

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



THE JAPANESE TABLE

Japanese Noodles

Udon

by Ayao Okumura

There are a variety of noodles to be discovered in Japanese cuisine, and each type has its own distinctive history and characteristics. In this second installment in our series on the world of Japanese noodles, Food Forum introduces udon wheat noodles.

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Japanese Noodles

Udon



Previously we presented *somen* noodles, traditionally made by hand-stretching. Udon noodles, by contrast, are usually knife-cut. Like *somen*, udon is made by kneading wheat flour with salted water into a dough; this is then rolled out into a sheet with a long wooden rolling pin to a thickness of only three to four millimeters, about 0.15 inch. The sheet is folded to a width of some 15 centimeters, or about six inches, then cut into three to four millimeter-wide strips of noodles with a large cleaver-like blade called an *udon-kiri*. Today, the udon-making process is predominantly automated, yet many restaurants in Japan still make it by hand. There are many forms of udon: it is available fresh-made, pre-cooked, frozen and dried, and it varies in width.

Eating Udon

The origins of udon in Japan date back to knife-cut noodles introduced from China in the early 1200s; these were about two millimeters (0.08 in.) wide and were called *kirimugi*, “cut wheat.” *Kirimugi* noodles were usually boiled, rinsed and cooled, then eaten by dipping in a cold clear sauce called *taremisso*, made by mixing miso with water, boiling it down and then straining it through a cloth. That dipping

sauce eventually came to be made with a dashi broth of *katsuobushi* dried bonito flakes and soy sauce; noodles dipped in this sauce were called *hiyamugi*, and were garnished with either chopped green or long onion and a touch of ground mustard paste.

The manner of eating hot boiled udon noodles arose in a Zen temple in Kyoto during the early 1300s. These noodles were cut wider than *hiyamugi* so as not to become too soft in the hot water. Later, in the early 1600s, people began to pour a hot savory soup over their boiled udon. This soup consisted of dashi made from *katsuobushi* seasoned with either the *taremisso* or with what was at that time expensive *tamari* soy sauce. By the late eighteenth century, however, ordinary soy sauce was used in the soup.

Soup and Toppings

During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, udon became a popular fast food in the city of Osaka, then the commercial center of the country. Noodle makers there have long mixed both local and regional Japanese wheat to make special udon flour, but what has always distinguished udon in Osaka is its delicious soup. The secret lies

in the strong umami of its dashi, made of a complex blend of high quality kombu from Hokkaido and *katsuobushi*, along with other dried fish flakes such as mackerel and *mejika*, a species of bonito. This combination of kombu’s glutamic acid with the inosinic acid element of the dried fish flakes increases the overall umami of the soup by seven or eight times, compared to dashi made with kombu or *katsuobushi* alone. Seasoning this umami-rich broth with *usukuchi* light color soy sauce, plus a small amount of mirin, produces a very elegant soup which makes the udon noodles taste even better.

In Osaka, udon has evolved over the years, resulting in a variety of recipes. *Tamago-toji udon* is similar to egg-drop soup, and is garnished with chopped green onion. Similar to this is



Udon noodles are available in various forms: (from left) Dried, pre-cooked, frozen and fresh.

From left: Cutting udon dough with an *udon-kiri*; *tamago-toji udon*; *nabe-yaki udon*; *kama-tama udon*.



savory steamed egg custard with boiled udon, called *odamaki-mushi* (see p. 7). Traditionally, this involves pouring beaten eggs mixed with dashi six times the amount of egg over a bowl of udon and other ingredients and steaming it. *Kitsune udon* with *abura-age* deep-fried tofu seasoned with soy sauce, sugar and dashi is an Osaka specialty. Other popular dishes include udon topped with beef or covered in curry. Udon topped with sliced *tamago-yaki* rolled omelet, sweet simmered shiitake mushrooms, slices of *kamaboko* fish cake and chopped green onion is another variation. There is also an udon dish where the broth is thickened with kudzu starch.

Udon Hot Pot

During the 1850s, *nabe-yaki udon* was served from itinerant stalls in Osaka. Udon noodles and assorted ingredients were cooked with dashi broth in shallow single-serving iron pots over a charcoal stove. These days, restaurants serve *nabe-yaki udon* in lidded earthenware pots, with more extravagant toppings than in the past, such as shrimp tempura, chicken, grilled *anago* conger eel, sweet simmered shiitake mushrooms and *kamaboko*. At one particular restaurant in

Osaka, cooked rice is added to the pot along with the noodles.

Udon-suki evolved as a sort of family-style version of *nabe-yaki udon*. It is generally eaten with several people serving themselves from a large shallow pot that is heated up right on the table, on a portable cooking element. After the soup is warmed, ingredients like shrimp, chicken, grilled *anago*, deep-fried tofu dumplings, *nama-fu* (wheat gluten), *yuba* tofu skin, vegetables and various mushrooms are added, followed by pre-cooked udon noodles, resulting in a nutritionally well-balanced meal.

Regional Variations

Udon is enjoyed throughout Japan, but its cooking styles and soup flavors tend to differ by region. In general, the soup is lighter in color in the western part of the country and darker in the east and north. Distinctive to the Nagoya area in western Aichi Prefecture is *miso-nikomiyaki udon*, served in a thick soup made with Hatcho miso fermented from locally grown soybeans, to which chicken and egg are added. It is served bubbling hot in an earthenware pot.

On the island of Shikoku, Kagawa Prefecture is famous for *Sanuki udon*, which is such a

staple there that people even eat it for breakfast. *Kama-age udon* is traditionally eaten straight out of the hot water in which it is boiled, simply dipped in a sauce seasoned with soy sauce. One quick dish is hot *kama-tama udon*, mixed in a bowl with raw egg and soy sauce. Grated daikon radish and soy sauce alone are enough to make a fine complement to chilled udon. Particularly popular in Kagawa Prefecture are self-serve shops, where diners can select toppings for themselves from assorted ingredients, such as tempura, to add to their bowl of freshly boiled udon. ◆

cover

A bowl of hot *kitsune udon* with *abura-age* deep-fried tofu seasoned with soy sauce, sugar and dashi, and chopped green onion.

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 1300 nen* ("1,300 years of Japanese noodle food culture," 2009; revised 2014).



CLOSE-UP JAPAN

Traditions and trends
in Japanese food culture



From left: A plate of *yaki-gyoza*; *gyoza* pan-fried in oil and then lightly steamed.

Gyoza Pot Stickers

Gyoza pot-stickers are popular in Japan, and they can be found everywhere, from specialty and Chinese restaurants to ramen shops, while frozen or chilled ready-to-cook *gyoza* are sold in supermarkets and convenience stores. Japanese *gyoza* generally refers to pan-fried *yaki-gyoza*, but steamed *mushi-gyoza* and boiled *sui-gyoza* are also popular.

Gyoza dumplings originated in China, where they are called *jiaozi* and are usually eaten boiled or steamed. They are a common side dish there, so these dumpling skins are thick and fillings consist mostly of vegetables. After the Second World War, returning Japanese who had been living in northeast China introduced the dumplings to Japan, where they eventually acquired unique Japanese characteristics to satisfy local tastes.

In contrast to Chinese *jiaozi*, Japanese *gyoza* are eaten as a main dish, and thus have a thinner wrapping and more meat in the

Gyoza might be
considered one of
Japan's staple foods

filling. Pan-fried *gyoza* eventually became the mainstay, and today are integral to contemporary Japanese food culture. In fact, *gyoza* are so common in Japan, they might be considered one of the country's staple foods; certainly they are a universal favorite, often eaten as a main dish with rice and soup or as an accompaniment to ramen noodles.

While ready-made wrappers are sold in supermarkets, and a variety of prepared *gyoza* products are available, making *gyoza* from scratch at home is not difficult. *Gyoza* parties are common, where friends and family get together and make dumpling wrappers, fill them and

cook them up. *Gyoza* fillings vary, but the classic recipe involves finely minced pork, shredded Chinese cabbage or cabbage, long onion, Chinese chives, soy sauce, garlic and sesame oil mixed and wrapped in dumpling skins. *Yaki-gyoza* are pan-fried in oil then lightly steamed, and eaten dipped in soy sauce with a splash of vinegar and/or a dash of *rayu* chili oil.

Regional *gyoza* variations include Kyushu *tetsunabe gyoza*, fried and served in a cast iron pan; Osaka *hitokuchi gyoza* bite-sized dumplings; and *hanetsuki gyoza*, fried with an extra-crispy crust. Two Japanese cities—Utsunomiya in Tochigi Prefecture and Hamamatsu in Shizuoka Prefecture—are both renowned for their *gyoza*. Each year they compete for the highest annual consumption of *gyoza* in Japan. They hold annual *gyoza* festivals and provide tours of local *gyoza* restaurants, all to satisfy Japan's ever-growing number of *gyoza* fans. ●



JAPANESE STYLE

Perspectives on
Japanese cuisine

Kanten

Kanten, or agar-agar, is similar to gelatin but possesses a different texture. *Kanten* is often used in making *wagashi* traditional Japanese confectionery. It is produced by boiling and straining *tengusa* seaweed and other algae, and forming it in an oblong mold to make *tokoroten*, which is eaten with either a sweet or savory sauce. When *tokoroten* is freeze-dried, it becomes *kanten*. *Kanten* typically comes in stick, string and powder forms. It melts in hot water and hardens again



Kanten in stick, string and powder forms

when cooled, remaining set even at room temperature. Unlike gelatin, *kanten* is vegan. It is also rich in dietary fiber and virtually calorie-free. One popular *kanten wagashi* is *yokan*, which consists of *an*—sweet adzuki bean paste—mixed with *kanten*. Other *kanten* desserts include the classic *anmitsu*, where white translucent cubes of *kanten* are served in a bowl with *an*, fruit and brown sugar syrup. Healthy *kanten* is also used in a wide array of dishes besides confectionery. ◆



Traditional Japanese desserts: slices of *yokan* and a bowl of *anmitsu*.

TASTY TRAVEL



Hakata, Fukuoka

Hakata Mizutaki

Mizutaki chicken hot pot is a specialty of Hakata ward in Fukuoka Prefecture. *Mizutaki* usually includes chicken and chicken meatballs, Chinese cabbage, tofu, and enoki and *shimeji* mushrooms, cooked in chicken stock. *Mizutaki* broth can be either milky or clear; it is made by bringing to a boil chicken and water at the same time, rather than adding chicken to an already boiling pot. Diners serve themselves directly from the hot pot and dip their bites in ponzu sauce, accompanied with chopped green onion and other condiments. As hot pot ingredients are eaten, cooked rice or noodles are added, allowing diners to savor the soup's concentrated umami. During the Meiji period (1868-1912), *mizutaki* grew popular in Hakata; it eventually spread throughout Japan, which naturally led to variations in soups and dipping sauces. Most Hakata restaurants serve ponzu sauce using the juice of *daidai*, a variety of Fukuoka citrus. ◆



Mizutaki



AVOCADO-SOY MILK TOFU

The lightness of the avocado tofu, with its essential accompaniments of sauce and wasabi, is best appreciated if sliced thin. This refreshing appetizer of fiber-rich *kanten* may be enjoyed as vegetarian sashimi or served alongside a salad for a heartier meal.



◆ Soy milk

豆乳

4 appetizer servings

376 kcal Protein 4.0 g Fat 35.3 g
(per person)

- 1 ripe avocado, approx. 280 g / 9 oz.
- 2 t lemon juice
- 4 g / scant 1 t *kanten* (agar-agar) powder*
- 240 ml / 1 C water
- 200 ml / 7 fl. oz. soy milk, at room temperature
- 1 T Kikkoman Soy Sauce
- 8 T Japanese mayonnaise
- Wasabi paste to taste

1 Halve the avocado, remove seed, peel and dice into small pieces for easy mashing. Place these in a bowl, add lemon juice and mash together roughly using a potato masher. ** Set aside.

2 Mix the *kanten* powder and water in a milk pan. Cook over medium-low heat while stirring continuously. When it comes to a boil, lower the heat and simmer for another 1-2 minutes, stirring and taking care it does not boil over. Turn off heat, add the soy milk to the pan and stir well using a whisk.

3 Pour the agar-agar/soy milk liquid over the mashed avocado and mix. To form the tofu, pour this avocado mixture into a square mold 12 cm x 12 cm / 5 in. x 5 in., or an oblong mold with liquid capacity of up to 800 ml / 3 1/3-4 C. Allow to cool.

4 In 10-15 minutes, the surface will become firm. Spread plastic wrap tightly over the surface of the avocado mixture in the mold, pressing out the air in order to prevent discoloration (*see photo*). Chill in a refrigerator for 2-3 hours until completely set and cool.



5 To make the sauce, mix soy sauce and mayonnaise.*** After chilling, run a knife around the mold to loosen and remove the avocado tofu from the mold. Cut in half, then cut each half into rectangular slices about 5-6 mm / 1/5 in. in thickness.****

6 Serve the avocado tofu with sauce and wasabi on the side.

* See package instructions for exact amount of *kanten* powder needed to gel in 500 ml / 2 C of liquid.

** May also be roughly pureed in a food processor.

*** If mayonnaise is to be avoided, alternatives include soy sauce, ponzu sauce or soy sauce mixed with lemon juice; each with a dab of wasabi.

**** Even if using a different sized mold, it is important to maintain the thickness of the rectangular slices at 5-6 mm.

Recipe by Michiko Yamamoto

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



ODAMAKI-MUSHI SAVORY STEAMED EGG CUSTARD WITH UDON



◆ Kamaboko

Serves 4

232 kcal Protein 17.3 g Fat 5.0 g
(per person)

- 4 prawns with shells, 20 g / 0.7 oz. each
- 2 chicken fillets, 100 g / 3 ½ oz. total
- 1/4 t Kikkoman Soy Sauce
- 1/4 t sake
- 4 shiitake mushrooms
- 4 stalks of *mitsuba* (trefoil)
- 3 large eggs
- 480 ml / 2 C dashi stock
- 1 T Kikkoman Manjo Mirin
- 1 T Kikkoman Light Color Soy Sauce
- 2/3 t salt
- 2 servings frozen udon noodles, defrosted
- 4 pieces *kamaboko* fish cake, cut in 8 mm- / 1/3 in.-thick slices
- 4 fresh ginkgo nuts, cooked; if unavailable use canned

- 1 Shell and devein the prawns, leaving tails on. Cut chicken fillets into thin slantwise slices; season with soy sauce and sake.
- 2 Remove stems from the shiitake mushrooms. Cut a cross-shape into the caps of the mushrooms using a knife. Cut the *mitsuba* into 3-4 cm / 1-1 ½ in. lengths, reserving the leaves for garnish.
- 3 In a bowl, gently beat the eggs using a pair of long cooking chopsticks or a fork; refrain from using a whisk so bubbles do not form on the surface. Add dashi, mirin, light color soy sauce, salt and mix, then pass through a strainer to make the mixture smooth.
- 4 Into four individual serving bowls, evenly portion out the udon noodles along with the prawns, chicken, shiitake, *kamaboko* slices, ginkgo nuts and *mitsuba* stems. Pour equal portions of the egg mixture into each bowl and remove any bubbles in the liquid using a spoon.
- 5 Fill the bottom two-thirds of a steamer* with water. Cover and place over high heat. When steam becomes visible, carefully place one serving bowl onto the steamer tray (*see photo*) for about 2 minutes covered on high heat. When the egg mixture turns creamy in color, turn heat to low and steam for another 10-12 minutes with the lid of the steamer slightly ajar to allow a little steam to escape. To confirm whether it is done, poke the center of the egg custard with a skewer. If transparent soup comes out, it is ready. Repeat this process with each of the remaining three servings.



- 6 Remove bowl from steamer and garnish with *mitsuba* leaves.

* If a steamer is unavailable, fill a pot with water so it will cover a third or the bottom half of each serving bowl. Cover and place over high heat. When water comes to a boil, carefully place each serving bowl directly into the hot water, taking care not to burn the hands.

Recipe by Kikkoman Corporation



Kikkoman Panel Discussion: In Praise of *Washoku*



Kikkoman's *washoku* panel discussion, from left: Mr. H. Kakizawa, Mr. T. Takahashi, Mr. H. Nakahigashi, Mr. Y. Takahashi, Mr. H. Arai, Mr. N. Yanagihara and Mr. Y. Tezuka

On February 24, 2018, Kikkoman held a panel discussion in Tokyo titled “Praising the Appeal of Japanese Cuisine: *Washoku* is Wonderful! The Taste of Kyoto, The Taste of Edo and The Future of Japanese Cuisine.” The panel featured six leading Japanese chefs who are active in both Kyoto and Tokyo: Mr. Takuji Takahashi of Kinobu, Mr. Hisato Nakahigashi of Miyamasou, Mr. Yoshihiro Takahashi of Hyotei, Mr. Hitoshi Arai of Tenko, Mr. Naoyuki Yanagihara of Kinsa-ryu Yanagihara School of Traditional Japanese Cuisine, and Mr. Yoshinori Tezuka of Matsunozushi. Their lively discussion was moderated by food business

consultant Mr. Hitoshi Kakizawa.

Following opening greetings by Kikkoman President and CEO Noriaki Horikiri, each chef-panelist presented his views on the differences between Kyoto and Tokyo food cultures, illustrated with videos. The discussion conveyed the concepts that these specific regional food cultures have been fostered through both climate and unique historical backgrounds. Each chef also presented kitchen implements and utensils that they use daily, while sharing personal anecdotes. The latter part of this event included a conversation among the panelists about their current activities in Japan and

overseas, and the sharing of ideas about the future of Japanese cuisine.

This event served as an opportunity to realize that the term *washoku* signifies countless meanings and concepts depending not only on individual chefs, but upon which region of Japan is referenced. Despite its myriad aspects, the fundamental essence of Japanese *washoku* is underscored by a sense of gratitude for the many blessings bestowed by nature—which include food ingredients.

This event was recognized by the Tokyo Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games as an official cultural program of the Tokyo 2020 Nationwide Participation Programme.* Through such events, Kikkoman continues its endeavors to create “delicious memories” for all, while promoting activities that increase the joys of eating and help create healthy minds and bodies. ●



From left: Mr. Noriaki Horikiri, Kikkoman President and CEO; Mr. Kakizawa (left) discusses Mr. Yanagihara’s traditional wood container for serving cooked rice.

* Kikkoman is an Official Partner of the Olympic and Paralympic Games Tokyo 2020 in the category of “Sauces (Including Soy Sauces), Vinegar, Mirin and Cooking Sake.”