

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



THE JAPANESE TABLE

Washoku: Balanced and Healthy

by Isao Kumakura

In the second installment in our series on washoku, we focus on its healthy aspects, and how Japan's traditional cuisine makes for a well-balanced diet.

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Washoku: Balanced and Healthy



One of the main reasons Japanese foods such as sushi have become so popular around the world is that they are considered to be healthy. The spread of Japanese cuisine (*washoku*) overseas began in the U.S. during the eighties as a gourmet rarity; this was against the backdrop of Japan’s remarkable economic development and a growing awareness of its long life expectancy, and it was concluded that Japanese health and vigor were a direct consequence of the country’s diet.

Dietary Guidelines

After the 1960s, an increase in heart disease from nutritional imbalances was a major U.S. health concern. In 1977, the U.S. Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs established a set of nutritional guidelines in its Dietary Goals for the United States, commonly called the McGovern Report. These included recommendations that carbohydrates be increased up to 55% to 60% of total calorie intake; that fat be reduced to less than 30% of total calorie intake; and that fish be substituted for meat to avoid saturated fatty acids.

By around 1980, Japan’s Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries noted that a balanced Japanese diet comprised

15% protein, 25% fat and 60% carbohydrates—virtually identical to the Dietary Goals of the McGovern Report. The Ministry proceeded to issue these figures as the country’s dietary guidelines under the term “the Japanese-style diet.”

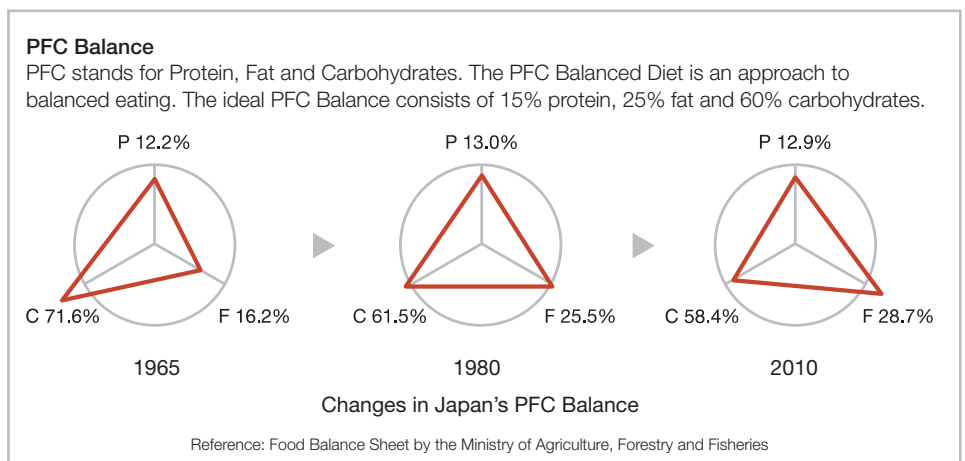
Historically, however, the Japanese diet was not always so balanced. Figures indicate that during the mid-sixties, Japanese generally consumed too many carbohydrates, along with high levels of sodium. Gradually, as the country experienced economic growth and prosperity, better-quality proteins including meat, fish and dairy products became more readily available. This led to overall greater intake of protein and calories, which balanced the intake of carbohydrates. By the 1980s, statistics revealed that an ideal

dietary balance had been attained—an ideal diet that closely followed traditional *washoku* eating patterns.

Washoku Style

What are the patterns that define a *washoku* meal? First of all, it consists of four components: rice as the staple, a soup, side dishes and Japanese pickles. These elements are consumed together in order to mix the simple taste of the rice with the more richly seasoned side dishes, thus creating a harmony of combined flavors. There is a tendency to eat Western-style dishes separately; a *washoku* meal, however, is always eaten by integrating the rice, side dishes, pickles and soup together or in turn, and finishing them at the same time.

Let us consider the side dishes.



From left: *Aji* horse mackerel sashimi; *hiyayakko* chilled tofu; *kinpira-gobo*, sautéed burdock root and carrot; kombu, *katsuobushi* and dashi stock.



Probably the favorite side dish of Japanese is sashimi, slices of raw fish. Certainly all kinds of seafood are well-suited to the *washoku* meal: *sakuradai* (sea bream) harvested around the time cherry blossoms bloom in spring; *katsuo* (bonito) in early summer; freshwater *ayu* (sweetfish) in midsummer; *sanma* (Pacific saury) in autumn; *buri* (yellowtail) loaded with tasty fat in winter; as well as *maguro* (tuna) and *aji* (horse mackerel) throughout the year. The intake of blue-backed fish such as tuna and mackerel can help reduce “bad cholesterol” in the blood, because the oil and fat they contain are rich in unsaturated fatty acids such as DHA* and EPA, unlike beef or pork, which are high in saturated fatty acids. When meat is used in a *washoku* side dish, it is typically in small quantities.

Vegetable proteins are also a significant facet of *washoku*. Soybeans, which appear most often in the form of tofu or *natto* (fermented soybeans), are frequently part of the menu. Root vegetables, leafy vegetables and various iodine-rich seaweeds also feature regularly on the Japanese table. Together, all of these characteristics of *washoku*—particularly the consumption of rice as the main staple—promote a balanced diet

and prevent excess intake of protein and fat.

Changing Tastes

Another essential feature in the healthy Japanese diet is its emphasis on umami.

Just over a dozen years ago, the umami taste receptors in human taste buds were identified, and umami was formally recognized as the fifth independent basic taste, alongside sweet, sour, bitter and salty. The Japanese developed methods of extracting umami such as glutamine acid and inosinic acid from kombu seaweed and *katsuobushi* (dried bonito flakes) more than 500 years ago, and this taste has long been considered a fundamental constituent of Japanese food. Umami enhances flavors in harmony with other seasonings, and brings out the intrinsic taste of the ingredients themselves. As a result, there is a decrease in the amount of seasonings required, which in turn leads to lower sodium intake.

Today’s Japanese eating habits are changing, however. From the ideal nutritional balance of the eighties, more recent statistics from 2010 indicate that the Japanese diet has become more Westernized, causing an increase in fat intake and a rising number of patients with lifestyle-related diseases. The country’s meat

consumption is also on the rise, whereas its rice intake is decreasing.

The recent listing of *washoku* traditional dietary cultures of the Japanese as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage has made us recognize anew the advantages and benefits of our traditional diet, and has served to inspire and motivate us to pass those benefits on to future generations. ●

* DHA (docosahexaenoic acid);
EPA (eicosapentaenoic acid)

cover

A *washoku* meal consisting of rice, miso soup with *asari* clams, *ohitashi* (boiled leafy vegetable with dried bonito flakes), *chikuzen-ni* (simmered chicken and vegetables), dried horse mackerel with grated daikon, *natto* (fermented soybeans) and pickles.

Author’s profile

Isao Kumakura was born in Tokyo in 1943. He taught at Tsukuba University from 1978 to 1992; from 1992, he was professor at the National Museum of Ethnology, Osaka, where he was then named professor emeritus in 2004. He was director of Hayashibara Museum of Art, Okayama from 2004 to 2012. Since 2010, he has served as president of Shizuoka University of Art and Culture. Dr. Kumakura is the author of many publications on Japanese food culture and Japanese tea culture; his most recent work is *Bunka to shite no Manaa* (“Manners as Japanese culture”).



CLOSE-UP JAPAN

Traditions and trends
in Japanese food culture



From left: Miso ramen, *shoyu* soy sauce ramen, *tonkotsu* pork-bone ramen

Ramen

Ramen noodles can trace their origins to China, but this traditional dish is now so entrenched in Japanese food culture, it's taken on a local identity all its own. Basic Japanese ramen is composed of soup, noodles and toppings. The soup comprises mixed broth made from fish, pork or chicken, with seasonings such as soy sauce, miso or salt. The noodles themselves are made from wheat and lye water—the lye water lends the noodles their distinctive texture and color.

Ramen made its first forays into Japan soon after the country opened to the world, after nearly two centuries of national seclusion. In ports such as Yokohama, various “Chinatowns” flourished, where Chinese restaurants served *shiru-soba* Chinese noodle soup. In 1910, the first ramen specialty restaurant opened in Tokyo; later,



Tsukemen soup and noodles served separately

New trends continually tempt ramen-lovers

following the Second World War, Japanese evacuees from China set up ramen carts (*yatai*) on the streets, feeding Japan's growing taste for ramen. As a love for ramen spread throughout the country, the dish acquired distinctive regional styles—and in the process, became wholly Japanese.

Around the 1960s, new ramen varieties debuted. These included miso ramen, unique in that it used the Japanese traditional condiment miso in its soup; another was *tsukemen*, whose soup and noodles are served separately and enjoyed by dipping a portion of noodles into the soup. From the 1990s onward, *gotochi* (meaning “local”) ramen flavors emerged, including Hokkaido's Asahikawa ramen, which is soy sauce-flavored with pork-bone and seafood broth; and garlic-infused Kumamoto ramen from Kyushu, with a choice of either light-color soy sauce or salt-flavored *tonkotsu* pork-bone broth.

New trends and tastes continually tempt ramen-lovers: recently, *tori-paitan* (white chicken soup) ramen has created a stir.

Ramen is priced at about ¥500-1,000 (USD5.00-10.00) per bowl, and although there are ramen chain restaurants, most ramen shops are independent, and these tend to obsess about the ramen they serve. Passionate and dedicated ramen cooks consider the affinity and texture of the noodle (thick *futomen*, thin *hosomen*, or curly *chijiremen*) relative to the soup and other ingredients.

Some restaurants allow diners to customize their ramen by specifying noodle texture and their selection of toppings, which typically include seasoned boiled egg, bean sprouts, corn and dried nori seaweed. These are all in addition to basic ingredients such as roast pork, chopped Japanese long onion or green onion and seasoned bamboo shoots.

Japanese media regularly feature the latest unique, delicious ramen eateries, and although the publicity can sometimes trigger long lines, these are often well worth the wait. Many ramen lovers enjoy visiting popular restaurants in different areas to experience and compare its many variations. ●



JAPANESE STYLE

Perspectives on
Japanese cuisine

Natto

Although *natto* (fermented soybeans) is one of Japan's most characteristic traditional foods, Japanese are strongly divided in their reaction to its sticky texture and strong smell: rarely indifferent, they either love it or hate it.

The origins of *natto* have been traced to China, and the habit of eating *natto* in Japan may date as far back as the Yayoi period (300 BC-AD 300). The Japanese have long enjoyed *natto* as a

healthy food; it became common during the Edo period (1603-1867), when *natto* vendors sold it in the city streets.

Natto is made by soaking soybeans in water. Depending on the season, this takes around eight hours in summer and about 18 hours in winter. The variety and size of the soybeans also determine soaking time. After soaking, the soybeans are steamed, then sprayed with pure cultured bacterium called



Natto on rice

Bacillus subtilis natto; the treated soybeans are then placed in containers to ferment at around 40°C (104°F) for about a day. Traditionally, after soaking, the soybeans were boiled, wrapped in rice-straw, then warmed at suitable temperatures to ferment naturally with the aid of the *Bacillus subtilis natto*, which lives in the straw.

Natto is available in supermarkets and convenience stores throughout Japan, typically sold in sets of three small polystyrene foam containers or three paper cups. It is usually eaten by mixing with a little soy sauce, plus condiments such as *karashi* (Japanese mustard) and *negi* (Japanese long onions) atop cooked rice. *Natto* appears in many other dishes, including *natto-maki* (sushi rolls filled with *natto*) and *natto-jiru* (miso soup with minced *natto*). ●



Left to right: *Natto* in traditional rice-straw wrapping, and in polystyrene foam and paper packaging.

TASTY TRAVEL



Senshu, Osaka



Pickled *mizunasu*



Fresh *mizunasu*

Senshu *Mizunasu*

Mizunasu is a type of eggplant or aubergine found in Senshu, the southernmost part of Osaka Prefecture. Measuring about 10-13 cm (4-5 in.) in length, *mizunasu* have extremely soft, succulent flesh. *Mizu* means water, and this name reflects the plant's high water content. The vegetable can be eaten raw, thanks to its soft skin and mild flavor. To enjoy the taste of *mizunasu*, cut off stem and calyx, score the top with crosswise cuts, then split the eggplant vertically by hand. *Mizunasu* are also popular as pickles, best enjoyed when plucked straight from the garden and kept for just a few days in a mixture of fermented rice bran and brine called *nukadoko*. *Mizunasu* are so sought-after, they are now cultivated in other parts in Japan, but Senshu will always be considered their true home. ●



HEARTY SOYBEAN SOUP WITH NATTO



● *Abura-age*

Serves 3-4

127 kcal Protein 8.5 g Fat 7.8 g
(per person)

- 8 green onions, 40 g / 1.5 oz. total
- 2 t vegetable oil
- 2 packs *natto*, each 40 g / 1.5 oz.; set aside Japanese mustard packets, if included
- 1 t mustard (preferably Dijon), or more to taste
- 600 ml (2 1/2 C) bouillon*
- 1 stem fresh thyme, or 2 pinches powdered thyme
- 1 bay leaf
- 150 g (1/3 lb.) tofu, firm or soft, drained, cut into 1 cm (1/2 in.) cubes
- 200 ml (5/6 C) soy milk
- 1 + 1/2 t Kikkoman Soy Sauce, or more to taste
- Black pepper to taste

Optional garnish

- Chopped green onion leaves
- Chopped parsley
- 1/2 piece *abura-age*** , deep-fried tofu
- Kikkoman Soy Sauce

This soup is a flavorful combination of various soybean products, including *natto*, fermented soybeans. Here, the sticky texture of the *natto* is reduced a bit when sautéed; despite its aroma during preparation, neither its smell nor taste overpowers the soup, making this an appealing dish even for those who are not fans of *natto*.

- 1 Separate the hollow green leaves from the solid part of the onion. Finely chop the solid part for use in the soup; then cut up a few of the hollow green leaves to set aside for optional garnish.
- 2 Heat vegetable oil in a heavy-bottomed pan. Add *natto* and sauté over low heat, stirring lightly to prevent burning. Add the chopped onion and sauté until soft.
- 3 Stir in pre-packaged Japanese mustard from the *natto* along with the mustard.
- 4 Add the bouillon to the sautéed *natto*. Wrap thyme and bay leaf together in cheesecloth or pack into a bundle, and add to the pot. Bring to a boil; lower heat and simmer for 2-3 minutes.
- 5 Add the diced tofu; after it rises to the surface, add the soy milk and 1 t soy sauce, then heat to just under the boiling point.
- 6 Taste and depending on preference, add another 1/2 t soy sauce or more and sprinkle with black pepper.
- 7 Serve in individual bowls garnished with chopped green onion leaves, parsley and/or *abura-age*, depending on preference. Serve hot.

* Either meat- or vegetable-based bouillon cubes or powder may be used. Use about 3/4 the amount of bouillon suggested in directions for a mild soup base.

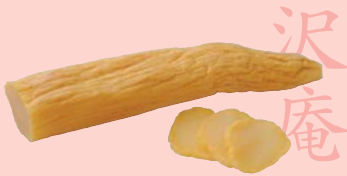
** Preheat a non-stick frying pan. Over low heat, lightly brown both sides of the *abura-age*, pressing it down. Remove pan from heat, brush tofu with soy sauce. Cut in half and slice into 5 mm (1/4 in.) strips.

Recipe by Michiko Yamamoto



GOSHIKI "FIVE-COLOR" NATTO

The Japanese term *goshiki* literally means "five colors," represented here by the five different-colored ingredients in this tasty recipe. The five contrasting flavors and textures of the red tuna, white squid, green cucumber, yellow *takuan* and brown *natto* combine to make a delicious, visually appealing dish.



◆ Takuan

Serves 4

106 kcal Protein 15.0 g Fat 2.7 g
(per person)

- 100 g (3.5 oz.) sashimi-quality tuna
- 100 g (3.5 oz.) sashimi-quality squid
- 1 small pickling or other unwaxed, unpeeled cucumber 50 g / 1.7 oz.
- 40 g (1.4 oz.) *takuan**, yellow pickled daikon
- 2 packs *natto*, each 40 g / 1.4 oz.

- 2 T finely chopped green onions
- Wasabi to taste
- 1 T Kikkoman Soy Sauce

- 1 Dice tuna, squid and cucumber.
- 2 Cut the *takuan* into cubes about 8 mm (0.3 in.).
- 3 Divide the tuna, squid, cucumber, *takuan* and *natto* into four individual serving bowls by arranging one-quarter of each ingredient in each bowl.
- 4 Place the garnish of green onions and wasabi in four small accompanying dishes.
- 5 When eating, add soy sauce directly to the serving bowls, and mix all the ingredients together.

* *Takuan* is a traditional Japanese pickle made of daikon. Some make it at home by drying daikon outside for one or two weeks, then pickling it with rice bran, salt, sugar and dried red pepper. A stone is placed on top of the container, and the daikon is allowed to pickle for about a month.

Note: For additional serving suggestions, goshiki natto can be enjoyed as an appetizer by wrapping tablespoon-sized servings in dried nori seaweed or in lettuce leaves; it may also be eaten simply atop cooked rice.

Recipe by Kikkoman Corporation

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



Kikkoman Food Culture Exchange in China



President and CEO Horikiri at Shanghai University



Students from the Japanese Department of Shanghai University

Inspired by the positive response to its Japanese Restaurant “紫 MURASAKI” at the Japan Industry Pavilion during Expo 2010 Shanghai China, Kikkoman continues to pursue various public relations activities within China.

This May, Kikkoman President and CEO Noriaki Horikiri spoke at a Kikkoman special lecture held at Shanghai University. Mr. Horikiri had spoken there previously in the first of the company's special lecture series in April 2011. During this most recent event, attended by over 200 students, Mr. Horikiri discussed the theme “Corporate International Business Development and Cultural Exchange.” Referring to the overseas business Kikkoman has been developing for more than 50 years, together with its exchange programs with Shanghai University, Mr. Horikiri emphasized the importance of determination and perseverance. He also sent a message to the students that young people should actively experience new cultures and values, and

highlighted the advantages of utilizing such experiences toward personal growth within today's rapidly changing global society. Following the lecture, a relaxed and informative social gathering was held with 30 students from the university's Japanese Department.

Kikkoman also held a special lecture at the Guangzhou Vocational School of Tourism & Business in Guangzhou. Mr. Hitoshi Kakizawa, food consultant and former general manager of Japanese Restaurant “紫 MURASAKI,” spoke on the appeal of *washoku*, Japanese cuisine. Mr. Kakizawa shed light on the two key ingredients of dashi stock, including how *katsuobushi* (dried bonito flakes) is made, and where kombu is produced. He also discussed the characteristics and uses of Japanese soy sauce as one of the fundamental seasonings of *washoku*. These topics may have been unfamiliar to many of the students unacquainted with Japanese food; however, Mr. Kakizawa framed his discussion by relating them to the basic attitudes of a chef, stating

that “it is necessary to have an interest in food ingredients and understand their characteristics and how they are made, and master how to use them in your own way. The range of your cooking will be expanded this way.” The talk was followed by a cooking class, where Mr. Kakizawa provided students with the hands-on opportunity to experience and taste dashi stock, as described during the morning lecture. They prepared dashi stock in three stages: first, using only kombu; then by adding *katsuobushi*; and lastly, by adding a drop of soy sauce. At each stage, he asked the enthusiastic future chefs to describe its color and flavor in their own words. Using their own dashi stock, the group prepared *niku jaga* simmered beef and potatoes, and enjoyed tasting their creations.

As China's economy continues to expand, Kikkoman anticipates growing demand for high value-added products in its seasoning markets. Thus Kikkoman will strive to introduce the taste and flavor of naturally brewed Kikkoman Soy Sauce, produced using the company's unique brewing technology. At the same time, the company aims to provide more opportunities for the Chinese to experience new flavors along with the enjoyment of food. Through activities like these, the Kikkoman Group will continue to promote the international exchange of food culture, as stipulated in its management philosophy. ◆



Mr. Kakizawa speaks on the appeal of *washoku*.



Future chefs experience the taste of dashi stock.