

JAPANESE CUISINE

Japanese cuisine has developed over the centuries as a result of many political and social changes. The cuisine eventually changed with the advent of the Medieval age which ushered in a shedding of elitism with the age of Shogun rule. In the early modern era massive changes took place that introduced non-Japanese cultures, most notably Western culture, to Japan.

The modern term "Japanese cuisine" (*nihon ryōri*, or *washoku*.) means traditional-style Japanese food, similar to what already existed before the end of national seclusion in 1868. In a broader sense of the word, it could also include foods whose ingredients or cooking methods were subsequently introduced from abroad, but which have been developed by Japanese who made them their own. Japanese cuisine is known for its emphasis on seasonality of food (*shun*), quality of ingredients and presentation.

Philosophy of Japanese Cooking

Japanese cuisine is an orchestrated symphony of art. The style of cooking is simple but simplicity is the most difficult characteristic to achieve. The Japanese cook respects individual ingredients and prepares them with care to ensure that each flavour is brought out in the dish.

History

Ancient era - Heian period

Following the Jomon period, Japanese society shifted from a semi-sedentary hunter-gatherer lifestyle to an agricultural society. This was the period in which rice cultivation began having been introduced directly from China. Short-grain rice has been the only type of rice grown in Japan, which contrasts with the long-grain rice grown in other Asian regions. Rice was commonly boiled plain and called *gohan* or *meshi*, and as cooked rice has since always been the preferred staple of the meal, the terms are used as synonyms for the word "meal." Peasants often mixed millet with rice, especially in mountainous regions where rice did not proliferate.

During the Kofun period some of Japanese civilization came from Korea which heavily influenced Japan. As such Buddhism was a large influence on Japanese culture. After the 6th century, Japan directly pursued the imitation of Chinese culture under the Tang dynasty. It was this influence that marked the taboos on the consumption of meat in Japan. In 675 A.D. Emperor Temmu decreed a prohibition on the consumption of cattle, horse, dogs, monkeys, and chickens during the 4th-9th months of the year, to break the law would mean a death sentence. Monkey was eaten prior to this time, but was eaten more in a ritualistic style for medicinal purposes. Chicken were often domesticated as pets, while cattle and horses were rare and treated as such. A cow or horse would be ritually sacrificed on the first day of rice paddy cultivation, a ritual introduced from China. Emperor Temmu's decree however did not ban the consumption of deer or wild boar, which were important to the Japanese diet at that time.

The 8th century saw many additional decrees made by emperors and empresses on the ban of killing of any animals. In 752 A.D., Empress Kōken decreed a ban even on fishing, but made a promise that adequate rice would be given to fishermen whose livelihood would otherwise be destroyed. In 927 A.D. regulations were enacted that stated that any government official or member of nobility that ate meat, was deemed unclean for three days and could not participate in Shinto observances at the imperial court.

It was also the influence of Chinese cultures that brought the chopsticks to Japan early in this period. Chopsticks at this time were used by nobility at banquets, they were not used as everyday utensils however, as hands were still commonly used to eat with. Metal spoons were also used during the 8th-9th century, but only by the nobility. Dining tables were also introduced to Japan at this time. Commoners used a legless table called a *oshiki*, while nobility used a lacquered table with legs called a *zen*. Each person used their own table. Lavish banquets for the nobility would have multiple tables for each individual based upon the number of dishes presented.

Upon the decline of the Tang dynasty in the 9th century, Japan made a move toward its individuality in culture and cuisine. The abandonment of the spoon as a dining utensil is one of the marked differences and commoners were now eating with chopsticks as well. Trade continued with Korea and China, but influence en masse from outside of Japan would not be seen again until the 19th century. The 10th and 11th centuries marked a level of refinement of cooking and etiquette found in the culture of the Heian nobility. Court chefs would prepare many of the vegetables sent as tax from the countryside. Court banquets were common and lavish, garb for nobility during these events remained in the Chinese style which differentiated them from the plain clothes of commoners.

The dishes consumed post 9th century included grilled fish and meat (*yakimono*), simmered food (*nimono*), steamed foods (*mushimono*), soups made from chopped vegetables, fish or meat (*atsumono*), jellied fish (*nikogori*)

simmered with seasonings, sliced raw fish served in a vinegar sauce (*namasu*), vegetables, seaweed or fish in a strong dressing (*aemono*), and pickled vegetables (*tsukemono*) that were cured in salt to cause lactic fermentation. Oil and fat were avoided almost universally in cooking. Sesame oil was used, but rarely as it was of great expense to produce.

Documents from the Heian nobility note that fish and wild fowl were common on the table along with vegetables. Their banquet settings consisted of a bowl of rice and soup, long with chopsticks and a spoon along with three seasonings which were salt, vinegar and *hishio* which was a fermentation of soybeans, rice, wheat, sake and salt. A fourth plate was present for mixing the seasonings to desired flavor for dipping their food into. The four types of food present at a banquet consisted of dried foods (*himono*), fresh foods (*namamono*), fermented or dressed food (*kubotsuki*), and desserts (*kashi*). Dried fish and fowl were thinly sliced (e.g. salted salmon, pheasant, steamed and dried abalone, dried and grilled octopus), while fresh fish, shellfish and fowl were sliced raw in vinegar sauce or grilled (e.g. carp, sea bream, salmon, trout, pheasant). *Kubotsuki* consisted of small balls of fermented sea squirt, fish or giblets along with jellyfish and *aemono*. Desserts would have included Chinese cakes, and a variety of fruits and nuts including pine nuts, dried chestnuts, acorns, jujube, pomegranate, peach, apricot, persimmon and citrus. The meal would be ended with sake.

Kamakura period

The Kamakura period marked a large political change in Japan. Prior to the Kamakura period, the samurai were guards of the landed estates of the nobility. The nobility having lost control of the Japanese countryside fell under the militaristic rule of the peasant class samurai with a military government being set up in 1192 in Kamakura giving way to the period. Once the position of power had been exchanged, the role of the court banquets changed. The court cuisine which had prior to this time emphasized flavor and nutritional aspects, changed to a highly ceremonial and official capacity.

Minamoto Yoritomo, the first shogun punished other samurai who followed the prior showy banquet style of the nobility. The shogun banquet, called *ban* was attended by military leaders from the provinces. The *ban* originally referred to a luncheon on festival days attended by soldiers and guards during the Heian period and as such was attached to the warrior class. The menu usually consisted of dried abalone, jellyfish *aemono*, pickled ume called *umeboshi*, salt and vinegar for seasoning and rice. Later in the period, the *honzen ry ri* banquet became popularized.

The cuisine of the samurai came distinctly from their peasant roots. The meals prepared emphasized simplicity while being substantial. Specifically the cuisine avoided refinement, ceremony and luxury and a shedding of all further Chinese influence. One specific example is the change from wearing traditional Chinese garb to a distinct clothing style that combined the simplistic clothing of the common people. This style evolved into the kimono by the end of the Middle Ages.

The Buddhist vegetarian philosophy strengthened during the Kamakura period as it began to spread to the peasants. Those who were involved in the trade of slaughtering animals for food and/or leather came under discrimination. Those practicing this trade were considered in opposition to the Buddhist philosophy of not taking life, while under the Shinto philosophy they were considered defiled. This discrimination eventually intensified to the creation of a separate caste.

Modern Era

Japanese cuisine is based on combining staple foods (*shushoku*), typically rice or noodles, with a soup, and *okazu* - dishes made from fish, meat, vegetable, tofu and the like, designed to add flavor to the staple food. These are typically flavored with dashi, miso, and soy sauce and are usually low in fat and high in salt.

A standard Japanese meal generally consists of several different *okazu* accompanying a bowl of cooked white Japanese rice (*gohan*), a bowl of soup and some *tsukemono* (pickles). The most standard meal comprises three *okazu* and is termed *ichij -sansai* ("one soup, three sides"). Different cooking techniques are applied to each of the three *okazu*; they may be raw (*sashimi*), grilled, simmered (sometimes called boiled), steamed, deep-fried, vinegared, or dressed. This Japanese view of a meal is reflected in the organization of Japanese cookbooks, organized into chapters according to cooking techniques as opposed to particular ingredients (e.g. *meat*, *seafood*). There may also be chapters devoted to soups, sushi, rice, noodles, and sweets.

As Japan is an island nation its people eat much seafood. Meat-eating has been rare until fairly recently due to restrictions placed upon it by Buddhism. However, strictly vegetarian food is rare since even vegetable dishes are flavored with the ubiquitous dashi stock, usually made with *katsuobushi* (dried skipjack tuna flakes). An exception is *sh jin ry ri*, vegetarian dishes developed by Buddhist monks. However, the advertised *sh jin ry ri* usually available at public eating places includes some non-vegetarian elements.

Noodles are an essential part of Japanese cuisine usually as an alternative to a rice-based meal. *Soba* (thin, grayish-

brown noodles containing buckwheat flour) and *udon* (thick wheat noodles) are the main traditional noodles and are served hot or cold with soy-dashi flavorings. Chinese-style wheat noodles served in a meat stock broth known as ramen have become extremely popular over the last century.

Imported and adapted foods

Japan has incorporated imported food from across the world (mostly from Asia, Europe and to a lesser extent the Americas), and have historically adapted many to make them their own.

- Foods imported from Portugal in the 16th Century
- Other adapted cuisines in Japan
- Fusion dishes

Y shoku

Japan today abounds with home-grown, loosely western-style food. Many of these were invented in the wake of the 1868 Meiji restoration and the end of national seclusion, when the sudden influx of foreign (in particular, western) culture led to many restaurants serving western food, known as *y shoku*, a shortened form of *seiy shoku* lit. Western cuisine, opening up in cities. Restaurants that serve these foods are called *y shokuya*, lit. Western cuisine restaurants.

Many *y shoku* items from that time have been adapted to a degree that they are now considered Japanese and are an integral part of any Japanese family menu. Many are served alongside rice and miso soup, and eaten with chopsticks. Yet, due to their origins these are still categorized as *y shoku* as opposed to the more traditional *washoku*, lit. Japanese cuisine.

Ingredients

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| Aduki Beans | - Small, red sweet beans, used in desserts, also available in glaze form (<i>ama-natto</i>) or in a paste (<i>neri-an</i>). |
| Bonito | - The name given to several different fish, including a relative of mackerel and another, a small tuna, the Pacific bonito. The latter is the fish used in Japanese cooking known as <i>Katsuo</i> : it is the strongest flavoured of the tuna and is used dried, in thin flakes known as <i>Katsuo-Bushi</i> . It is used to flavour stock and is sprinkled over dishes to season. |
| Enoki Mushrooms | - Small cultivated mushrooms with long thin stems and tiny white caps. They are harvested in clumps, attached at a root base which is cut off before use. They have a crisp texture and delicate flavour. They may be eaten raw or lightly cooked. |
| Fish Cakes | - These do not resemble the Western equivalent, they are finer and they are usually cooked ready for eating cold. Available fresh or frozen from Japanese supermarkets. <i>Chikuwa</i> are long, brown and white cakes; <i>Kamaboko</i> is a smooth textured white loaf; and <i>Satsuma-Age</i> are brown and come in many varieties. |
| Gari | - These are pale pink ginger pickles are served with <i>Sushi</i> or <i>Sashimi</i> to refresh the palate between mouthfuls. |
| Ginger Pickles | - Fresh root ginger is pickled in various strengths of flavour. |
| Gobo Burdock | - A long, thin root vegetable that grows wild in Europe, but is cultivated in Japan. The roots may be stored (unwashed) in a polythene bag in the fridge for up to two weeks. Scrub the roots, then cut into fine strips or grate them coarsely. The root may be soaked to remove bitter flavours and eaten raw, or cooked; it has a crisp raw texture and a slightly sweet and earthy flavour. |
| Hijiki | - A variety of dried seaweed. It is soaked, then used in soups and salads. |
| Japanese Curry Powder | - Available from Japanese supermarkets, this is essential for Japanese-style curries. |
| Japanese Spring Onions | - Known as <i>Negi</i> , these are larger than the European spring onions, with longer, thicker, blue-green stems. |
| Katakuri-Ko | - Potato starch or flour. Cornflour can be used instead. |

Kombu	-	Kelp seaweed, a rich source of iodine. Kombu is used to flavour stock and it is served as a vegetable. Dried kombu is dark grey-brown with a pale powdery covering which contributes to its flavour; therefore it is wiped, not washed, before use.
Konnyaku	-	A cake made from flour produced from a root vegetable called devil's tongue. It should be torn into pieces before cooking, rather than being cut with a knife, as this ensures it will absorb more flavour. Black and white varieties are available.
Koya-Tofu	-	Taking its name from Mount Koya, this is tofu which has been frozen. It was first used by the vegetarian Buddhist monks in the monastery on the mount when their tofu was frozen by the harsh winter snows. Freezing gives Koyatofu a firmer texture with more resistance than ordinary tofu (slightly rubbery).
Lotus Root	-	The rhizome of a water lily. Fresh lotus roots are large with a red-brown skin which must be peeled off. They have a similar texture and colour to potato, but the hollow channels running through them create an attractive flower pattern when sliced, making them a popular garnish. Canned lotus root is readily available.
Mirin	-	Sweet cooking sake, this has a delicate flavour and is usually added in the final stages of cooking.
Miso	-	Fermented paste of soy beans, the key ingredient for miso soup and widely used as a seasoning. There are various types, depending on the culture used to ferment them which may be based on barley, wheat or soy bean starter mould. The time taken to mature the paste also affects the result. White miso has a lighter flavour than red miso; dark brown miso is a strong flavoured version.
Mooli	-	Long white radish, also known as daikon. About the size of a parsnip with smooth creamy-white skin, mooli has the crunchy texture and peppery flavour similar to red radishes but milder. It may be cooked or served raw in salads, grated for dips or as a garnish.
Noodles	-	Various types are used like Shirataki, Soba, Udon etc.
Nori	-	Dried seaweed, sold in paper thin sheets which are dark green to black in colour and almost transparent in places. It is toasted and used as a wrapping for sushi. Ready-toasted sheets (yaki-nori), seasoned with ingredients such as soy sauce, salt and sesame oil, are also readily available from health-food shops.
Okonomiyaki Sauce	-	Similar to Tonkatsu Sauce but sweeter.
Pickles	-	There are many varieties of pickled vegetables (tsukemono), served as accompaniments for rice dishes.
Rice Vinegar	-	This is a pale vinegar with a distinctive, delicate flavour. It is milder than most other light wine vinegars. It is available from health-food shops and supermarkets as well as specialist stores. Do not confuse with Chinese rice vinegar. The Mitsukan brand is widely available.
Sake	-	Japanese rice wine. Like Western wines, the price can vary. It is not necessary to use expensive sake for cooking. Sake is drunk hot or chilled.
Seaweed	-	Various types are used, dried or fresh. Seaweed is generally rich in minerals and vitamins, and can be a useful source of vegetable fibre.
Sesame Seeds	-	White or black, these are available roasted or plain. The plain seeds should be toasted before use.
Seven Spice Pepper	-	This chilli based spice, known as shichimi, is made of hemp, poppy, rape and sesame seeds, anise-pepper leaves and tangerine peel.
Shiitake Mushrooms	-	The most popular mushroom in Japan. This has a good flavour, especially when dried. Soaking water from dried Shiitake makes a good stock.
Shimeji Mushrooms	-	Similar to Enoki Mushrooms, these are separated into individual stems before using.
Shirataki Noodles	-	White noodles made from the starch of Devil's Tongue plant. Canned or packed in water, these are good for Sukiyaki.
Shiratama-Ko	-	Rice flour made from glutenous short grain rice with a high starch content. This is used to make mochi (sticky rice cakes).

Shiso Leaves	-	A Japanese herbs similar to basil.
Shungiku Leaves	-	Edible leaves of a Japanese chrysanthemum, these are good for Sukiyaki.
Soba	-	Long, thin buckwheat noodles. These are typically used in dishes from East Japan. Available from health-food shops as well as Japanese supermarkets.
Somen	-	Also known as Soumen. Round, white wheat flour noodles.
Soy Sauce	-	Shoyu, this is the best known seasoning ingredient. There are several different types of Japanese soy sauce. Chinese soy sauce should not be substituted as it is far stronger. Usukuchi soy sauce is light in colour but has a saltier taste than dark soy sauce which is richer and stronger in flavour. It is good for boiling vegetables and for flavouring delicate dishes such as clear soups. Tamari is a thick soy sauce with a mellow flavour. Used as a dip for sashimi and other dishes. Regular soy sauce can be used instead.
Sushi Vinegar	-	Seasoned and sweetened vinegar product for sushi.
Takuwan	-	A bright yellow, mooli pickle; a favourite with rolled Sushi.
Tofu	-	Also known as Bean Curd, this is a soy bean product valued for its high protein content in a vegetarian diet; it is also a good source of calcium and iron. There are several types, including soft or firm tofu; silken tofu; grilled (yaki tofu), fried or dried tofu; and koya tofu. Plain uncooked types are bland in themselves but readily absorb the flavour of other ingredients.
Tonkatsu Sauce	-	Japanese fruity sauce served with deep fried pork and croquettes.
Udon	-	White ribbon noodles available fresh or dried. These are used in the cuisine of West Japan.
Umeboshi	-	Small red pickled plums with a sharp and salty taste. Considered to act as a preservative, these are used as a filling for rice balls (Onigiri).
Wakame	-	Seaweed available fresh or dried used for soups and salads.
Wasabi	-	Green horseradish which tastes extremely hot. Available as a paste or powdered, to which water is added like making up mustard.

Traditional Table Settings

The traditional Japanese table setting has varied considerably over the centuries, depending primarily on the type of table common during a given era. Before the 19th century, small individual box tables (*hakozen*) or flat floor trays were set before each diner. Larger low tables (*chabudai*) that accommodated entire families were gaining popularity by the beginning of the 20th century, but these gave way to western style dining tables and chairs by the end of the 20th century.

Traditionally, the rice bowl is placed on the left and the soup bowl on the right. Behind these, each *okazu* is served on its own individual plate. Based on the standard three *okazu* formula, behind the rice and soup are three flat plates to hold the three *okazu*; one to far back left, one at far back right, and one in the center. Pickled vegetables are often served on the side but are not counted as part of the three *okazu*.

Chopsticks are generally placed at the very front of the tray near the diner with pointed ends facing left and supported by a chopstick rest, or *hashioki*.

Dining Etiquette

Hot towel : Before eating, most dining places will provide either a hot towel or a plastic-wrapped wet napkin. This is for cleaning of the hands prior to eating and not after. It is rude to use them to wash the face or any part of the body other than the hands.

Bowls : The rice or the soup is eaten by picking the relevant bowl up with the left hand and using chopsticks with the right, or vice-versa if you are left handed. Traditionally, everyone holds chopsticks in their right hand and the bowl in their left – this avoids running into each others' arm when sitting close together – and this is safest in formal situations, but left-handed eating is more acceptable today. Bowls of soup, noodle soup, donburi or ochazuke may be lifted to the mouth but not white rice.

Soy sauce : Soy sauce is not usually poured over most foods at the table; a dipping dish is usually provided. Soy sauce is, however, meant to be poured directly onto tofu and grated daikon dishes. In particular, soy sauce should never be poured onto rice or soup. Noodles are slurped.

• Chopsticks are never left sticking vertically into rice, as this resembles incense sticks (which are usually placed vertically in sand) during offerings to the dead. Using chopsticks to spear food or to point is also frowned upon. It is also very bad manners to bite on your chopsticks.

Communal dish : When taking food from a communal dish, unless they are family or very close friends, turn the chopsticks around to grab the food; it is considered more sanitary. Better, have a separate set of chopsticks for the communal dish.

Sharing : If sharing with someone else, move it directly from one plate to another. Never pass food from one pair of chopsticks to another, as this recalls passing bones during a funeral.

Eat what is given : It is customary to eat rice to the last grain. Being a fussy eater is frowned upon, and it is not customary to ask for special requests or substitutions at restaurants. It is considered ungrateful to make these requests especially in circumstances where you are being hosted, as in a business dinner environment. Good manners dictate that you respect the selections of the host.

Drinking : Even in informal situations, drinking alcohol starts with a toast (*kanpai*) when everyone is ready. It is not customary to pour oneself a drink; but rather, people are expected to keep each other's drinks topped up. When someone moves to pour your drink you should hold your glass with both hands and thank them.

Dishes for Special Occasion

In Japanese tradition some dishes are strongly tied to a festival or event. These dishes include:

- **Botamochi**, a sticky rice dumpling with sweet azuki paste served in spring, while the term Hagi/Ohagi is used in the fall season.
- **Chimaki** (steamed sweet rice cake): Tango no Sekku and Gion Festival.
- **Hamo** (a kind of fish) and somen: Gion Festival.
- **Osechi**: New Year.
- **Sekihan**, literally "red rice", is served for any celebratory occasion. It is usually sticky rice cooked with azuki, or red bean, which gives the rice its distinctive red color.
- **Soba**: New Year's Eve. This is called *toshi koshi soba* (literally "year crossing soba").
- **Chirashizushi**, **Ushiojiru** (clear soup of clams) and amazake: Hinamatsuri.

In some regions every 1st and 15th day of the month people eat a mixture of rice and azuki (*azuki meshi*).

Kaiseki Cuisine (Tea Ceremony type)

“Kaiseki” dishes are served during tea ceremony

This "kaiseki" cuisine of a tea ceremony originated as a light meal served to soothe the hunger of "zen" monks. "Kai" originally meant bosom and "seki" stone. This type of cuisine was named so because the supper seemed to the monks just like carrying a warm stone in the bosom in order to soothe the hunger. The word "tenshin" derived from the Chinese word for a light meal that has the original meaning of turning on an empty mind. These "kaiseki" cuisine dishes are served as a prelude to the tea ceremony just as sweets are sometimes served. The difference between this type of cuisine from the "kaiseki" cuisine described above lies in the avoidance of excess.

Shojin Cuisine

“Shojin” dishes served at a meeting of “Zen Buddhist” poet

"Shojin" is a Buddhist term that referring to a type of asceticism that aspires to enlightenment and "ryori" translates as "cooking". Shojin ryori is a type of vegetarian cooking that was introduced into Japan at the same time as Buddhism in the 6th century. In the 13th century when Zen Buddhism was introduced, the custom of eating "shojin ryori" spread rapidly. Foods derived from soybeans including "tofu" and vegetable oils including sesame, walnut and from rapeseed that were used extensively in "shojin ryori" became popular in Japan as a result.

Bento Cuisine

"Bento" is the Japanese term for a lunch, particularly a packed lunch that can be carried in a lunchbox and eaten outside of one's home. In the world of the tea ceremony the strict formality of "bento" should not be broken and has been established by shortening the "kaiseki" cuisine menu of the tea ceremony into a single set meal. This has been done so as not to lose the "wabi", the elegant restraint and simplicity that is inherent the tea ceremony. Of this type of "bento", the most representative ones are those to be found in Kyoto include the following examples.