

# Japanese Food Culture

Influenced by the natural environment and by the cultures of various countries, Japanese cuisine has acquired a distinct identity. Japan has a temperate climate with four seasons. Summer is hot and humid but the abundant rainfall throughout the year is well suited to the cultivation of various agricultural products. Many products have been introduced from other parts of the world and cultivated in Japan: grains such as rice and wheat; a wide selection of vegetables and beans, including **daikon** radish, eggplants and turnips; and a variety of potatoes and fruits. Surrounded by the sea, Japan also enjoys an abundance of fresh seafood throughout the year, which is eaten not only as **sashimi** or sushi but also in a variety of simmered or grilled dishes. A wide range of fermented food products have been developed from rice or soybeans, including **miso** paste, soy sauce, **sake**, rice vinegar and **mirin**, sweet cooking alcohol. These form the basis of the flavor of Japanese cuisine, which places special emphasis on **dashi**\* and a savory taste called **umami**.

\***dashi** : soup and cooking stocks



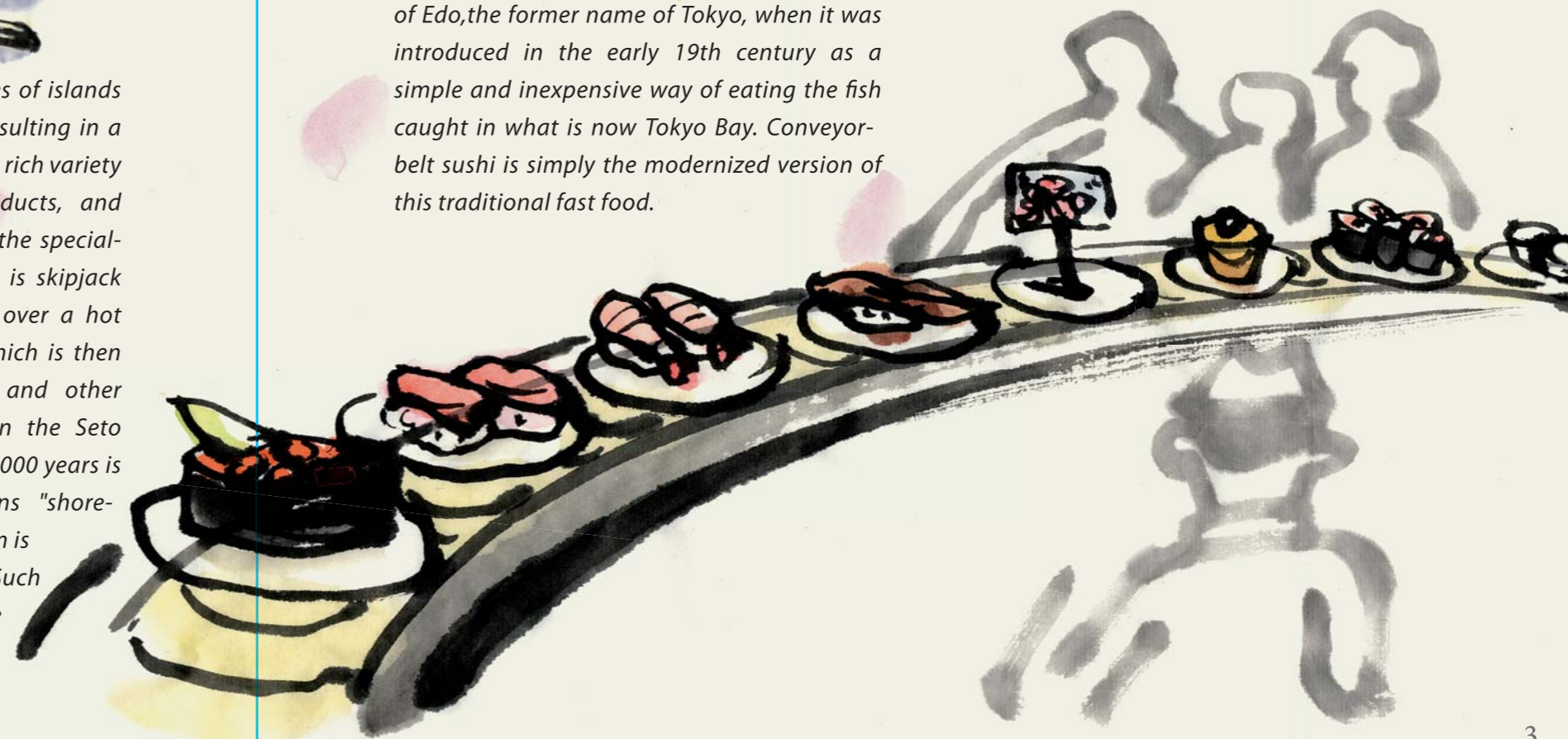
A traditional Japanese meal is comprised of rice, which is the staple food, a bowl of **miso** or clear soup and several side dishes, as well as pickled vegetables. Traditionally, a standard meal consists of one bowl of soup and three side dishes, and this is called **Ichiju-Sansai**. Low in fat but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



Japan is comprised of a long series of islands stretching from north to south, resulting in a diverse natural environment with a rich variety of agricultural and marine products, and countless regional dishes. One of the specialties of the Pacific coast of Japan is skipjack **tataki**. The fish is filleted, seared over a hot flame and sliced into **sashimi**, which is then eaten with vinegar, soy sauce and other seasonings. A traditional dish on the Seto Inland Sea with a history of over 1,000 years is **hamayaki**, which literally means "shore-cooked." Freshly caught sea bream is packed in salt and broiled whole. Such ancient cities as Kamakura and the former capital Kyoto are famous

for a style of vegetarian cuisine called **shojin-ryori** featuring **tofu** and vegetable products developed at Buddhist temples. These are just a few examples of the culinary delights found throughout Japan. Each region has its own specialties, with so much variety that it's possible to spend a whole lifetime eating one's way around Japan without having the same dish twice. Japan's many different local dishes represent a great way to appreciate the changing seasons and nature's bounty.

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.

10 Great taste of Japan features 10 popular dishes that have been selected to convey the rich variety of Japanese cuisine to people in other parts of the world.

Do try out the recipes! We think they'll enhance your understanding and appreciation of Japanese cuisine.