

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



THE JAPANESE TABLE

Annual Events and Traditions

Autumn: Obon, Moon-Viewing and Grilled Eel

by Yoichiro Nakamura

Our current series looks at the special foods and traditions related to Japan's seasonal observances, based on the ancient lunar calendar. This third installment focuses on autumn, when ancestral spirits visit during Obon and communities celebrate the full moon and the tradition of eating grilled eel.

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Autumn: Obon, Moon-Viewing and Grilled Eel



Obon: Return of the Ancestral Spirits

In Japan, the fifteenth day of the seventh month by the old lunar calendar has long been believed to be the time when the spirits of ancestors return to visit the living. During the several days surrounding this date, called Obon, a series of family rituals are observed to welcome, entertain and send off these spirits. Offerings to them include rice ball sweets called *botamochi*, or *ohagi*, depending on the season, and *somen* noodles, all of which are later partaken by the family. *Somen* noodles are offered to pray for good health, stemming from an old Chinese tradition. *Botamochi* made on the first day of Obon, when returning spirits are thought to arrive, were called *ochi-tsuki botamochi*, or “settling-down rice ball sweets.” *Botamochi* are made of steamed non-glutinous rice and glutinous rice lightly pounded in a mortar, and formed into oval balls. These are then either coated with a layer of sweet adzuki bean paste, or sprinkled with sesame or roasted soybean powder (*kinako*). Both *botamochi* and *ohagi* are not only presented as offerings during Obon; they are also

enjoyed at other celebrations, and shared with friends and neighbors. In some areas, it was also an Obon tradition for the community to gather at the local temple and eat their fill of udon noodles.

Obon falls during harvest time, so offering vegetables to the deities was another way of expressing gratitude for a bountiful harvest. Eggplant and cucumber were used to fashion figurines of oxen and horses as mounts to transport the deities.

Bon-odori dances, also held during Obon, remain among the most diverse and colorful of Japanese performing folk arts. Young people would gather beneath the full moon and dance the night through, and it was often during these events that romance would blossom. The next day, offerings of food were brought to the seaside or riverside, where fires were lit. There, the invisible spirits would be sent off to the heavens, with entreaties

to return the following year.

This fire-lighting custom evolved into a special summer event held in Kyoto, where bonfires are set alight across mountain slopes surrounding the city to create the enormous character *Dai*, meaning “large” or “great,” to send off the ancestral spirits.

Important among Obon rituals is offering water to the ancestral spirits. Offerings may include a basin of water and vegetables such as chopped eggplant and cucumber, or sometimes uncooked rice. In some areas of the country, offerings of hot tea are made to ancestral spirits as many as 75 times a day during Obon, reflecting an old tradition of offering tea to the Buddha.



Daimonji fires on Kyoto's mountainside

From left: *Botamochi* offered to the spirits are also shared by friends and family during Obon; oxen figures made of eggplant and horses of cucumber are offered to the spirits during Obon season; eel grilled over charcoal.



There was also a belief that ancestral spirits returned in the form of living creatures, and for that reason, meat and fish were not eaten during the Obon season. The author recalls his grandmother once telling him one night when a moth entered the room attracted by the light not to kill it, as it might be the spirit of an ancestor.

Moon-Viewing

People around the world share a sense of wonder at the beauty of the full moon. Moon-viewing, or *otsukimi*, takes place during the eighth month of the lunar calendar, when people enjoy the especially large and beautiful full moon. *Tsukimi-dango* are steamed and kneaded rice flour balls traditionally offered to the moon on the day of *otsukimi*. These are accompanied by a vase of *susuki* grass, an early blossoming field grass, and just-harvested vegetables such as *satoimo* (taro). The inclusion of *susuki* expresses the hope that the rice, still growing lushly in the paddies, will ripen as abundantly as the grass. *Satoimo* has been cultivated in Japan long before rice cultivation was introduced, so their appearance among the offerings provides a

glimpse of ancient beliefs for giving thanks for the harvest. On this night only, it is the custom that children are allowed to make off with the *tsukimi-dango* and offerings—perhaps a remnant of the belief that when the offerings disappear, it was the ancestral spirits—temporarily assuming the shape of innocent children—who have accepted them. *Otsukimi* rituals are held again on the thirteenth day of the ninth month of the lunar calendar in many areas, and offerings on this occasion include chestnuts, a valued and favorite food since antiquity.

Grilled Eel

Since long ago, eel has been treasured as a highly nutritious food. A custom has been passed down of eating grilled eel (*kabayaki*) to provide nourishment to build up physical strength during a time when the seasons are changing. *Kabayaki* is made by skewering sliced-open eel and grilling it with a thick and savory soy sauce-flavored sauce that contains mirin, which adds a mild sweetness. Around the middle of the Edo period (roughly 1700-1800), mirin became more widely available as a seasoning, and this helped

increase the popularity of grilled eel. Interestingly, the manner in which eel is prepared for *kabayaki* differs between Japan's eastern Kanto and western Kansai regions. In Kansai, the eel is slit along the belly, skewered and grilled as-is; in Kanto, the eel is slit along the spine and steamed before grilling. The lively business enjoyed by *unagiya* restaurants specializing in eel around this time of year is a nostalgic and notable event in modern Japanese cuisine, and one that is still enjoyed today. ●

Translated by Lynne E. Riggs

cover

Tsukimi-dango and *susuki* grass are offered during moon-viewing celebrations.

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).



Clockwise from left: Warm *amazake*; *amazake* ingredients rice and sake lees

Amazake

A traditional Japanese drink, sweet *amazake* is made from fermented rice. This creamy white beverage is traditionally prepared by adding water and malted rice to cooked rice, before storing it at about 60°C (140°F). *Aspergillus* mold decomposes and saccharifies the rice starch, which produces *amazake*'s natural sweetness. *Amazake* literally means “sweet liquor,” however, the traditional type made from cooked rice and

Amazake is popular
among the health-
conscious

malted rice has an alcohol content of less than one percent. This beverage has been around for centuries: it was sold on streets year-round during the Edo period (1603-1867), and was particularly enjoyed as a restorative against fatigue on hot summer days. These days, warm *amazake* is more commonly served at temples and shrines during New Year's to visitors hoping to ward off the chill of winter.

There are essentially two kinds of *amazake*. The traditional type is made from cooked rice and malted rice; the other is prepared by dissolving *sakekasu* (sake lees) in hot water then adding sugar. Today,

most *amazake* falls into the former category; some of these contain both malted rice and sake lees to improve palatability, while others have added salt—and so the taste of *amazake* differs, depending on the manufacturer. In recent years *amazake* has gained popularity among the health-conscious, as its beneficial nutrients are composed of essential amino acids, glucose, B vitamins, dietary fiber and oligosaccharides. Some *amazake* is blended with cereals, banana, citrus or apple; it can be found canned, bottled, in cartons or freeze-dried. The broad range of *amazake* foods on the market includes *amazake*-flavored soymilk, ice cream and candies, as well as bread made with *amazake*. *Amazake* is also a healthy alternative to sugar, and has found popularity as an additive to seasonings such as dressings, sauces and soups, as well as cakes, cookies and jellies. ◆



Various *amazake* products are available in bottles, cans and other packaging.



JAPANESE STYLE

Perspectives on
Japanese cuisine

Japanese Lacquerware

In English, the term “japan” is synonymous with Japanese lacquerware. Japan has for centuries been renowned for its lacquerware—wooden dishes and utensils layered with a varnish made from the sap of the Japanese lacquer tree. Sealing and protecting wooden ware with lacquer, or *urushi*, makes it resistant to cracks and stains; its low heat conductivity allows a lacquered dish containing, for example, hot soup, to be held comfortably by hand, and sipped directly from the mouth—perfectly

suiting to traditional Japanese dining etiquette. The beauty of lacquer is also essential to the Japanese aesthetic, in that it enhances the appeal of the food itself. Lacquerware is versatile; it may be used every day, but is elegant enough for use on important occasions, such as during the New Year and other celebratory rituals. The distinctive lacquerware used on these special observances is often exquisitely decorated with hand-painted details, and inlaid with gold or mother-of-pearl. ●



From left: lacquerware for daily use; celebratory lacquerware used during the New Year

TASTY TRAVEL



Ibaraki



Anko-nabe

Ibaraki *Anko-nabe*

Anko-nabe is a popular winter dish enjoyed in Ibaraki Prefecture, where anglerfish, or *anko*, are common along the coast. This hotpot dish includes various parts of anglerfish boiled in miso- or soy sauce-based dashi broth with vegetables, tofu and other ingredients. Anglerfish are deep-water fish; the edible female is about 1 to 1.5 meters (40-60 in.) long. Because these fish are too soft and slimy to cut up on a chopping board, they are prepared using the traditional *tsurushi-giri* technique, which involves cutting up the fish while suspended from a hook. In Japan, almost all parts of the anglerfish are eaten, including fins, skin, gills, liver, stomach, ovaries and flesh—referred to as the “seven tools of the anglerfish” in Japanese. The steamed liver is called *ankimo* and is considered a delicacy that may be eaten alone, or added to the hotpot soup for extra flavor. ●



MEATBALLS WITH TOMATO-AMAZAKE SAUCE



◆ Genmai amazake

Serves 3-4

485 kcal Protein 27.2 g Fat 29.1 g
(per person)

Tomato sauce

- 1 can whole tomatoes, 400 g / 14 oz. (approx. 1 lb.)
- 150 ml / $\frac{3}{8}$ C genmai amazake*
- 2 thin lemon slices
- Lemon zest, 1/4 the amount from one lemon
- 1 T Kikkoman Light Color Soy Sauce**

Meatballs

- 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ t butter
- 1/2 onion chopped, 80 g / 2.7 oz.
- 40-50 g / 1.4-1.7oz. slice of bread or baguette
- 500 g / 18 oz. ground beef-pork mix***
- Lemon zest, 1/2 - 3/4 the amount from one lemon
- 4 t genmai amazake
- 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ t Kikkoman Soy Sauce
- 1/6 t salt
- 1 egg
- Olive oil

A little sugar is often added to many Japanese recipes to sweeten savory dishes; here, *amazake's* fermented element imparts a gentle sweetness, while its thickness blends easily into the sauce. Lemon zest injects a refreshing accent. This tomato sauce is ideal served over vegetables for vegans.

- 1 Place the tomatoes with juice into a saucepan, along with *amazake*, lemon slices and zest, and light color soy sauce. Lightly mash together, then simmer over low heat for 10 minutes, stirring occasionally.
- 2 Remove lemon slices. Puree the sauce and set aside.
- 3 Add the butter to a frying pan and sauté the chopped onion. Set aside.
- 4 Soak bread in a bowl of water, drain and squeeze out moisture, then tear into small pieces.
- 5 In a bowl, mix and knead well all the meatball ingredients, except for the egg. After kneading, add the egg and mix well.
- 6 Form balls with a diameter of 4 cm / 1.5 in. each, weighing about 30 g / 1 oz. to make a total of 24-26 meatballs.
- 7 Add a small amount of olive oil to a frying pan. On medium-low heat, cook the meatballs until they are nicely browned.
- 8 Add meatballs to the sauce and simmer for 10 minutes over low heat. Taste and add a pinch of salt if needed.
- 9 Serve the meatballs in a deep dish covered with the sauce.

* If *genmai* (brown rice) *amazake* is unavailable, substitute regular *amazake*. Please see page 4 of this issue regarding *amazake*.

** Kikkoman Soy Sauce may be substituted.

*** Any ground meat may be used.

Recipe by Michiko Yamamoto

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



SATOIMO MANJU WITH GIN-AN (CHICKEN-FILLED TARO DUMPLINGS WITH "SILVER SAUCE")

Gin-an sauce is a slightly thick, almost transparent dashi-based sauce, whose name literally translates as "silver sauce." *Gin-an* is often used in traditional Japanese dishes; its delicate transparency and subtle flavor complement the main ingredient of the dish.



● Satoimo

Serves 4

144 kcal Protein 5.8 g Fat 6.0 g
(per person)

- 300 g / 10 oz. peeled *satoimo*, taro*
- 1 T cornstarch
- Salt

Chicken filling

- 100 g / 3 oz. ground chicken**
- 2 T chopped onion
- 1t Kikkoman Soy Sauce
- 1 t sake
- A knob of grated ginger
- 1 t cornstarch

- Cornstarch
- Vegetable oil for deep-frying

Gin-an "Silver Sauce"

- 240 ml / 1 C dashi
- 2 t Kikkoman Soy Sauce
- 1 T Kikkoman Manjo Mirin
- Salt
- 1/2 T cornstarch and 1/2 T water, mixed together

- *Momiji-oroshi**** for garnish, wasabi or grated ginger may be substituted

1 Cut each peeled *satoimo* in half and place in a heat-resistant dish covered loosely with plastic wrap. Microwave for 3 minutes at 600 W. While still hot, mash up the *satoimo* with the cornstarch and a pinch of salt. Divide into four balls of equal portions and set aside.

2 In a bowl, blend well all the ingredients for the chicken filling; form into four balls of equal size.

3 Make one dumpling at a time. Cut a sheet of plastic wrap and lightly powder with cornstarch to prevent the *satoimo* from sticking to the wrap. Take one *satoimo* ball and press into a round on the sheet of plastic wrap. Then place a single ball-portion of the chicken filling onto its center (see photo). Form a "dumpling" using the wrap to completely cover the filling. Repeat to make four dumplings. Remove wrap; sprinkle cornstarch on palms of hands to complete forming the dumplings.



4 Heat oil in a frying pot to 140 °C / 285 °F. Gently place the dumplings into the pot, to prevent them from falling apart; deep-fry for 5-6 minutes. Take care that the dumplings do not turn brown. Remove from pot, set aside and drain.

5 In a small saucepan simmer the ingredients for the *gin-an* sauce briefly over medium heat, stirring until the sauce thickens.

6 Serve each taro dumpling in an individual bowl topped with the sauce. Garnish with *momiji-oroshi*.

* If taro is unavailable, potatoes may be substituted.

** If preferred, other ground meat such as beef or pork may be used.

*** *Momiji-oroshi* is daikon grated with chili pepper. For easy prep, push a chopstick lengthwise into a daikon to make a hole; insert a chili into the hole, then finely grate together.

Recipe by Kikkoman Corporation



World Cuisine with Soy Sauce: Introducing 20 Recipes



Kikkoman's popular advertisement spotlights our shared global food culture and the joys of food.

One of Kikkoman's corporate principles is "to promote the international exchange of food culture." Since our entrance into the global market, we have furthered international exchange through the fundamental, commonly shared human culture of food.

Soy sauce goes well with various food ingredients, adds a distinctive aroma and umami to foods, and can be used in a diverse range of cuisines.

Early on, we recognized the importance of taking advantage of these unique characteristics of soy sauce, and found ways to integrate this seasoning into local food cultures and global cuisines, rather than marketing it as a seasoning for Japanese food alone. We chose to develop original recipes complemented by soy sauce, catering to specific countries and regions: these are recipes that utilize local ingredients, and which may resemble familiar local dishes—and these innovative recipe development activities continue. Take a look at our website for some of these delicious recipes (<https://www.kikkoman.com/en/worldwide/>).

Last year, Kikkoman created a Japanese corporate advertisement depicting a world map composed with 85 vivid images of world cuisine dishes, all made using soy sauce. This advertisement expressed our aim to spread the joys of food and connect global food cultures, and it received a positive reaction in Japan: schools were interested in how the images might be used as educational material and there were inquiries about these dishes and their

recipes. Kikkoman selected 20 of the 85 dishes, and provided their recipes on the company's Japanese and English (<https://www.kikkoman.com/en>) websites.

The development of these original Kikkoman recipes was strongly influenced by the food environment and culture of each specific country or region. Even if ingredients go by the same name, food varieties may differ from area to area; therefore, it can be difficult to precisely recreate each dish. Yet more important than exact duplication, we hope people will be encouraged to cook using the fundamental global seasoning of Kikkoman Soy Sauce, which offers the same high quality around the world—and which provides the opportunity to explore and savor new tastes. In conveying the appeal of soy sauce around the world, Kikkoman respects the way of life and food cultures of each local region. We will continue to pursue our promise of making Kikkoman Soy Sauce a truly global seasoning so we can fill the world with the joys of food by delivering wholehearted flavor. ◆



The English website introduces original recipes inspired by world cuisine, all made using Kikkoman Soy Sauce.