and vegetables right in front of them.

*Kabosu: a Japanese citrus fruit
Tempura is said to have been brought to Japan by the Portuguese in the form of fried ground fish or other deep fried foods. Tempura in the form of white-flesh fish and shrimp lightly fried in batter developed in the late 18th century when people began frying seafood caught in today's Tokyo Bay and nearby waters. Creating tempura's thin coating of fried batter demands skillful control of the temperature of the egg, water and flour, as well as a careful frying technique. Nowadays, seafood such as shrimp, whiting, squid and scallops are commonly used, complemented by batter-fried vegetables such as sweet potatoes, green beans, Japanese ginger and pumpkin. In Japanese, tempura consisting of only vegetables is referred to by a separate term: shojin-age.

Tempura is usually eaten by either dipping it into a sauce called tensuyu, made from broth stock, soy sauce and mirin, with a garnish of grated daikon radish and ginger, or by seasoning it with salt alone or a mix of salt and either powdered Japanese pepper or powdered Japanese green tea. In Japan, grated daikon radish and ginger was historically used as an antidote for poison, while the use of Japanese pepper and powdered green tea for their pungent taste, smell and color is a hallmark of Japanese cuisine.

Fried in vegetable oil, tempura greatly enriches the natural flavors of its ingredients yet is also remarkably healthy.

Shojin-ryori, a form of vegetarian cuisine in Japan, was originally brought back to Buddhist temples by priests who studied in China from the 12th century onward. Influenced by Buddhist teachings that prohibit the killing of living creatures, shojin-ryori developed as a cuisine that does not use animal products. The featured ingredients are vegetables, beans and potatoes. In order to supplement the protein content, soy and soy products as well as wheat gluten are also used. In the quest to add zest to the otherwise bland flavor of a vegetable-based diet, cooks turned to sesame and sesame oil, which contains large amounts of fatty oils, and created dishes that mimic traditional meat-based foods. One example is ganmodoki, a dish of fried tofu and vegetables that mimics goose meat. One signature shojin-ryori foodstuff is sesame tofu, similar to kneaded tofu. This is made from ground sesame and arrowroot starch. Broths based on seaweed and dried shiitake mushrooms are flavored with miso, soy sauce, sake and mirin.

During the 18th century, taking advantage of Japan's abundant and high-quality water, the firmer tofu that had originally came to Japan from China was improved to create a softer type that spread in popularity among the masses. Tofu contains less fatty oils than meat but is high in proteins, leading to its nickname, "meat from the fields." Kayedofu, freeze-dried tofu, and yuba, a tofu product made by skimming heated soy milk, are essential ingredients in Japanese vegetarian cuisine.
Rice and Seasoned Rice

This conveniently portable, easy-to-make and tasty food has been enjoyed for a long time. Today, onigiri are made with many new kinds of ingredients and they’re a popular food all over Japan. Young people tend to be especially fond of onigiri made with tuna mixed with mayonnaise.

Seasoned rice, takikomi-gohan, is a colorful and seasonal treat made from vegetables, seafood and meat all mixed into rice. Recipes vary by region, though in general it starts with rice seasoned with salt, soy sauce and sake. To this are often added ingredients such as carrot, shiitake or shimeji mushrooms and chicken. In spring, bamboo shoots and peas are typical, and in the autumn, chestnuts and ginkgo nuts. Local delicacies such as oysters, salmon and sea bream can also be used as ingredients.

Noodles

Among the many types of noodles introduced to Japan from China, udon has become the favorite noodle of western Japan. Hand-pulled somen noodles, made by stretching a dough of flour mixed with salt, water and oil until it becomes thin, are a classic summertime treat. In western Japan’s Kansai region, the clear broth used with udon is made from a soup stock seasoned with salt and a light soy sauce. While in the Kanto region of eastern Japan, sugar, mirin and dark soy sauce are added to the stock.

Soba noodles, which are made from buckwheat, became widely eaten among Japan’s population in the mid-17th century. Both soba and udon are boiled and served in a bowl with broth, then topped with kamaboko fish sausage, chicken, shiitake mushroom or egg, along with condiments such as sliced green onion or ground chili pepper. Cooked soba and udon can also be served “dry” on a bamboo sieve and dipped in a deeply-flavored broth, with spices such as wasabi, ginger and chili peppers.

Ramen noodles in modern Japan differ from the Chinese version and feature a range of soup flavors based on soy sauce, salt, miso, butter and pork stock. In order to create a complex flavor that cannot be reproduced at home, ramen restaurants make their soups from a combination of chicken and pork bones, dried bonito, dried sardines and seafood. Restaurants compete fiercely to innovate in offering an abundance of ramen flavors and varieties. The most popular ones often attract long lines of customers.
Miso Soup and Clear Soup

Japanese soups can be divided into two major categories—miso soup and clear soup. Both are made with dashi, soup stock. Miso is mixed into the dashi to make miso soup, while clear soups use salt, soy sauce, and sake to add flavor to the dashi. Most people tend to have miso soup with everyday meals, especially breakfast. This is closely connected to the fact that in the old days, many people made miso at home. Miso is made by adding salt and malted rice or malted barley to soybeans that have been steamed and mashed. This mixture is then fermented and allowed to mature. There’s also a type of miso that is made entirely from soybeans, using malted soybeans instead of malted rice or malted barley. There are many other regional varieties, each with a characteristic flavor.

The all-important dashi soup stock can be made from katsuobushi, dried bonito flakes, konbu seaweed, kelp, or niboshi, a type of small dried fish. A combination kelp and bonito stock is made by first soaking a piece of konbu in water. You heat the water and then remove the konbu just before the water starts to boil. Add a handful of dried bonito shavings and remove from heat. Allow the shavings to sink, and then strain immediately. This gives you a delicious stock. Konbu contains glutamic acid, while bonito flakes are full of inosinic acid. The synergy of these two “umami” ingredients results in a fragrant stock full of umami flavor. This is by far the tastiest stock in Japan and is used for clear soups. Common ingredients in clear soups are shrimp, fish, tofu and seasonal vegetables. A slice of yuzu, kinome* or mustard adds zest to the soup and enhances the umami flavor. Some of the popular ingredients in miso soup include thinly sliced and fried tofu, raw tofu, daikon radish, potatoes and other seasonal vegetables. These ingredients are added to enhance the combined umami of dashi and miso. The key to a good Japanese soup is the care with which the dashi is prepared.

Japanese Sake and Shochu

Sake is a unique Japanese alcoholic beverage, boasting over one thousand years of history. It is brewed primarily from rice. Sake production requires sophisticated techniques to induce koji mold to convert starch to sugar and ferment the rice malt. Sake brewing developed in connection with religious rituals and official ceremonies. Varieties of sake from different areas of Japan have distinct flavors due to local variation in the quality of rice and water. Water makes up 80 percent of sake and has the biggest effect on quality. Water from the Nada area of Hyogo Prefecture is said to be the hardest of all Japanese waters. Sake made from Nada water is highly valued and was shipped from Osaka to Edo (present day Tokyo) as far back as the 17th century. Since then, sake has come to be made with softer waters as well. One unique aspect of Japanese sake is that it can be enjoyed both cold and warm. Many Japanese foods such as sashimi, soups, aemome*, stews and fried food developed as foods suitable to accompany sake. Japanese sake is most often enjoyed in a small ceramic or glass cup, but you can also enjoy it in a wine glass.

Shochu is a type of liquor that’s brought to a high level of purity through repeated distillation. While shochu like this is used in cocktails, recently there has been a revival of so-called “genuine shochu,” or shochu that is distilled only once in order to bring out the unique flavors of its raw ingredients, such as rice, barley, sweet potatoes or buckwheat.

*aemome : vegetables, seaweed or fish in a dressing
A wide variety of fruits are cultivated and enjoyed in Japan. Peaches and persimmons have a particularly long history. They were introduced from China way back in the 3rd century. There are two main types of persimmons: *amagaki*, or sweet persimmons, and *shihugaki*, or astringent persimmons. The astringent ones are inedible until they are dried or soaked in alcohol or hot water. Dried persimmons are very sweet and are often served with tea. Persimmons are rich in both vitamin C and carotene, which is converted to vitamin A in the body. Persimmon leaves contain antiseptic properties and are used for kaki-no-ha sushi, which is sushi wrapped in persimmon leaves. They can also be eaten fried, as tempura, or made into tea. Nashi, or Japanese pears, also have a long history, as do grapes. Grape cultivation began over 800 years ago in the Kamakura period. In addition to a rich variety of table grapes, many grapes are grown to make juice and wine.

The unshu mikan, or satsuma mandarin orange, as it’s known in the West, is cultivated in regions with a relatively mild climate. Cultivation began in the mid-18th century, first as a luxury gift item. As production increased, it became a popular winter fruit, rich in vitamin C. The cultivation of apples began in the mid-19th century in northern Japan and other regions with colder climates. Apples are widely eaten. Not only for their sweet taste but also for the benefits they offer the digestive system. These are just some of the many fragrant and delicious fruits that are cultivated in Japan, each with a different historical background. Thanks to continuous fruit development over many years, Japan has some of the highest quality fruits in the world.

Tea was first introduced to Japan from China in the form of compressed or brick tea. By the 12th century the drinking of *matcha*, a powdered tea brewed in hot water, became popular among Buddhist priests and the aristocracy, giving rise to the highly aesthetic and philosophical tea ceremony: the way of tea. The mid-18th century saw the development of *sencha*, a loose tea made by steaming, rolling and drying tea leaves. Ever since then *sencha* has been at the heart of Japanese green tea.

Japanese tea refers to *sencha* and other forms of green tea in which the leaves are heat-treated before drying to prevent oxidation and fermentation. There are various types of green tea, depending on the production process, which part of the tea leaf is used and the production area. Some are best drunk after meals, while others go very well with sweets. Green tea is rich in vitamin C and is believed to have other health benefits that include regulating blood cholesterol and preventing hypertension.

The development of *wagashi, Japanese sweets, went hand in hand with the cultivation of tea in Japan. Just as there are different types of Japanese tea, Japanese sweets can be classified into three categories according to moisture content: fresh sweets, semi-moist sweets and dry sweets. From plain rice crackers to delicately colored sweets with seasonal design motifs, the variety is endless. Many sweets are associated with seasonal events and annual customs. Most traditional Japanese sweets are made from non-animal products (apart from eggs) such as *azuki* beans, sweet Japanese beans and rice flour. Traditional Japanese sweets are thus free of fat and tend to have fewer calories than Western sweets, such as pies or chocolate, which are often rich in butter and cream.