

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



THE JAPANESE TABLE

Japanese Noodles

Somen

by Ayao Okumura

Noodles are one of Japan's most popular foods, and Japanese cuisine is renowned for its diverse types of noodles, each with its own complex heritage and unique traditions. In this new series, Food Forum takes a closer look at the delicious world of Japanese noodles, beginning with somen.

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Japanese Noodles

Somen



From left: *Sakubei* with walnut and vinegar sauce, an ancient dish as reproduced by Dr. Okumura who demonstrates how to roll and stretch *sakubei* using two bamboo sticks.

Sakubei

Wheat was introduced from China to Japan via the Korean peninsula some 2,000 years ago, yet it was not cultivated on a substantial scale here until about 1,300 years ago. In contrast to the hard wheat strains from which Italian pastas are derived, so-called soft wheat arrived in Japan in the Nara period (710-794). At that time, the method for making wheat-flour noodles was introduced in Nara, then capital of Japan. These noodles, called *sakubei*, were made by kneading wheat flour with salted water into a dough, which was then broken up into small pieces. These were rolled out between the palms of the hands and covered with starch to facilitate stretching into very long, fine strands using a pair of bamboo sticks. After stretching them in this fashion, they were hung outside to dry.

Sold at markets, *sakubei* was available to ordinary people, and was also among goods distributed to workers engaged in the state-supported task of copying Buddhist sutras from China. There were two ways to eat *sakubei*. One was to rinse the boiled noodles in cold water and garnish them with crushed walnuts and ginger,

accompanied by a sauce made of either miso and vinegar, or of vinegar and *jiang*. *Jiang*, a precursor to today's soy sauce, is the liquid drained from fermented soybeans. The other way was to enjoy *sakubei* as a kind of dessert, where the boiled noodles were eaten with boiled adzuki beans sweetened with *mizuame* glucose syrup made from fermented glutinous rice.

During the star festival of Tanabata, celebrated on the seventh day of the seventh month of the lunar calendar, typical offerings included *uri* melon, eggplant and *sakubei*. By presenting offerings of *sakubei* noodles, with their long, thread-like shape, women prayed for sewing skills, along with a bountiful summer harvest. Dining on the long noodles was a way of praying for long life. One reason behind this custom may be that during summer, rice—already a staple in the diet—was likely in short supply.

Thinner and Longer

Somen emerged as an advanced form of *sakubei* in Song dynasty China (960-1279). Instead of starch, vegetable oil was used to prevent the surface of the noodles from

drying out, allowing them to be slowly and gradually stretched even longer, to diameters of less than 1.7 millimeters, or 0.07 inches—a process which took two days. This method of making *somen* was introduced to Japan sometime in the early thirteenth century. We know that by the early sixteenth century, this exacting technique was being demonstrated to customers in Kyoto.

The manner in which Japan's early *somen* was eaten differed from that of the earlier *sakubei* noodles. During the summer months, the boiled noodles were rinsed in cold water, and each mouthful was dipped in a cold clear sauce called *taremisso*, made by mixing miso with water, boiling it down and then straining it through a cloth. Chopped green onion and ground mustard paste were additional condiments. This way of eating *somen* was distinctive to Japan. In winter, *somen* was often eaten warm, simmered in miso soup; another way was to add the noodles to a bowl of hot water, and dip them in cool *taremisso* before eating.

In the eighteenth century, *somen* was produced throughout Japan in more than thirty



From left: Traditional production process of drying somen in the sun; *taimen* sea bream somen.



noodle-producing areas; at this time, the noodles began to be cut into lengths of 18 centimeters, or about 7 inches—convenient for eating—and were sold in bundles of what is now about 100 grams (3.5 oz.). *Somen* that had been stored and matured for two or three years was prized as being silky and smooth, and thus more pleasurable to eat. This is because of changes in the proteins, which eliminated stickiness and made the noodles easier to swallow—the only problem was that oxidation of the vegetable oil left a rancid smell.

In the latter half of the eighteenth century, tasty dipping sauces made with soy sauce, mirin* and *katsuobushi* (dried bonito flakes) dashi became available, which greatly enhanced the pleasures of eating *somen*. Eventually, the custom of exchanging *Ochugen* summer gifts of *somen* developed. In those days, a Chinese-style dish called *taimen* (sea bream *somen*) was enjoyed in Nagasaki Prefecture. A sea bream would be cut in half, deep-fried, and then simmered in *katsuobushi* dashi and soy sauce, to which cooked *somen* was added. This dish became popular among villages along the shores of the

Inland Sea, and its preparation was gradually modified to involve simmering the sea bream in water with soy sauce; *somen* was boiled, then rinsed and cooled, and seasoned with this sea bream broth before being served with the sea bream on a large platter. This special dish is still presented at weddings, as it evokes the homophone *taimen*, which means “meeting,” referencing the meeting of the two families of the bride and groom.

Somen Today

Almost all *somen* today is manufactured by machine. It is a favorite summer dish often eaten simply dipped in a soy sauce and dashi-based sauce, together with condiments such as chopped green onion and grated ginger (*see cover photo*). However, ways of eating *somen* differ by region. In northern Aomori Prefecture, for example, it is served in cooled broth made from simmered *sazae* horned turban shell, topped with slices of *sazae* and *uni* raw sea urchin. In Aichi Prefecture, in a town at the tip of a peninsula south of Nagoya, *somen* is served with *hishigani* elbow crab. Along the coast of the Inland

Sea in Hiroshima Prefecture, *somen* is cooked in the broth of simmered *kuro-mearu* rockfish. In landlocked villages of northern Shiga Prefecture, a festive summer dish involves *somen* served in broth flavored with grilled mackerel, eaten with the mackerel. In the Amami Oshima Islands in Kagoshima Prefecture, south of Kyushu, *somen* is cooked in a soup made from salted pigs’ feet. In subtropical Okinawa Prefecture, the noodles are boiled, drained and then pan-fried with canned tuna or corned beef. ◆

* Made of glutinous rice, rice koji and shochu distilled liquor. Originally a beverage, mirin began to be used as a seasoning at this time.

cover

Chilled *somen* with soy sauce and dashi-based dipping sauce

Author's profile

Ayao Okumura, Ph.D. was born in 1937 in Wakayama Prefecture. A former professor at Kobe Yamate University, Dr. Okumura is a specialist in traditional Japanese cuisine. He is currently part-time professor at Osaka City University Graduate School, lecturing on the establishment and structure of Japanese food culture; as owner of cooking studio Douraku-tei, he is known for his authentic reproductions of historic Japanese dishes and menus. His various publications include *Nippon men shokubunka no 1,300 nen* (“1,300 years of Japanese noodle food culture,” 2009; revised 2014).



Japanese Cuisine Around the World

Each year, Food Forum presents a Special Report that takes a look at people who are introducing Japanese cuisine around the world. In this issue, we feature Japanese food pioneer Tsuneyasu Kondo, founder of a Japanese food import business in Vienna, Austria.



Tsuneyasu Kondo

Born in 1931, Mr. Kondo moved to West Berlin in 1960 where, with his brothers, he established a Japanese food import business. In 1965, they opened Restaurant Tokyo there, followed by outlets in Vienna and London. In 1974, he founded Nippon-Ya, where he is currently management advisor; in 2006, with his daughter, he opened Cha No Ma. Mr. Kondo received the Minister's Award for Overseas Promotion of Japanese Food from the Japanese Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (2015), and is the recipient of the Order of the Rising Sun, Gold and Silver Rays (2016).

Nippon-Ya

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To Europe

I was born in 1931 in the Korean city of Keijo, now known as Seoul. My elder twin brothers were also born there. Soon after my birth, my father was sent on a research trip to Europe. He spent about a year there, and returned home with a mountain of souvenirs. After he suddenly passed away, our family returned to Tokyo, but living among my father's souvenirs, my brothers and I talked constantly about how we'd go overseas to work when we grew up. After the long and arduous war ended, we once again dreamed of going to Europe. My brothers went there first and I joined them in West Berlin in 1960, where we established a company to import Japanese goods. However, the following year, the Cold War worsened and the Berlin Wall began to go up, throwing our company into crisis. Meanwhile, the West German government launched a plan to establish a large international center in the heart of West Berlin in order to invigorate the economy. We were asked to open a Japanese restaurant there, and it was this unexpected opportunity that plunged us into the world of Japanese food culture.

Adapting to Local Tastes

Thus it was that we three brothers established a Japanese restaurant called Restaurant Tokyo in West Berlin in 1965. Inside the glass-fronted restaurant, which was in one of the city's best locations (Europa-Center), we had a showcase to introduce Japanese products. We advertised on opening day in rather flashy style with a parade of our staff dressed in kimono, riding in a convertible from the airport into the city. This strategy worked, and the 100-seat restaurant was packed full.

There were few Japanese in West Berlin in the mid-1960s, so most of our patrons were German. Only a few could use chopsticks, so we set the tables Western-style and Kikkoman made chopsticks for us, which became great customer souvenirs. There were a few moments of excitement, like when someone poured dipping sauce right over the noodles on the *zaru* bamboo noodle mat, or ate the raw meat while the table-top *sukiyaki* pot was still warming up—but overall, we got off to a good start. The most difficult task for us was adapting the serving of dishes to customers who



Opening of Restaurant Tokyo, London (1970)



Nippon-Ya

had never eaten Japanese food in its original setting. For example, if we served the same modest amount of tempura as we would in Japan, we faced complaints that the quantity was too small. But if we accommodated German expectations, our Japanese customers would remark that the amount of food was way too much. We were very fortunate to find a head chef endowed not only with excellent Japanese culinary skills, but with a flexible mind-set for managing the restaurant to suit the local clientele. In 1970, we established a chain of Japanese restaurants by the same name in London, and in Vienna in 1972. For the 1972 Munich Olympics, we provided Japanese meals for the Japanese team and for Japanese visitors who came to see the Olympics.

Japanese Food Culture

In 1974, we opened a Japanese food import business called Nippon-Ya in Vienna. The Cold War was still on and this business allowed us to support those Japanese residing not only in Vienna, but in other parts of

Eastern Europe, who had difficulties obtaining Japanese food products and household items. That experience has continued recently in our work to supply Japanese food ingredients to Middle Eastern countries and the Balkan region. One of Nippon-Ya's major objectives is to introduce Japanese food to locals, so it has been actively engaged in public relations activities, such as holding a "Japan Week" in local department stores or setting up large booths at major fairs and exhibitions.

In the 1980s, both of my brothers passed away, so I decided to withdraw from the restaurant business. I do, however, remain involved with the supply of Japanese ingredients for the many Japanese restaurants now in Vienna and in neighboring countries. About 80 percent of the Nippon-Ya clientele is local. In 2006, at the suggestion of my daughter, we opened a "Japanese tea room" called Cha No Ma adjacent to the Vienna Nippon-Ya. The tea room clientele is almost 100 percent local; it is a small establishment, but popular with young people.

Recognizing Japanese Food

Importing food products from Japan ran into serious problems following the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011, but my daughter, who has been in charge of managing the business, made several appearances on Austrian television to present the case for the safety of Japanese food. Our shops quickly collected about 1.5 million yen in donations for the recovery effort in East Japan, with which we purchased five electronic pianos, as representing Vienna, the "city of music." These pianos were donated to elementary and junior high schools in the affected areas. We believe that these gestures of generosity were made because of our customers' familiarity with Japanese food.

When we first opened our Japanese restaurants in Europe, Japanese food and food products were little known, but today there are likely very few people who do not know what sushi is, and many can use chopsticks quite skillfully. There are now over 300 restaurants in Vienna which include some kind of Japanese food—particularly sushi—on their menus, which is impressive in a city of just under two million. This transformation is something that fills a pioneer like me with tremendous joy and satisfaction. Another thing we have always tried to do is to be conscientious, to always consider the standpoint of our customers and to adapt our business to the realities of the marketplace. I am greatly encouraged to see that this principle is shared by all of our employees. ◆



Inside Nippon-Ya (2014)



Introducing Japanese food at the Wiener Messe (1983)



SOMEN WITH EGGPLANT YAKIBITASHI

Sautéed eggplant enhances the marinade-dipping sauce of dashi, soy sauce and mirin, making it more umami-rich than usual *somen* dipping sauce. Both the marinade-dipping sauce and *somen* are simple to prepare, making this an easy appetizer. For a more traditional Japanese taste, substitute chopped green onion for dill garnish.



◆ Ginger

4 appetizer servings

227 kcal Protein 4.3 g Fat 3.3 g
(per person)

Yakibitashi* marinade

- 240 ml / 1 C dashi stock
- 2 T+ 1 t Kikkoman Soy Sauce
- 2 T+ 1 t Kikkoman Manjo Mirin
- 5-6 small Japanese eggplants, or 1 large American eggplant, total 360 g / 13 oz.
- 1/4 t salt, about 0.5% weight of eggplants
- 1 1/2 T pure olive oil or vegetable oil
- 2 bundles *somen*, each 50 g / 1.8 oz.
- 1 knob grated ginger for garnish
- Dill for garnish
- Red bell pepper, thinly sliced for garnish

- 1 Bring marinade ingredients to a brief boil in a small saucepan. Turn off heat and allow to cool.
- 2 Peel the eggplant. Cut into 4 equal pieces lengthwise, then cut these into 1.2 cm / 1/2 in. thick pieces. If eggplant is large, cut into 1.2 cm / 1/2 in. cubes. Sprinkle eggplant with salt and set aside for at least 15 minutes. Squeeze out excess moisture.**
- 3 Heat oil over low-medium heat in a non-stick frying pan and add eggplant. Cook until lightly browned, then remove and place on a paper towel to soak up excess oil. Add the cooked eggplant to the marinade and allow to steep for up to 60 minutes.
- 4 Just before serving, boil *somen* noodles following package instructions. Drain, rinse with cold water and drain again.
- 5 Divide *somen* among four small bowls. Spoon the marinated eggplant onto the noodles and pour 3 T marinade over each serving. Garnish with grated ginger, dill and bell pepper.

* *Yakibitashi* is a dish of grilled vegetables or fish, typically marinated in dashi, soy sauce and mirin.

** Sprinkling with salt rids eggplant of moisture and bitterness. Removing excess moisture creates a firmer texture and prevents over-absorption of oil.

Recipe by Michiko Yamamoto



SOBA SUSHI ROLLS

Futo-maki sushi rolls are typically made with sushi rice, but this delicious variation features soba. Other ingredient options include smoked salmon or ham in place of imitation crabmeat. Colorful red, green and yellow ingredients work well to make this sushi roll visually appealing as well as tasty.



◆ Dried shiitake

Serves 4, makes 2 rolls

248 kcal Protein 12.5 g Fat 6 g
(per person)

- 2-3 dried shiitake mushrooms
- 240 ml / 1 C water

Seasoning for shiitake

- 80 ml / 1/3 C shiitake soaking water
- 1/2 T Kikkoman Soy Sauce
- 1/2 T granulated sugar
- 1/2 T Kikkoman Manjo Mirin

- 200 g / 7 oz. dried soba noodles
- 50 ml / 3 1/3 T sushi vinegar*
- 1/2 Japanese cucumber
- 6 sprigs watercress

Tamago-yaki Japanese omelet

- 2 eggs
- 2 t granulated sugar
- Pinch of salt
- Vegetable oil

- 2 sheets roasted nori seaweed, about 21 cm x 19 cm / 8 in. x 7.5 in.
- 6 sticks imitation crabmeat

1 Soak the dried shiitake in 240 ml / 1 C water for several hours. Drain and reserve this soaking water. Squeeze out excess water, remove stems. Simmer the shiitake with seasoning ingredients in a small saucepan over medium heat until the liquid has nearly evaporated. Cut into slices.

2 Divide soba into two equal bundles. Tie one end of each bundle with cooking twine** (*see photo*). Into a saucepan of boiling water, first submerge about 2 cm / 0.8 in. of the tied end of one soba bundle for 1 minute, then submerge and cook the entire bundle as per package instructions. Keeping the twine tied, drain, rinse well with running water and then drain again; blot excess water with a paper towel. Repeat for the other soba bundle. Cut off about 3 cm / 1 1/2 in. of the tied end and discard. Sprinkle sushi vinegar evenly over aligned soba.



3 Cut cucumber lengthwise, the same length as the nori seaweed, then cut in half again lengthwise. Parboil the watercress and drain.

4 To make the omelet, beat eggs then mix in sugar and salt. Heat oil over medium heat in a non-stick 18 cm / 7 in. frying pan. Pour in the egg mixture all at once, stir slightly and cook until set. Place omelet on parchment paper and press gently into a flattened rectangular shape. When cool, cut lengthwise into three pieces. Cut one lengthwise piece in half.

5 Sushi rolls: place one sheet of nori on a bamboo mat. Evenly spread out one portion of soba on the nori from end to end, leaving the top 3 cm / 1 1/2 in. and bottom 2 cm / 0.8 in. of the nori uncovered. Lay out half the shiitake, cucumber strips, watercress, 1 + 1/2 strip of omelet and 3 crabmeat sticks from end to end, all centered atop the soba. Roll up the nori sheet tightly using the bamboo mat, pressing the fillings in place. Repeat with the other sheet of nori and allow both rolls to set for at least 30 minutes.

6 Cut each roll into 2 cm / 1 in. pieces. Use a dry cutting board to prevent nori from sticking; wipe knife with damp kitchen towel before cutting each piece.

7 Serve with soy sauce or soba dipping sauce.

* If sushi vinegar is unavailable, mix 3 T rice vinegar, 2 t granulated sugar and 1/2 t salt.

** This prevents noodles from scattering during boiling and keeps them aligned, which makes it easier to lay them out on the nori.



Kikkoman Soy Sauce Product Certified as Japanese Space Food



From left: Japanese astronaut Kimiya Yui (second from left) at a JAXA event in autumn 2017; Certified Japanese Space Food Kikkoman Soy Sauce product with and without its JAXA aluminum retort pouch packaging.

In September 2017, the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA) certified Kikkoman Shiboritate Nama Less Sodium Soy Sauce, a product which is sold in Japan, as Japanese Space Food. It is the first seasoning product manufactured using traditional Japanese brewing techniques to be certified.

In 2006, JAXA announced a new system to certify products that meet specific criteria as Japanese Space Food. The system was developed so that Japanese astronauts might enjoy the



Kikkoman Shiboritate Nama Less Sodium Soy Sauce

taste of Japanese food during long stays on the International Space Station (ISS)—a pleasure that helps not only to alleviate mental stress, but maintain and enhance work performance while on board. Companies wishing to provide astronauts with their products submit them to JAXA, where they undergo strict safety and quality tests. Upon passing these inspections, the product is added to the JAXA list of Japanese Space Foods and supplied to astronauts on the ISS. As the health benefits of Japanese food are globally recognized, these products are expected to be used by astronauts from other international partner countries as well.

In outer space, bone density loss is of great concern; moreover, sodium intake promotes the metabolism of calcium, resulting in further density reduction. Taking these circumstances into

account, Kikkoman submitted a soy sauce product containing 25 percent less salt than its regular soy sauce. At an event held by JAXA last autumn, Japanese astronaut Kimiya Yui commented, “Standard space food manufactured in the U.S. and Russia tends to be lightly seasoned because the amount of sodium is strictly controlled. Soy sauce can be used to add extra taste, so I think not only Japanese astronauts, but also astronauts from other countries, will enjoy it.”

Working and living in space is demanding, but Kikkoman believes its soy sauce will make mealtimes a bit more special by enriching the taste of space food for ISS astronauts. Kikkoman also hopes to enrich food for people all over the world and become a company whose existence is meaningful to the global society. 