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 sliver 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.

Ingredients for dashi stock

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, aemone*, 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.

*aemone: vegetables, seaweed or fish in a dressing

Warm sake

Sake on the rocks (also served with water)
Fruits

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 shibugaki, 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.

Japanese Green Tea & Sweets

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.