

The stars of Japanese cuisine



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Sushi, the exquisite finger food

Appeal: A display of artisanship

Sushi is a display of culinary art, with the patrons seated at a counter from which they can closely watch the chef at work. Indeed, one of the great pleasures of *sushi* is relishing the beauty of the chef's polished technique in preparing the ingredients and shaping them into their completed form.

Distinctiveness: Beauty, freshness, and variety

A truly eye-pleasing morsel is created when a *sushi* chef hand-rolls a ball of vinegared rice (*shari*) and covers it with a carefully prepared slice of seafood or other topping (*neta*). Since freshness is important, *neta* is bought at the market every morning for that day's menu. The wide variety of toppings used means that all sorts of seafood can be savored every season.

History: An ancient blend of wisdom and technique

The roots of *sushi* are said to go back to an ancient Chinese method of preserving fish by salting it and allowing it to ferment in a container of rice. As a blend of culinary wisdom and skill, this practice spread throughout Japan, where it provided a way to maintain a supply of much-needed protein. This form eventually evolved into the more refined, world-famous modern style of *sushi* in the Edo period, making its debut at street stalls in what is now Tokyo. Today, there is broad array of *sushi* throughout Japan, with many types incorporating locally produced ingredients special to each region.



Tidbits

Wasabi

Japanese cuisine wouldn't be the same without *wasabi*, a seasoning unique to Japan that is cultivated in pristine stream beds and is used to accent the delicate flavors of food with its pungent bite and distinctive aroma. As a condiment for *sushi* and *sashimi*, it brings out the savoriness of the raw fish and is said to kill bacteria present on the food.

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Tempura, a superb deep-fried food for savoring the seasons

Appeal: A beautiful rainbow of colors

The use of various seasonal vegetables and seafood in *tempura* dishes gives them a beautiful, colorful appearance, and makes for the real delight of *tempura*—the ability to relish the flavors of each season.

Distinctiveness: Enjoyable in different ways

Deep-fried in a thin coating of batter, *tempura* is distinctive for the many different ways it can be enjoyed. Most often, it is dipped in sauce or salt and eaten as a separate dish, but it can also be served on top of rice, in noodle dishes, and in other styles. As a food that remains delectable even when the batter is softened by sauce or broth, *tempura* is a one-of-a-kind treat.

History: Started out as quick street food

Tempura started out as a quick, simple meal of deep-fried seafood served at street stalls in the Edo period. Today, however, *tempura* uses a wide array of ingredients, and can be enjoyed at home and restaurants, including popular, upscale establishments where patrons can lavishly dine upon *tempura* fried in front of them.



Tidbits

Dashi

One indispensable element of Japanese cuisine is *dashi* (stock) made by simmering a base ingredient to concentrate its *umami*, or savoriness. One base commonly used is kelp, which is attracting attention as a health food because of its absence of calories and its abundance of fiber and such minerals as iron and calcium. Other ingredients often used are dried bonito and small dried sardines, with the choice of *dashi* being dictated by preference and the type of dish being prepared.

Made in Japan: The main elements of Japanese cuisine

RICE

Japanese rice, the short-grained, sticky rice

Japan's delicious rice is both the staple food and a source of pride for the nation. Unlike the more globally prevalent indica variety of rice, the japonica variety eaten in Japan comes in short, round grains that become glutinous when cooked. The basic style of eating rice is to serve it in a bowl alongside other items, but it is also often integrated into all sorts of dishes that make the most of japonica's characteristics, such as *sushi* and dishes in which various ingredients are cooked in the rice. The sheen, aroma, chewiness, and lasting natural sweetness of plump, freshly steamed rice all contribute to the appeal of this delightful food. The savoriness is accentuated when the rice eaten with other dishes, and Japanese cuisine is designed to bring out the full richness of rice's flavor. Indeed, no description of Japan's food culture is complete without an account of rice.



Rice cultivation, the wellspring of Japanese culture

Some 2,500 years ago, rice cultivation was introduced from China to Japan, where it spread to every region and became the source of the nation's staple food. Rice growing has also shaped Japanese culture, as seen in the many traditional harvest rites and festivals that continue to be practiced across the country. Because of their strong attachment to rice, Japanese are choosy about the region, variety, and brand of rice they buy, and many look forward to each year's shipment of new rice.

Rice's appeal as a health food

The typical Japanese method of cooking rice, steaming, does not use oil, and thus is a very healthful practice. Rice chiefly consists of carbohydrates and protein, and also contains vitamins, minerals, and fiber. Japanese most commonly eat rice in its white, polished form, but also sometimes consume brown, unpolished rice—an eating style that is peculiar to Japan. Brown rice is being hailed around the world as a wholesome food because of its high nutritional content.



The two kings of Japanese seasonings

SOY SAUCE

A distinctly Japanese seasoning made from soybeans, soy sauce is the clincher that decides Japanese food's flavor

Originally derived from *bishio*, a flavoring adopted from China, Japanese soy sauce is a brown liquid seasoning made by fermenting soybeans and wheat with *kōji* mold. Its use of soybeans distinguishes it from the fish-based sauces seen in other Asian countries, and it also marked by the special flavor created by slowly, painstakingly fermenting soybeans in a selected environment. Soy sauce is the miracle seasoning of Japanese cuisine, indispensable for enhancing savoriness and adding aroma and flavor to dishes. In fact, it can be said that soy sauce is the essence of Japanese cuisine's flavor, providing zest to *sashimi*, *sushi*, grilled fish, vegetables, stewed dishes, and more.



MISO

A vital source of flavor and aroma, miso has kept Japanese healthy for centuries



Miso is made by fermenting and aging a mixture of soybeans, salt, and *kōji* mold. A diverse assortment of *miso* is created by choosing different *kōji* types (rice, wheat, bean, etc.) and altering the length of the aging process to produce a reddish or whitish hue. Traditionally, *miso* was the main source of protein for Japanese, and it still remains a vital seasoning in Japanese cuisine, as its rich, distinctive fragrance and flavor add an exquisite touch to fish and vegetables. For centuries, it has helped Japanese to stay fit with its health-enhancing powers, which are said to include cholesterol reduction and prevention of the effects of aging. *Miso* can be eaten as is, or used for soup, pickles, grilled dishes, and other cooking.

