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# Food Culture in Japan



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MICHAEL ASHKENAZI AND JEANNE JACOB

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Food Culture around the World

Ken Albala, Series Editor



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The publisher has done its best to make sure the instructions and/or recipes in this book are correct. However, users should apply judgment and experience when preparing recipes, especially parents and teachers working with young people. The publisher accepts no responsibility for the outcome of any recipe included in this volume.

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*In memory of Okuyama Shunzō, friend, mentor, philosopher, and gourmet.*



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## Preface

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For the average American diner, knowledge about and interest in Japanese food seemed to be confined to a few popular dishes until fairly recently. American exposure to Japanese food was largely limited to Japanese steakhouse chain offerings and deep-fried *tempura*. One primary ingredient epitomized for the non-Japanese person Japanese food at its pinnacle—raw fish. However, authentically prepared Japanese cuisine using raw fish as its centerpiece was for many years unavailable outside Japan. The ingredient itself was also a major barrier to undiluted worldwide acclaim of Japanese cuisine. To the uninitiated diner decades ago, *sushi* (raw fish and vinegared rice balls) or *sashimi* (raw fish slices) were breathtakingly aesthetic in concept and very visually tempting, but all interest stopped there. Those who did not wish to offend their hosts surreptitiously deposited *sashimi* into a convenient paper napkin, or else swallowed it unchewed and washed it down with copious gulps of beer or *saké*.

It does seem an injustice that for a very long time Japanese food did not receive the widespread recognition that it deserves. Many first-time eaters, though bowled over by its aesthetic presentation, describe Japanese food as insipid, because the subtlety of Japanese haute cuisine, as demonstrated in the *kaiseki*, or tea-ceremony, style of cooking, is lost on palates expecting elaborate blends of seasoning. Highly seasoned Chinese or intricately sauced French dishes are more likely to win over experimenting palates. Palates have to be educated to fully appreciate Japanese food beyond the familiar stews, *tempura* (deep fried), and the lavishly seasoned grilled dishes. Tongues have to learn to become sensitive to the

slight nuances of taste, to discern the intrinsic and undisguised natural flavors in each ingredient.

The aesthetic presentation of Japanese food naturally encourages this focused attention. In classical Japanese cuisine, before each diner is an array of small individual servings, each a work of art framed in its own exquisite receptacle. “Feed the eye first,” is the first injunction to the Japanese cook. Artistry is not limited to the table arrangements, outdoor gardens, or exterior and interior architecture of the venue and main rooms. In the washrooms you may be fortunate to see an exquisite seasonal floral arrangement in a bamboo receptacle, to match the bamboo paneling on the walls, or perhaps a rustic stone sink.

The visual appeal of a feast can be bewildering to the uninitiated. Plates of all possible geometric shapes—square, rectangular, crescent- or fan-shaped—in many colors, sizes, and textures decorate the table. Not all are porcelain—slabs of wood, baskets, even chestnut husks can hold food. Garnishes can be greens, similar to parsley, to which most non-Japanese people can relate; but what does one do with red maple leaves, pale pink ginger shoots, and stalks with flower buds? Is one expected to eat these as well? (Yes, but not the maple leaves.)

And, to complicate matters particularly during a banquet, where is the rice? Having been told that rice is the foundation of all east Asian meals, the uninitiated diner at a celebratory meal is perplexed. There is no rice to be glimpsed among the vast array of artful tidbits arranged at the table. Endless rounds of *saké* (rice wine) are offered, awkwardness disappears, everyone else starts eating, and no one seems to mind that there is no rice. Finally when everyone is bursting to repletion and *saké*-muddled, the rice appears with pickles and *miso* (soybean paste) soup. The neophyte eater cannot imagine room for another morsel, but everyone digs in, all miraculously sobered up, relishing the salty pickles and commenting on them with nostalgia, particularly if the ingredients and flavoring are an unusual combination.

What does this say about food in Japan? That at its best, it is an overwhelming sensory aesthetic experience. And it is that meticulous attention to every phase—from selecting the freshest ingredients, choosing the serving receptacles, and most of all, the graciousness of service and attention to guests—that characterizes the fine art of Japanese *omotenashi* (hosting a meal).

Compared to 20 or even 10 years ago, in most cosmopolitan cities, it is no longer difficult to find places that serve Japanese food. Noodle bars specializing in variably flavored *udon* or *râmen* have sprung up, joining the

proliferating *kaiten zushi* (budget-priced restaurants featuring ready-made *sushi*) as the east Asian competitors to Western fast foods. Even *miso* (soybean paste) soup has found favor with Western chefs dabbling in East-West fusion cooking.

On a personal note, because of the initial scarcity of Japanese restaurants where we lived, and later because the Japanese dishes that we wanted to eat were not available, we began to cook our own. As amateur cooks, we could not hope to attain the virtuoso expertise of Japanese chefs with years of traditional training behind them. Although we had cooked our own meals while living in Japan, there were certain dishes that we had only sampled at restaurants that specialized in one type of food. These specialist restaurants were favorites because we could watch the cooking process as *tempura* was fried to unmatched light crispness or chat with the sushi chef to ask which fish was in season as we sat at the counter slowly savoring our tea.

In those days, unlike today, laver (edible seaweeds), Japanese soy sauce, *miso*, and buckwheat noodles were impossible to get at our local supermarket in England and so we resorted to having them sent from Japan and keeping them deep frozen, rationing our supplies so that we could cook them throughout the year. We had acquired a few traditional kitchen knives and miscellaneous tools, including variously shaped tableware, and set about teaching ourselves to cook the Japanese way. As a result, our two younger children, who had never been to Japan, have come to prefer Japanese food to all other food. Their childhood favorites, in common with most Japanese children, were *furikake* (a powdered mixed seasoning for cooked rice) and *nori*, and remain so, even in their teens.

More than the elaborate multicourse *kaiseki* banquets, it was the simple everyday dishes, such as blanched vegetables, grilled fish, and plain fresh tofu, cold or hot, or, in Michael's case, hand-cut *soba* noodles, that we longed for most when we craved Japanese food. Except for freshly made silken tofu (*kinugoshi*), unobtainable locally, very fresh green vegetables and freshwater and air-shipped sea fish are now readily available. The ultimate objective in serving Japanese food is to use local and fresh ingredients in season as much as possible.

In practical terms, a mix of ingredients sourced locally and elsewhere is usual for all but the most exacting Japanese chef. Even classical Kyoto cooking, which is considered the acme of refinement, has always used dried foodstuff such as marine fish and seafood brought in salted and preserved from elsewhere, because landlocked Kyoto was self-sufficient only in freshwater supplies.

The key to good food is fresh quality ingredients; this is the recurring message of professional cooks and literature the world over. The Japanese have taken this message to an extreme, and the vegetables and fruit in supermarkets, department stores, and greengrocers in Japan are not only fresh, but also of perfect appearance, shape, and size. Fish and seafood are bright-eyed and glisten attractively: there is none of the dense and incriminating fishy smell that from a distance unmistakably identifies fish-mongers elsewhere. Twenty years ago, most Japanese shopped for food every day to ensure freshness, something that would be difficult to do now even in Japan. The realities of working life force even the authors to stock up on food items so that we shop as rarely as possible. However, when we do, and we find superb ingredients, we cook these immediately in the Japanese style. And these days, even nonlocal foodstuffs can be of impeccable quality and freshness. Modern freezing and transportation methods have made exotic marine foodstuffs and fresh Asian vegetables and fungi available to all. Organic crop production and local farmers' markets are also making it easier to find chemical-free produce nearby.

Aside from its gustatory and aesthetic appeal, there is one more compelling reason to cook and eat Japanese food. It is good for you. Not only is it a balanced diet in its combination of rice, vegetables, and emphasis on fish and seafood, with a modicum intake of animal protein and fat, but many of its components have disease-preventing qualities.

This book attempts to relate Japanese food to its cultural surroundings in a way that makes sense to non-Japanese readers. Chapter 1 supplies context: the historical and geographical factors that have shaped Japanese food. Chapter 2 shifts to a closer examination of the various major components of this cuisine. We discuss the primary foods: the rice, soybean paste, and stock that appear at virtually every meal, and the other major food items used. Chapter 3 covers *who* prepares food and *how* it is prepared: the various cooking methods that make up the repertoire of the Japanese cook. Chapter 4 presents the different types of Japanese meals. Japanese eat out a great deal, and chapter 5 concentrates on the various types of restaurants, some of which serve food that is difficult or complex to make even for a Japanese housewife and is, therefore, rarely encountered, even in the Japanese home. Chapter 6 examines foods served for festive occasions and on special days and continues to explore the dynamic area of aesthetics in Japanese food. Finally, chapter 7 looks at the modern Japanese diet and nutrition.

Throughout the book, the reader will find recipes that complement the narrative. These are not intended to compete with the many fine cook-

books on Japanese food available today: more than 100 in English alone (a selected list is found in the Resource Guide at the back of this book). However, as any good cookbook writer should, we have experimented with all these recipes. The recipes range from the simplest home foods to elaborate fare more commonly available in restaurants. Students and other readers should be able to readily find the special ingredients in Asian grocery stores and some in the Asian section in the supermarket. The Resource Guide also includes a brief annotated list of suggested readings, films/videos, and Web sites.



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It's always a pleasure to work on a subject that one is passionate about. Besides our own love of Japanese food and cooking, preparing this book has taught us a great deal. The book, however, would not have been possible without the help of many people. Ken Albala, the series editor, first proposed that we tackle this subject during a meeting of the annual Oxford Food Symposium, and we are grateful to him for the opportunity. Thanks are also due Wendi Schnauffer at Greenwood Press for encouragement and reading the manuscript before its completion. We are also grateful to the members of the Oxford Food Symposium for informal advice and criticism (often otherwise unacknowledged) during the writing of the book. We are grateful to the many members of the H-Japan and H-Asia Internet discussion lists, who came through with suggestions and obscure bits of data we were unable to track down.

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Our greatest debt, inevitably, is owed Okuyama Shunzô. For more than 25 years, he was a close friend and mentor. He loved good food and good company and had a fine discernment of the aesthetic and sensory dimensions of Japanese food and art. A wonderful human being, we have been privileged to know him. Sadly, he passed away during the writing of this book.

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# Timeline

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- 7000 B.C.E.–710 C.E.** Prearistocratic period (for historians, the Jōmon, Yayoi, Yamato, and Kofun eras). Japanese culture gradually moves from a farming/hunting-gathering economy to an agriculture-based state. Pottery and metallurgy are learned, possibly from Korean origins. Staple foods are bulbs, roots, and various types of millet. Rituals related to purity and food offerings to the deities are established and practiced.
- 531–580** Buddhism is introduced from Korea, along with Korean artisans in ceramics. The King of Paekche in Korea sends an image of the Buddha to Emperor Kimmei. In consequence, the path is set for a cuisine that uses little meat. Buddhist monasteries, in particular, develop their own meatless cuisine, and their cooks exert a great deal of influence on Japanese cooking.
- 607** First Japanese embassy is sent to China to learn Chinese ways. New forms of food and luxuries are imported from China.
- 710 onward** Start of the aristocratic period with the establishment of a permanent capital at Nara. Rice cultivation based on mainland models commences, and rice meals become a feature of court life.
- 774–835** Life of Kōbō Daishi, founder of the Shingon Buddhist sect, which helped codify Japanese aesthetic ideas, and who is credited with many miracles, including reviving a dried fish at the site of Mackerel Temple on the island of Shikoku.

- 794–1185 Historical Heian era. The imperial capital is established at Heian-kyô (modern Kyoto). A rich court life develops as the aristocracy in Heian-kyô refines its tastes. Lavish ritual feasts are performed at temples and recorded in novels, diaries, and paintings.
- 838 Twelfth and last embassy to China.
- 1180–85 The Gempei War between the Minamoto and the Taira clans of warriors brings about the end of the aristocratic period; warriors establish a political capital at Kamakura, near modern Tokyo. The start of the *samurai* period brings with it a more austere aesthetic in art as well as in food.
- 1480–1568 The Sengoku (Civil War) era.
- 1542 or 1543 Portuguese arrive at Tanegashima and introduce Western firearms. Subsequently, as more Europeans arrive, the *namban* (sweets using lots of egg yolks and sugar, such as *kasutera*; meat cookery; and *tempura* deep frying) cooking styles are popularized; these styles gradually spread to the capital. New vegetables such as sweet potatoes and peppers are introduced to the Japanese, probably by Spanish visitors from the Americas.
- 1585? The tea ceremony rules are codified by Sen-no-Rikkyu (1522–91). Sen also lays the foundation for *kaiseki*-style cuisine, based partly on Buddhist temple cooking styles.
- 1600–1868 Historical Tokugawa (or Edo) era. Power is assumed by the Tokugawa clan. The political capital is moved to Edo. During this period, Japan is secluded and no foreigners are allowed to live in the country, nor are Japanese allowed to leave it. As a consequence, Japanese food customs develop and mature with minimal influence from other cuisines.
- 1868–1912 Historical Meiji era. The emperor returns as ruler, and the imperial capital is moved to Edo, which is renamed Tokyo. Start of the modern period as Japanese society introduces industrial and other forms of technology. First beef stew restaurant is opened in Tokyo. A brewery is established in Yokohama by Americans, which becomes the forerunner of the Kirin beer company. Bread becomes common and is even requisitioned by a rebel army in the first years of the era.
- 1870 Bread is publicly sold by the many bakeshops that now open in Yokohama and Tokyo. Ice cream is first sold in Yokohama, and the first Western food restaurant opened in Yokohama.
- 1873 The first railway in Japan between Shimbashi and Yokohama opens, and Emperor Meiji tries beef, giving a boost to meat con-

- sumption and the opening of the first Western-cooking restaurant in Tokyo.
- 1878 The first Japanese winery opens and Western wine is sold to the public.
- 1886 The first “station box lunch” (*ekiben*) is sold at Utsunomiya Station, starting a culinary tradition that continues today.
- 1889 A coffee specialist shop opens in Tokyo, influenced in part by the popularity of coffee as a hot drink among Japanese soldiers stationed in northern Hokkaido.
- 1904–05 Russo-Japanese War. First defeat of a European power by a non-European one as the Japanese fleet sinks the Russian Far-East Fleet in Tsushima Straits.
- 1905 Women’s magazines start publication and introduce to the public menus, recipes, and new ways of cooking.
- 1915 Calpis fermented milk drink manufacturing and sale creates serious popular interest in milk products.
- 1932 The ministry of education starts a school lunch program to combat child malnutrition.
- 1937 Outbreak of war with China. Hinomaru (Rising Sun) lunch box becomes a fad to display patriotism and support the war effort.
- 1941 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor starts the Pacific theater of World War II. During the war, rice shortages and rationing become common. Potatoes are introduced as a substitute for rice for many people.
- 1945 Kamikaze attacks. Japan surrenders to the Allied Powers after the U.S. atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.
- 1970 American fast food companies start making inroads into Japan and establish branches throughout the country. Both hamburgers and fried chicken become popular foods, in both American and Japanese versions.
- 1975 Cheesecake becomes popular in Japan as a major Western confectionery, and demand for cheese and other milk products soars.
- 1979 Calorie-free devil’s foot root jelly (*konnyaku*) rises in popularity as a diet food as the Japanese public becomes more weight-conscious; increased health-consciousness inspires the development of reduced-salt soy sauce and sports drinks, in addition to other health drinks, become available.

- 1983 Post Office begins a delivery service shipping packages of “home-town foods”—delicacies from small farming communities around Japan—to city residents.
- 1991– Heisei era. Death of Shōwa Emperor (Hirohito). Succession by his son, the current Emperor Heisei. Organic, locally sourced food is in demand, and homemakers’ cooperatives are formed to source food directly from farmers. There is a boom in highly spiced food, and heightened interest in ethnic cuisines, health food, and vegetarian food (*shōjin*).

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# 1

## Historical Overview

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To understand Japanese food, it is necessary to have geographical and historical context. The history of Japan is strongly dictated by its geography: the society that developed on this chain of volcanic islands was strongly influenced by the Asian continent. Japan is close enough to the Asian mainland to be influenced by Asian culture, yet far enough off the coast not to be affected directly by continental events. The types of foodstuffs the Japanese people ate, though often derived from Asiatic continental sources, were modified by Japan's relative isolation, by the environment of fertile volcanic valleys watered by monsoon rains and artificial irrigation, and by reliance on the sea. The nonmaterial component of food will also be discussed: the ideas and sentiments that the Japanese have about their surroundings powerfully influenced their foodways.

### GEOGRAPHY AND CLIMATE

The geography and climate of Japan have not changed materially throughout Japanese history, with the exception of the arable areas (only about 15 percent of the land is arable), which were gradually brought under the plow.

#### **Geography**

Japan is a group of more than 3,600 islands stretching 3,500 km long, roughly the area of California, but without its expanse of habitable ter-

rain. Steep mountains make up over 80 percent of the four main islands, in the order north to south, Hokkaido, Honshu, Shikoku, and Kyushu. The major cities of Tokyo, Kyoto, Osaka, and Kobe are on Honshu island. Sapporo and Nagasaki are two major cities on Hokkaido and Kyushu, respectively.

Surrounded on all sides by the sea or the mountains, the Japanese naturally look to these sources for their food and lyrically refer to food as the delights or treasures of the seas and the mountains (*umi no sachi, yama no sachi*). Japan straddles four climate zones, with most of its landmass enjoying distinct temperate seasons. Hokkaido as well as northern and eastern Honshu have a cold temperate climate with heavy snowfall for over half of the year, beginning as early as October and only melting in April. The rest of Honshu and Shikoku have a cool temperate climate, while southern Kyushu and the Okinawan islands have a subtropical climate. The four seasons are regular and clearly defined; the one oddity, from a North American perspective, are the monsoon rains between May and July. The food culture of the Japanese is much constrained by three geographical features: river valleys, mountains, and the sea.

### *River Valleys*

Wide valleys where arable agriculture was practicable determined much of Japanese history. The region west of the fortified barrier that controlled passage to and from the imperial court in Kyoto (the *Kansai*) encompasses what is now the Kyoto-Osaka area. At its center is the Yamato plain, the cradle of Japanese civilization. This is where both the refined cuisine of the Kyoto imperial court and the sumptuous cuisine of the Osaka merchants developed. Kyoto taste exemplifies the most refined of all Japanese regional cuisines. Landlocked Kyoto, without easy access to marine produce, focuses on the excellence of its vegetables and freshwater fish. Osaka's cuisine is noted for its brash showiness. A conspicuous wealth of luxurious and rare items as well as an appreciation for hearty eating characterize the bourgeois cooking favored by moneyed businessmen.

East of the ancient barrier is the *Kantô* area. Life was rougher here, but in many ways easier since the well-irrigated, reasonably flat plain was ideal for agriculture and a large landlocked bay allowed easy fishing. One fishing village, Edo by name, became in the seventeenth century the political capital of Japan. By the eighteenth century, and for some time after, Edo (now known as Tokyo) was the largest city in the world. This is where the retainer-warriors (*samurai*) of feudal lords came to stay at the order of the

effective political ruler, the *shogun*. And this is where a robust cuisine evolved, based on bounty from the fields and the sea, becoming the dominant Japanese cuisine today. Some of its representative dishes, such as *sushi*, otherwise known as Edo *sushi* to distinguish it from Osaka *sushi*, have become synonymous with Japanese cuisine world-wide.

About midway between these two dominant valleys and their cuisines lies another fertile coastal plain. Centering more or less around the modern city of Nagoya and backed up against the mountains, the southern plain (*Nanzan*) provides another culinary center, from which many marine foods come, since it is one of the centers of pelagic and seaweed farming.

The Japan Sea side of Honshu, from the cities of Kanazawa to Niigata, is an area of lush, well-irrigated valleys and good access to the sea. Kanazawa cuisine is as lush and luxurious as the area it comes from and its barons in the Japanese Middle Ages were among the wealthiest in Japan. Other areas in Japan, such as the plains around Sapporo in the north and the cities of Nagasaki and Kagoshima in the south, also evolved their own cuisines based on the wealth of the countryside.

### ***Mountains***

The mountains of Japan have been formidable barriers throughout its history. Covered with forests, they were also the source of much desired foodstuff—mushrooms, wild greens, wild fruit, and roots—called collectively *sansai*, which the Japanese still adore to this day. The mountains were also the domicile of the gods, and therefore, any food with that provenance was considered something of a blessing. Significantly, too, the mountains served as barriers between various political entities and regional cuisines and preferences, each of which has contributed, in modern times, to the entity we know as “Japanese cuisine.”

### ***The Sea***

Developed by dwellers on an archipelago with many fine bays and a large inland sea, Japanese cuisine, no less than its history, is affected by the ocean. Fish and marine products have always been major food items. Marine cultivation started in Japan in early history. The sea not only provided a bounty, it also provided this bounty according to a regular routine, so that feelings of dependency, expectation, and even anxiety were bound up with feelings about the sea. Because, regular as the sea was in the long-



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