

# Japanese Food and Cooking

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Visitors to Japan today witness a huge array of food choices, ranging from traditional Japanese cooking, Chinese, Korean, to the increasing available cooking of recent immigrants to Japan from various parts of the world. Of course, to this, so-called Western food goes into the mix. Western food comes in as many types as there are nations, with Italian and French now being very popular. Then there is fast food, offered by such outlets as McDonald's, Pizza Hut, and the like. On any block of a Japanese town, one is likely to find eateries offering a rich mixture of food choices. One finds, too, the Japanese eat meals that show a variety of foreign influences, without much cognizance of what influences come from which countries—for breakfast, they are as comfortable with ham and eggs, salad, buttered toast, and coffee as they are with a traditional breakfast fare, consisting of rice, miso soup, seaweed, and grilled fish. Lunch could be a plate of spaghetti with tomato sauce (originally Italian), hot bowls of rice with delicious, spicy toppings (originally Korean), or a steaming bowl of ramen noodles with soup (originally Chinese). For a snack, they may have cheesecake and English tea, Japanese sweets and green tea, or cold soba noodles dipped in sauce. Dinner may be sukiyaki, tempura (originally said to be Portuguese, referring to fried vegetarian food eaten during Lent), or something as perennial favorite as curry and rice (originally Indian).

At many restaurants, customers can decide on their order by looking at very realistic wax models of their menu offerings at the storefront—so real that one can see details like bubbles in a carbonated drink and almost smell the melted cheese on gratin dishes.

Added to this availability is a general interest in good eating. When people get together, their topic often turns to food—new restaurants, regional cooking, recipes, and so on—more often than their counterparts do in the United States. This fervor is fueled by Japanese TV that broadcasts programs on food and cooking on a daily basis; in addition, travel shows, quiz shows, talk shows, game shows, and others frequently incorporate segments on cooking and eating. With show biz glitter and flare, a TV show like *Ryōri no tetsujin* (known as "Iron Chef" when shown in the United States) gained a phenomenal following, a show in which famous chef contestant and defender compete to create the best-tasting, luscious looking, and textually varied multi-course meal using one principal ingredient. Bookstores are replete with books and magazines on all types of cooking. Travel brochures and posters try to lure customers by showing beautifully prepared specialty dishes—in fact, we may say that a main attraction to a resort is food, perhaps superseded only by its scenery and its proximity to onsen (hot springs). Indeed, there seems to be no end to the length a Japanese would go to get something cooked just right, even if it is as humble as a bowl of noodles.

What makes Japanese so passionate about eating? How is Japanese cooking different from Chinese or Korean cooking, and for that matter, so-called Western cooking? What can we learn

about Japanese people and their culture from what they eat? These are some of the fundamental issues involved.

## **No Meat in Diet: Milder Food**

When one picks up a Japanese cookbook, one is often surprised by the variety of seafood dishes and a relatively small section dedicated to cooking of meat. This is for a reason: historically the Japanese avoided public eating of animals, animal fats, and dairy products, owing to Buddhism that shunned such foods (more on this below). The staple of the Japanese diet remains the same-with or without meat. It has always been seafood, vegetables, and grains (rice), due primarily to Japan's geography and climate. Except in pre-Buddhism days, meat eating in Japan without the danger of religious reprimand is a relatively recent phenomenon; it was not until the mid-nineteenth century that the people of Japan began eating meat widely and making use of it in their own cooking.

Since the introduction of Buddhism to Japan in the sixth century until the mid-nineteenth century, food has generally been cooked without any animal meat or fats. To the palate, cooking in this way resulted in milder, more subtle flavoring that preserved the color and taste of the ingredients. If an "insipid" dish needed a culinary lift, they would top it with little daub of grated yuzu (citron), wasabi (Japanese horseradish used as a condiment to sushi), sliced myōga (a kind of ginger), or a sprinkle of sanshō pepper (Japanese mountain pepper), and the like, a practice which is still done today. A preference for mild seasoning over the centuries in turn may explain why many dishes from abroad now abundantly found in Japan (and this includes Chinese and Korean cooking, which can be quite spicy) have become milder. Such changes also occurred when original ingredients were substituted with local materials and cooking methods were adapted to suit the Japanese kitchen. Thus an American visitor to Japan may be surprised by delicate and refined steaks, different from American steaks that are more robust and hearty. Such changes are common to all forms of food adaptation, whenever there is a mingling of food cultures.

## **Aesthetics**

Preparing and eating Japanese food goes beyond just staving off one's hunger. Food must be set out to please the eye. Customers of Japanese restaurants often marvel at the beautiful presentation of food. In every dish, cooks go to a painstaking length to present food of contrasting colors, texture, and shape to appeal to the eye and the palate. Japanese food, especially in fine restaurants, is served in very small hors d'oeuvre quantities. Food is never served in large quantities, for doing so would be unaesthetic, although eating at home is a welcome exception to this rule. Moreover, a suitable container, a ceramic bowl for instance, would be chosen to suit the food, season, and balance with other containers on the table. A cook's skills are measured not only by the food they prepare, but also by a careful selection of plates, bowls, and other eating utensils. In the end, one may say that the Japanese people are quite sensitive to eye-appeal; to stay in business, restaurants must pay attention to presentation.

Japanese cooking must also use perfectly fresh food at its prime. Although ready-to-eat food is available ubiquitously in small shops and convenience stores, home and professional cooks alike still prefer to prepare meals from fresh ingredients, avoiding the canned, frozen, or packaged variety. In fact, visitors to a Japanese supermarket will be surprised by a relatively meager choices in these departments. This fact does not mean that Japanese people do not eat fast food—they do in a huge variety. Japan has a long tradition of making fast food, such as bentō (traditional Japanese boxed lunches), noodles, onigiri (rice balls), and the quintessential fast food sushi for people on the go. Using freshest ingredients means that they must be in season, a dictum that underscores a philosophy that food must also embody the season. The Japanese are very attuned to the seasonal nature of food; for instance, home cooks know which fish, vegetables, or fruit are in season before deciding on the menu and shopping at the market. They shop for food at markets frequently (usually every day) and buy food in small quantities.

They are so conscious of seasonality of food that they are willing to pay a high price to the first harvest of a particular food item, a tradition that began in the late 17th century. For instance, the first catch of the fish katsuo (bonito) on the opening day of fishing in May will command a huge price. These katsuo will mostly end up in the most expensive Japanese-style restaurants, where affluent customers praise and enjoy the first-of-the-season katsuo; later shipments will begin to filter down to local supermarkets at more reasonable prices. Conversely, asking for katsuo in September or oysters in summer months in a restaurant will gather a scornful look. When eating out, patrons also expect, and cooks happily comply, to eat perfectly pristine food at the very prime of their season.

Thus, it is not before long that one begins to see Japanese people's passion for food and taking pleasure in seasonal food are inextricably enmeshed with deeper currents in their life. Aesthetics, religion, land and season, and history get woven into the people attitude about food.

## History

After a period of gathering and hunting lifestyle, the introduction of rice prompted a sedentary way of living. Rice was introduced to Japan from the continent in prehistoric times during the Yayoi era (ca. 300 B. C. to A. D. 300). Diets until then were based on seafood, animal meat (deer, fowl, boar, rabbit, and such), and other foodstuff gathered or cultivated around the settlement (chestnuts, indigenous fruit, melon, and the like). By the end of the third century A. D., rice and salted food were established as common fare. As mentioned earlier, Buddhism was introduced to Japan in the sixth century and became the state religion. In observance of the Buddhist doctrine that prohibited eating the meat of animals and fowl, the Japanese stopped eating meat, at least publicly and in larger towns. Because of this, people began using less animal fats to make sauces, which in turn resulted in milder, more subtle method of cooking.

As the samurai class rose to power, they embraced more frugal styles of cooking, in place of more formal Chinese-style meals eaten in the court. With the introduction of Zen Buddhism in the 13th century, shōjin ryōri, a vegetarian cooking for Buddhist monks and introduced to Japan in the 6th century, became popular and began to filter into cooking methods used by the general public. This influence was long lasting; a number of dishes the Japanese eat today date from

shōjin ryōri. Examples include tofu, nattō (fermented boiled soybeans), yuba (sheet made from soy milk), ganmodoki ("fake" duck made from tofu and other vegetables), and aburaage (deep fried tofu squares).

The most influential style of cooking that lay the foundation of Japanese cooking is honzen ryōri. Honzen ryōri refers to formal meals served to the nobles in the imperial court in the Muromachi period (1333-1568) and became fully established as a culinary tradition in the Edo period (1604-1868), which then influenced the cooking of the general populace. Honzen in this context referred to the main low four-legged tray called zen, on which food was served. Food served in this way has its roots in ceremonial cooking of the Heian period. In the Muromachi period, honzen ryōri was served on as many as five zen, which were placed in front of the guest. In addition to rice and soup, a minimum of three side dishes but sometimes as many as eleven side dishes were served on a single tray, on up to five trays, depending on the formality of the occasion. There were strict rules to be observed about how and in what order foods must be eaten.

This type of cooking is rarely eaten today, except in some wedding and funeral banquets and at temples.

By the 15th century, many of the basic food eaten by the Japanese today had made their debut, including shōyu (soy sauce), miso (fermented soybeans), and tofu. During the Edo period, honzen ryōri was gradually refined, with a great emphasis being placed on methods of cutting and other procedures.

Another type of Japanese cooking is called chakaiseki. Chakaiseki refers to a meal served after a tea ceremony. The frugality in this type of meal symbolized the essence of chadō (a.k.a. sadō; the way of tea). The ritual aspect of chakaiseki, as well as the tea ceremony that precedes it, was formalized by Sen no Rikyū (1522-1591), a master of tea who formalized many tea rituals and who served two pivotal war lords, Oda Nobunaga (1532-1582) and Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537-1598). In chakaiseki, a meal consisted of small servings of rice, and miso soup, and several dishes served in groups or in sequence, each having a very strong emphasis on taste, use of seasonal ingredients, with a distinction between hot and cold dishes. A meal concludes with warmed sake, followed by a soup made of rice stuck to the bottom of the pot (which embodies a principle of frugality), and pickles.

The third type of food is called kaiseki ryōri. This style of serving food originally referred to meals served at poetry parties where the participants gathered compose renga (linked waka poems), a type of gathering that was popular in the Edo period (1604-1868). The meal began with a soup with an odd number of side dishes (an influence from honzen ryōri). The guest would eat and drink sake in an informal setting at his leisure. Rice, pickles, and dessert (e.g. Japanese sweets, fruit), and tea are served, with the tea signaling the end of a meal. Today, in high class restaurants and ryōtei (exclusive Japanese restaurants), this has become the normal progression of a meal.

Many changes in Japanese victuals took place in the Edo period (1604-1868). In early Edo, one rice dish became very popular. It was called Narachameshi (named for the ancient Japanese capital of Nara, where the dish supposedly originated), which was rice, cooked in tea and stock, then served in a bowl with toppings. In the beginning of the 18th century, there were only a few restaurants in Edo, and if one wanted to eat out, it would most likely be at any number of street stalls, numerous in Nihonbashi and Asakusa districts. Soon after, townsmen became more sophisticated about food, as shown by an increasing number of restaurants and cookbooks that became widely available. Even cookbooks about foreign (e.g. Western) cuisine (Spanish, Portuguese and Dutch, cultures to which the Japanese then had access) were written.

A sensibility such as *iki* (certain stylishness cultivated by fashionable Edo dandies), popularized by the townsmen of Edo in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, also dictated how and when something should be eaten. For instance, lowering all of soba noodles in the dipping sauce was thought to be boorish; a true man of style will only let the sauce touch a small part of the soba. Food unrelated to such sensibilities was avoided at all cost. As townsmen and merchant culture became stronger with the power of the ruling class of samurai on the wane, seasonings like sake, mirin (sweet sake for cooking), *shōyu* became more widely used among the populace during this time. Teahouses and *ryōriya* opened along major highways and in towns. Specialty stores selling soba, udon (wheat noodles served in soup or with a dipping sauce), *tenpura* and such increasingly flourished in urban centers like Edo and Osaka.

The feudal government issued directives to all classes from time to time to prohibit spending on expensive food and luxuries. Samurai were directed to eat frugally and merchants, who were more affluent than samurai toward the end of the Edo period, were also told to control their spending, even to the extent that they were told how many side dishes they could have in a meal (usually five dishes, in addition to rice, soup, and pickles). Ironically, although a vast majority of farmers were poor, some gained enormous wealth and began living in a life of luxury. Time and again, laws were promulgated against spending an exorbitant amount of money for the season's first catch of fish, in an attempt to curb Edoites' appetite for it. This did not have much effect. In 1686, the government issued a directive to set the date on which each of the various fruit, vegetables, and mushrooms could be marketed and, in 1742, another law determined when the first catch of fish could be sold.

Perhaps the most radical change in Japanese eating habits took place in the mid-nineteenth century. During this time, the long-held taboo against certain food and superstitions about food combinations gave away and, with the opening of the country and with foreigners bringing in a variety of new food and dishes (such as milk and butter), the people began to eat dairy products and the meat of animals and fowl. With an official lifting of sanction against meat eating, experimenting with red meat became something of a fashion, so much so that every townsman who embraced the motto of the time "Enlightenment and Civilization" caught onto this craze. Eating beef was just as fashionable as getting the male traditional topknot cut off. New food, such as the Irish potato, tomato, celery, cabbage, asparagus, and onion were introduced into the Japanese diet. Many food items whose roots date back from this time in history, transmuted to suite the Japanese taste, still persist today. These include *ramune* (from English 'lemonde'), *korokke* ('small breaded and fried potato patties with fillings' from French *croquette*), *tonkatsu*

(fried and breaded pork cutlets, from Japanese ton, 'pork' + katsu 'cutlet'), omuraisu (ketchuppiced rice topped with an egg omelet, omu, from English 'omelet' + raisu, from English 'rice'), hayashiraisu (ground meat and rice cooked with ketchup, hayashi, from English 'hashed beef' + raisu English 'rice').

The Japanese diet again experienced a major change after World War II. Especially in the fast food sector, American influence was strongly felt and with this, certain changes in eating habits have taken place. Japan also contributed to fast food by inventing now ubiquitous instant noodles. For the last several decades, per capita consumption of rice has been slipping; this in contrast to increasing consumption of all types of vegetables, meat, dairy, and wheat.

A concern for more healthful choice of food, especially among the young, has been expressed in the media. The Japanese continue to incorporate non-indigenous foodstuff from abroad, not to mention find ways to combine food in a variety of novel ways to appeal to the Japanese taste. For instance, pizza shops offer an enormous variety not imaginable in the United States; their current offering includes pizzas topped with, among other things, potato salad or green salad, fruit, barbecued pork, etc.

## **Eating Meat for Health**

Eating meat was avoided through much of Japan's history but, in reality, people never stopped eating it even in the most puritanical days. The prohibition first came as an imperial edict issued in A.D. 675 which specifically prohibited eating of ox, horse, dog, monkey, and fowl. A conspicuous lack of mention of deer and wild boar should be noted here. Although eating of meat was not sanctioned, people of all social classes continued to consume meat for various "medicinal" purposes. During the Tokugawa period, a store in Edo called Momonjiya specialized in selling meat of wild boar, deer, fox, tanuki, wolf, bear, river otter, skunk, cat, and wild dog, flourished as early as the beginning of the 18th century. Around the same time, records show that meat was available for purchase in Kōjimachi area of Edo. Archaeological excavations of mansions of samurai, such as one occupied by the Yonezawa Fief in present day Minato Ward in Tokyo, revealed a large amount of animal bones, suggesting large scale eating of meat by those who occupied the mansion in the beginning of the 17th century. Hikone Fief also customarily sent beef to the shogun as a gift and would happily oblige when shogun made a request for beef. They would send one shipment through the Nakasendō highway and another via Tōkaidō, so that if one failed to reach its destination for some reason, the other would surely succeed.

## **Cooking Basics**

The milder seasoning of Japanese cooking is achieved by the use of cooking broth called dashi. In contrast to rich sauces made from animal fats, butter, cream, and flour, food cooked in dashi take on subtle flavor in addition to the ingredient's own. This broth is made from dried giant kelp (konbu) preferably harvested in the cold waters off of Hokkaidō and flakes of dried bonito, which are briefly boiled in water and then strained. Dashi came to be used in the Edo period; it is as ubiquitous as table salt in any Japanese cooking today if the food contains liquid.

Seasonings commonly used are shōyu (soy sauce), sake (as well as its sweet cooking variety called mirin), miso (fermented soybeans), rice vinegar, and salt. Oils used in Japanese cooking are those extracted from rapeseeds, soybeans, sesame seeds, and more recently corn.

A Japanese meal is typically served in the following way. First, clear soup (called osuimono or suimashijiru) or miso soup is served in a wooden lacquered bowl on the right side of the guest. A bowl of cooked rice in a ceramic bowl is placed to the left of the guest. Not observing this orientation of the bowls and switch their places is not recommended, as it denotes the way food is offered to the dead. Side dishes (okazu), served in variety of ceramic serving dishes, are placed on the far side. These could be fish, meat, and vegetables that are usually seasoned, prepared in a variety of ways (sliced, simmered, steamed, grilled, merely cut and mixed, to name a few of the standard procedures). All dishes are served at once, except when the food is kaiseki and chakaiseki and in some restaurants. Food is eaten with wooden or, less frequently, plastic chopsticks. In family style, side dishes may be shared by members of the family but each member eat from his/her own rice and soup bowls using own chopsticks. Table napkins are not usually available for Japanese meals as their need is not immediately perceived, although the guest might reserve the small wet towelette offered at the beginning of a meal to wipe off the hands (called oshibori) and use it like a napkin.

As explained in the section above about kaiseki ryōri, if people drink alcoholic drinks as the beginning part of a meal, they nibble on side dishes while doing so. Such a meal is usually followed by a soup, a bowl of rice, and pickles, and completed with a cup of tea and sweets or fruit.

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## Suggested Reading

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Ishige, Naomichi. *History and Culture of Japanese Food*. London: Kegan Paul, 2001.

*Kodansha Encyclopedia of Japan*, various entries on food. Tokyo and New York: Kodansha International, 1983.

Richie, Donald. *A Taste of Japan: Food Fact and Fable*. Tokyo and New York: Kodansha International, 1993.

Tsuchiya, Yoshio and Yamamoto Masaru. *The Fine Art of Japanese Food Arrangement*. Tokyo and New York: Kodansha International, 2003.

### **Suggested Viewing**

Tanpopo. Directed by Itami Jūzō. 114 minutes. Tokyo: Itami Productions, 1987.