Sukiyaki, Shabu-shabu and Teppanyaki

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) seafood 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 tentsuyu, 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.” Koyadofu, 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.