

Kikkoman's quarterly intercultural forum for the exchange of ideas on food



THE JAPANESE TABLE

Annual Events and Traditions

Spring: From the New Year to Cherry Blossoms

by Yoichiro Nakamura

Japan's annual cycle of seasonal observances revolves around the ancient lunar calendar. In this new feature series, Food Forum highlights the very special foods that define these celebrations. Our first installment opens with the symbolism and traditions of the New Year and of new beginnings.

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Annual Events and Traditions

Spring: From the New Year to Cherry Blossoms



From left: During Hinamatsuri, traditional foods include *hamaguri* clam soup and *hishi-mochi* diamond-shaped mochi cakes in colored layers.

The rhythms of life in Japan are neatly matched to the changes of its four seasons. The annual harvest of rice, staple of the Japanese diet for centuries, is realized through the steady cycle of the seasons, and Japanese traditionally regard this abundance of nature as a blessing imparted by their ancestors. Traditional belief holds that ancestral spirits appear in the world in the form of deities, bringing blessings and happiness; thus an abundant harvest is considered a boon for their descendants. From ancient times, people have prepared seasonal foods as offerings to those deities thought to visit this world and mingle among the living. The living partake of these foods with the spirits, then usher their spiritual visitors back to their own realm. Traditional foods in Japan are thus closely connected with customs related to belief in the divine.

Festive New Year's Foods

At the end of every year, preparations begin with cleaning and tidying to welcome the deity of the New Year. *Kadomatsu*, beautifully prepared festoons of pine and bamboo, are arrayed at entrances to homes and offices to serve as abodes for heavenly spirits. It is customary to cook with drawn water to signify renewal at the start

of the New Year. Mochi cakes of steamed glutinous rice, pounded in a mortar, are essential, placed on altars along with a variety of decorations as offerings to express gratitude to the deities. Mochi is a popular food in Asia; in Japan, its traditionally round shape is said to represent the human heart, within which the spirit dwells. In the past, small round mochi cakes were presented to children by their parents as *otoshidama* to convey this sensibility; these days, cash is given. Like Christmas presents from Santa, *otoshidama* have long been symbolic of happiness received from the gods. Traditionally served on New Year's day is *zoni* soup, which contains mochi and vegetables. Interestingly, the shapes of mochi in *zoni* differ by region: square cakes are preferred in eastern Japan, and round ones are more popular in the western part of the country.

Just as indispensable as New Year's mochi are the festive foods known as *osechi ryori*. Traditionally, these are the most extravagant foods eaten during the year, served in beautifully crafted lacquered boxes called *jubako*. The foods themselves are made using ingredients whose names or appearance are auspicious. Examples include shrimp, symbolic of long life with their

long "whiskers" and curved bodies evoking the bent back of an elderly person. Yellowtail is a fish whose Japanese name changes along with the stages of its life cycle, a concept suggestive of successful advancement in life. Chestnuts are referred to as *kachi-guri*, "victory in competition"; herring roe connote prosperity for one's descendants; *tazukuri* are small dried fish with sesame seeds in a sweet soy sauce-based seasoning, whose name implies "industrious cultivation of fields." *Osechi ryori* also includes *kamaboko* steamed fish cake in the pink and white colors associated with felicitous occasions; rolled kombu, whose name evokes the word *yorokobu* for "happiness"; and festive yellow-and-white layered *nishiki-tamago* egg cakes.

When the traditional New Year's period ends, mochi cakes are removed from the display of



Setsubun roasted soybeans and *oni* demon mask

Below: New Year's *kadomatsu*; right: three-layer boxes and assorted *osechi ryori* including chestnuts, *tazukuri*, *kamaboko* and rolled kombu.



offerings and consumed in a sweet soup made with adzuki beans and reheated mochi. When the *kadomatsu* and other decorations are taken down, it is customary to take them to a local shrine where they are given a ceremonial burning. The visiting deities then rise with the smoke to return to their world.

Rites of Spring

Setsubun is held on the day before the beginning of spring, which generally falls in early February. Certain rituals are observed to drive away ill fortune and summon luck. Soybeans are roasted, and one eats just as many beans as their age; the beans are also taken in hot tea on auspicious occasions. The highlight of Setsubun involves opening windows and doors and tossing out the soybeans while chanting, "Out with bad luck, in with good luck!" One person dons an *oni* demon mask, while others toss the beans to symbolically drive it away and invite good fortune. Traditional spring rites in Europe involve similar demon masks, reflecting the hope for renewal—a feeling shared around the world.

Girls' Day

To pray for the health of girls, the Hinamatsuri Doll Festival is held on March 3. Families display special

dolls dressed in brocade robes as worn by the emperor's court of ancient Japan. Offerings made to the dolls include *shirozake*, a sweet cloudy sake made of slightly fermented rice, along with *hishi-mochi*, diamond-shaped mochi cakes in red, white and green layers. The green layer is made by adding crushed *yomogi* mugwort leaves to mochi. Mugwort has medicinal effects and its pungent smell was believed to drive away harm, making it a suitable ingredient in foods to welcome a new season. Another traditional Hinamatsuri dish is *chirashi-zushi* (see p. 7). This "scattered" sushi is made by spreading out sushi rice in a large bowl and topping it with various tasty and colorful morsels, including thin strips of omelet, sashimi, seasoned slices of shiitake and strips of dried nori seaweed. On Hinamatsuri it is also customary to eat shellfish such as *hamaguri* clams in clear soup. Sometimes live clams are given as offerings to the dolls.

Cherry Blossom Viewing

The first of April marks the beginning of both the business and the academic year in Japan, and at about this time, cherry trees begin to bloom across the country. People love to celebrate this springtime

event with *hanami* "flower-viewing" parties that bring together family, friends and colleagues to enjoy food and drink beneath cherry blossoms in full bloom. Cherry trees hold special meaning for Japanese, as they are believed to serve as a dwelling for the gods who promise an abundant autumn harvest.

For Japanese, the season from New Year's to the flowering of the cherry blossoms is the important start, or "springboard," if you will, for the entire year—a time of celebration and prayers for peace and an abundant harvest, and for the happiness of each and every one of us. ◆

Translated by Lynne E. Riggs

cover

In springtime, all of Japan enjoys the spirit of renewal promised in the blossoming of the cherry trees. In traditional *hanami* flower-viewing parties, friends, colleagues and family gather beneath the trees to share food together.

Author's profile

Yoichiro Nakamura, Ph.D.; born in 1943. A specialist in historical and folklore resources, Prof. Nakamura was formerly professor at Shizuoka Sangyo University (SSU), and is currently guest researcher at the SSU Institute of Research and Development. His major works include: *Iruka to nihonjin* ("Dolphins and Japanese," 2017); *Myanmar: Ima, ichiban shiritai kuni* ("Myanmar: the country we're most curious about," 2013); *Bancha to shomin kissashi* ("Bancha tea and the history of popular tea drinking," 2015); and *Washoku bunka booklet 2: nenchu gyoji to shikitari* ("Washoku culture booklet, no. 2: annual events and traditions," 2016).



**SPECIAL
REPORT**
from Brazil

São Paulo

Japanese Cuisine Around the World

The annual Food Forum Special Report presents people who are introducing the pleasures of Japanese cuisine in countries around the world. This year we visit chef and restaurant owner Shinya Koike in São Paulo, Brazil.



Shinya Koike

Born 1957, Tokyo. Relocated to Brazil in 1994, where he founded five Japanese restaurants. Since 2007, Chef Koike has chaired the Japanese Food Promotion Committee of the Brazilian Society of Japanese Culture and Social Assistance. He actively promotes *washoku* through lectures and demonstrations, including during the Japanese Prime Minister's visit in 2014. He helped establish Brazil's first Sushi Chef Championship, certified by the Federation of Japan Sushi Industry Health Associations and the World Sushi Skills Institute. In 2016, Chef Koike received the Minister's Award for Overseas Promotion of Japanese Food from the Japanese Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries.



Sakagura A1

Rua Jerônimo da Veiga, 74-Itaim Bibi,
São Paulo, Brazil
Tel: +55 (11) 3078 3883
www.sakaguraa1.com.br

Restaurant SHIN KOIKE

Av. das Américas, 8585-Vogue Square,
Barra da Tijuca, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
Tel: +55 (21) 3030 9092
www.shinkoike.com.br

I first moved to Brazil in 1994 at the invitation of a friend who planned to open a Japanese restaurant in São Paulo, but eventually ended up working at a large-scale Japanese restaurant, followed by a stint as a sous-chef. In 2004, I opened my own place called Syutei A1. We had only 13 seats, menus were handwritten daily, and we served a variety of Japanese dishes including *hijiki-no-nimono* simmered *hijiki* sea vegetable, *kinpira-gobo* braised burdock root and carrot, grilled fish and tempura.

Japanese Traditions in Brazil

To give some background, there were only a handful of Japanese restaurants in São Paulo in the early 1990s, and these targeted mostly Japanese expats and second-generation, or *nikkei*, Japanese-Brazilians. When Brazilian-operated Japanese restaurants first appeared around 1995 in upmarket São Paulo neighborhoods, this marked the beginning of the Japanese food boom, where all-you-can-eat Japanese and

sales-by-weight restaurants were hugely popular.

So when I opened Syutei A1, conditions for any restaurant serving authentic Japanese cuisine were very favorable. The population, particularly in São Paulo, includes many *nikkei* interested in Japan, its traditions—and its cuisine. There is a huge consumer segment that knows and loves Japanese food. Furthermore, thanks to the enormous efforts of immigrant farmers from Japan who established themselves in Brazil in the early twentieth century, there are suburban farms providing a plentiful supply of the Japanese vegetables needed in Japanese cuisine, such as cucumber, eggplant, daikon, yam, yuzu citrus and ginkgo nuts. I am quite sure there is no other country outside Japan where such abundant, high quality produce can be obtained so easily. Because of these particular circumstances, Syutei A1 was blessed from the beginning. Its success led to my opening the 46-



Chef Koike demonstrates Japanese beef steaming technique at a Japan-Brazil dinner reception.



Sakagura A1 menu includes soba rolls with sliced yam and flavored shiso.



Sakagura A1 offers a variety of dishes including sashimi, sushi and tempura.

seat Restaurant Aizomê in 2007, which serves a *kaiseki* menu that changes daily. In 2008 and 2009, Aizomê was named best Japanese restaurant in São Paulo.

Authentic Flavors

The Brazilian economy stabilized over the past decade, and it became easier to obtain ingredients from Japan; by the early 2000s, we could source kombu, *katsuobushi* (dried bonito), instant foods and seasonings. Pre-prepared seafood products and gourmet items appeared on the market, and *kurage* jellyfish, *iidako* octopus, shark fin and *shirauo* icefish were served as sushi in high quality shops and were popular with Brazilian consumers. When I first arrived in Brazil, a few small shops sold Asian and Japanese foods and ingredients; but by 2000, there were supermarkets selling mainly Japanese foods. The rush from 2000-2012 to open new Japanese restaurants increased the number of Japanese-food fans. At the same time, refrigerated container



Arranging steamed abalone and crab with okura-tororo garnish at Sakagura A1

shipments of Japanese sake started to arrive here, and the availability of imported unpasteurized sake triggered a boom; the sake market took off and sake sommeliers thrived. Consumers slowly shifted from locally made seasonings and sake to genuine Japan-made products and so, reflecting their demand for higher quality taste, the authenticity of Japanese restaurants improved.

As the clientele of São Paulo's restaurant market gradually matured, in 2012, I opened the 130-seat restaurant Sakagura A1, a more extensive version of my original shops. Its concept is to provide a spectrum of *washoku* for a broader clientele of all ages, including Japanese, *nikkei* and non-Japanese-Brazilians. Our menu concept focuses on flavors created with genuine Japanese seasonings: Brazilian soy sauce is sweet, and simmered fish, for example, can be made only with true Japanese soy sauce. Our local staff also follow traditional Japanese preparation methods, like making dashi using kombu and bonito. It is my goal to change the false Brazilian conception that Japanese food is just sushi and sashimi. I hope to familiarize them with the true depth and variety of this cuisine. I believe that by enhancing our diners' experience through fine Japanese food, we spread greater understanding of *washoku* traditional Japanese cuisine here in Brazil.

Sharing Washoku

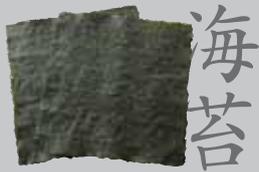
The environment for *washoku* here continues to be favorable, and awareness continues to grow. Today there are an estimated 700-800 Japanese restaurants in this city, and this trend is spreading to other parts of the country, generating more demand for quality ingredients, techniques and information about Japan and its culture. My long-time plans to expand to Rio de Janeiro were realized last year when I opened Restaurant SHIN KOIKE and Izakaya ROMAN. The two share the same kitchen and combine *washoku* dining and bar in a completely new style, unprecedented in Rio. I designed this establishment to function as a center for my *washoku* education and training activities in that city.

I continue to pursue direct, person-to-person exchange about food-related matters like ingredients, cooking tools and tableware. I am eager to see the number of *washoku* fans grow as a result of increased opportunities to enjoy the authentic cuisine. I want to do all I can to transmit the proper information and skills to food industry professionals to ensure that safe, reliable Japanese food is served. Today, *washoku* is still considered a "foreign culture" in Brazil, but I hope to see this food culture take firm root here. I believe that authentic culture truly endures, so I will continue my endeavors to pass on and share the enjoyment of *washoku*. ◆



SUSHI COCKTAIL

This recipe transforms sushi into individual servings that are perfect as small appetizers. The remaining sushi rice may be enjoyed as salad-style sushi by topping with a variety of greens, other fish and/or meat, served on a platter.



◆ Dried nori

Appetizer serves 12

113 kcal Protein 9.8 g Fat 5.4 g
(per serving)

- 400 ml / 1 2/3 C *japonica* rice*
- 450 ml / 2 C water
- 1 T sake

Sushi vinegar**

- 100 ml / 3.5 oz. rice vinegar
- 1 1/2 T granulated sugar
- 1/2 t salt

Tomato-soy sauce

- 2 tomatoes, total 260 g / 9 oz.
- 1 t granulated sugar
- 1 t Kikkoman Light Color Soy Sauce

- 180 g / 6 oz. cooked bay shrimp
- Lemon juice
- 4 T mayonnaise
- 1 t wasabi paste, or more if preferred
- 2 t Kikkoman Soy Sauce
- 1 avocado

- Dried nori seaweed for optional garnish, strips or shredded

- 1 Cook rice. Mix hot cooked rice with 4 T sushi vinegar and then cool.
- 2 Peel tomatoes, remove seeds and drain off the juice. Chop roughly, then place in a small pan with the granulated sugar and light color soy sauce. Stir over medium-low heat until its consistency is similar to marinara tomato sauce. Allow to cool.
- 3 Mix bay shrimp with lemon juice. Set aside.
- 4 In a bowl, mix the mayonnaise, wasabi paste and soy sauce.
- 5 Cut avocado in half, remove pit and skin. Cut each half into four lengthwise slices and then into small squares, each 1 cm / 1/2 in. Gently coat completely with the blended mayo-wasabi-soy sauce.
- 6 To prevent the sushi rice from sticking to the cocktail glasses, mix 2 T sushi vinegar and 4 T water, and add 1/2 t vinegar-water to the bottom of each glass. Rotate to coat well; discard excess.
- 7 To serve, spoon 2 T sushi rice into each cocktail glass.*** Sprinkle dried nori seaweed strips onto the rice, then add avocado mixture and cocktail shrimp, topped finally with a drizzle of tomato-soy sauce.

* The recipe uses only a portion of this rice; however, to cook properly, this quantity of rice is necessary.

** The sushi vinegar in this recipe is lighter and milder than usual sushi vinegar.

*** Adjust amount of rice according to size of serving ware.

Recipe by Michiko Yamamoto

1 C (U.S. cup) = approx. 240 ml; 1 T = 15 ml; 1 t = 5 ml



CHIRASHI-ZUSHI

Traditionally, *chirashi-zushi* is served during celebratory occasions, but it is most closely associated with the colorful Hinamatsuri Doll Festival in March. The dish is just as enjoyable without the fish.



◆ Lotus root

Serves 4-5

413 kcal Protein 11.1 g Fat 6.2 g
(per person)

- 400 ml / 1 ²/₃ C *japonica* rice
- 450 ml / 2 C water
- 1 T sake
- 5 cm- / 2 in.-square kombu
- 3 dried shiitake mushrooms

Sushi vinegar

- 4 T rice vinegar
- 1 ¹/₂ T granulated sugar
- 1 t salt

- 2 sheets *abura-age* deep-fried tofu
- Carrot, 4 cm / 1.5 in.

Simmering seasoning

- 1 T sake
- 1 T granulated sugar
- 1 ¹/₂ T Kikkoman Soy Sauce

- 2 eggs
- 2 t granulated sugar
- Salt
- Vegetable oil
- Lotus root, 80 g / 3 oz.

Lotus marinade

- 1 ¹/₂ T rice vinegar
- 1 ¹/₂ T dashi stock
- 1 T granulated sugar
- 1/3 t salt

- 10 snow peas
- Salt
- 8-10 slices of smoked salmon*
- Dried nori seaweed strips for garnish

1 Wash rice and drain; allow to rest for 30 minutes. Cook with water, sake and kombu.

2 To soften the shiitake, cover completely with lukewarm water and allow the mushrooms to soak for 20 minutes. Drain while reserving the water; remove stems and cut into thin slices.

3 Mix sushi vinegar into the hot cooked rice and fan to cool.

4 Parboil *abura-age* briefly and drain. Cut in half lengthwise then into thin strips. Cut carrot into thin slices. In a pan, add the *abura-age*, carrot, shiitake and 180 ml / ³/₄ C of the reserved shiitake water. Add simmering seasoning and bring to a boil, then simmer 5 minutes over medium heat. Remove from heat, allow to cool and gently drain.

5 Beat eggs with granulated sugar and a pinch of salt.

6 In a small, lightly oiled non-stick frying pan, pour in just enough egg to thinly coat the bottom of the pan. Cook over low heat and flip when the surface of the egg sets; remove from pan and cut into thin strips. Repeat process until all the raw egg is used.

7 Peel lotus root, cut into thin slices and place in a saucepan with just enough water to cover, and a few drops of vinegar. Boil only briefly; drain, then place in lotus marinade for at least 30 minutes.

8 Trim snow peas, parboil in lightly salted water. Drain and julienne. Roll up smoked salmon slices or cut into bite-size pieces.

9 Add the simmered *abura-age*, shiitake and carrot to the sushi rice and fold in gently. Spoon into a serving dish and top with the egg, lotus, snow peas, smoked salmon and nori strips.

* Shrimp may also be added for extra color and flavor.

Recipe by Kikkoman Corporation



Photo and Essay Contests: "seasoning your life"



A selection of prize-winning photos

The corporate slogan of Kikkoman Corporation, "seasoning your life," contains the core message that Kikkoman "helps you savor the joys of life." It suggests that, as Kikkoman seasons and enriches your food, it also brings fulfillment to life as a whole. This is important in our fast-paced modern society. However, in a time of constant change, some things remain the same: tasty encounters and the enjoyment and fun that come from sitting down to a meal with family and friends all combine to create delicious memories.

Kikkoman holds an annual photo contest for the general public in Japan, using its corporate slogan as a theme to capture delicious memories. Fiscal year 2016 was the ninth time for the photo contest to be held, and nearly 1,000 applications were received. These photos reflected a variety of delicious memories, and depicted subjects such as meals at grandparents' homes during summer vacation, Christmas and birthday events, and the joys of harvesting vegetables and fruit.

In addition, this marked the eighth year for the annual Kikkoman-supported essay contest held by the

Yomiuri Shimbun and Chuokoron-Shinsha, Inc. Over 3,000 applicants of all ages from across Japan have sent in entries over the years, writing about delicious memories, including: bento box lunches enjoyed during school days that were prepared by a mother; a wife's memory of the taste of the first pickles her husband ever made while she was hospitalized; and the unforgettable taste of home-cooked meals.

Kikkoman also holds related contests internally within its worldwide Group, which offer an opportunity for every Kikkoman Group employee to reaffirm the corporate slogan and Kikkoman's Promise to share the Kikkoman philosophy. Every year, more members share these values, and the company receives an increasing number of entries, both from Japan and its overseas Group companies.

Kikkoman believes that through these photo and essay contests, people can share food-related experiences and recall their own delicious memories. The company hopes to continue to encourage memorable—and tasty—moments at dining tables around the world. ●