

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



THE JAPANESE TABLE

Global Fare in Contemporary Japan Italian Cuisine

by Yoshiki Tsuji

Our current series is exploring some of the diverse international cuisines that are embraced in Japan. This second installment traces the history and evolution of Italian cuisine in Japanese food culture.

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Global Fare in Contemporary Japan

Italian Cuisine



Spaghetti Napolitan made with ketchup-based sauce (left) and pizza topped with boiled shirasu whitebait.

Italian food is very well-suited to the Japanese palate and is widely accepted here, not only as restaurant fare, but as an essential element in home cooking.

Early Italian Style

What is believed to be Japan's first Italian restaurant was the Italia Ken, opened in Niigata in 1881 by Pietro Migliore, a native of Italy. In 1895, the Restaurant Toyoken in Tokyo is said to have been the first to serve pasta imported from Italy. The early twentieth-century best-selling book *Shokudoraku* ("The pleasures of eating") introduced dishes like macaroni and cheese, and though macaroni may have been somewhat known among members of the upper class at this point, it was regarded more generally as part of Western

cuisine, rather than as an ingredient in Italian cuisine.

Upon the outbreak of the Second World War, many Western foods, macaroni included, disappeared, but afterward, former Italian prisoners of war reintroduced Italian cuisine by opening restaurants in Kobe (Antonio's; Donnaloia) and Takarazuka (Amore Abela) in Hyogo Prefecture, all of which remain in business today. Such restaurants catered primarily to those with the Allied Occupation. During the 1950s, Tokyo restaurants such as Sicilia and Nicola's opened and served pizza and spaghetti in the style introduced from the US. Around this time, spaghetti made with a ketchup-based sauce appeared in Japan where it evolved and was later named Spaghetti Napolitan,

which remains popular today. In 1960, the Tokyo restaurant Chianti opened and was patronized by members of the government as well as trend-setters. Chianti was more of a European-style restaurant, however, and the American-style dishes served in many

eateries at the time represented mainstream Italian cuisine in Japan.

Mention should be made of the Kabe No Ana ("hole in the wall") restaurant chain that began in Tokyo in 1953, when Japanese were still unfamiliar with Western-style flavors. This company pioneered *wafu* Japanese-style spaghetti dishes geared specifically toward local palates, including spaghetti with *tarako* salted cod roe, and with *umeboshi* pickled Japanese apricot and *shiso* perilla—both of which are now commonly served throughout Japan.

Eventually, spaghetti noodles and canned meat sauces manufactured in Japan came onto the market, and from the 1960s, both Spaghetti Napolitan and meat-sauce spaghetti quickly became familiar to the public with their appearance on menus of *kissaten* Japanese-style coffee shops.

Authentic Flavors

Japan's interest in other countries increased along with the country's growing affluence during the rapid economic growth period of the 1960s, and thanks to the 1970 Japan World Expo in Osaka. Aspiring chefs traveled to Italy for training, and upon their return, restaurants began to offer authentic Italian cuisine, unfiltered by American influences or imitations of what



Italia Ken restaurant in Niigata (photo ca.1883), founded in 1881 by Italian Pietro Migliore (right).



From Al-ché-cciano restaurant, created by Chef Masayuki Okuda: Seared Gassan wild bamboo shoots with *baikamo* waterplants simmered in dashi stock of springwater from Gassan mountain, Yamagata Prefecture (left); Seared local Fujisawa turnip and Yamabushi pork, both from Tsuruoka, where the restaurant is located.

was considered “Italian-style.” During the 1970s and early 1980s, restaurants serving authentic Italian cuisine appeared, one after another—and it was also in the 1970s that the Japanese government lifted import bans on durum flour and canned tomatoes.

Influenced by the emergence of *nouvelle cuisine* in France around this time, Italian chef Gualtiero Marchesi led the *nuova cucina* movement, which favored the proper heating of ingredients to enhance their flavors, the use of light and subtle seasonings, and an attention to the colors of ingredients. In Japan, prosperity during the second half of the 1980s fueled a boom in the popularity of Italian cuisine, and Japanese chefs exposed to the *nuova cucina* movement in Italy began to devise new styles of Italian food, unconstrained by tradition. The breakdown and reconstruction of traditional Italian cuisine and the search for lighter flavors, as well as

the serving of cold pasta, led to the creation of dishes that were entirely new to Italian cooking.

The 1990s were highlighted by the media-stoked tiramisu fad and a booming interest in wine-drinking, with luxury wines such as Super Tuscan appearing on the market. The ban on imports of prosciutto ham was lifted, and shops serving thin crust Naples-style pizza, as distinct from American pizza, began to emerge. The numbers of casual-style restaurants serving Italian dishes increased, allowing diners the opportunity to experience a broader range of Italian dishes and become more familiar with them. The rapid spread of the Saizeriya Italian-food chain of family restaurants also contributed to the mass popularization of Italian cuisine.

International Food Cultures

Since the 1990s, the diversification of restaurant-based Italian cuisine has continued. There are restaurants that seek ever-more authentic regional Italian cuisines, restaurants that feature the idiosyncratic tastes of an individual chef, and restaurants that fuse Japanese local ingredients and tastes with the simple cooking methods known to Italian cuisine, as represented in dishes created by Chef Masayuki Okuda of Al-ché-cciano.

A unique Italian cuisine has therefore arisen, conceived through purely Japanese interpretations. Italian cuisine in Japan has not only evolved through the influence of chefs and restaurants: buoyed by the increasing availability of dried pasta and retort-prepared sauces, it is now a standard component in home cooking.

Indeed, with dishes like pizza and pasta well-established as prepared foods or delivery fare, Italian cuisine is now a familiar part of the food culture of Japan. In contrast to French food, with its haute cuisine associations, Italian food has found a place in daily life, taking on its own unique identity beyond the conventional categorization of “Western food.”

The history of Italian cuisine in Japan is one more clear example of the way in which food cultures of other countries have been incorporated into this country’s diet. It also reveals the enthusiasm that Japanese have for cuisines of all kinds. ◆



Al-ché-cciano in Tsuruoka, Yamagata Prefecture

cover

Popular *wafu* Japanese-style *tarako* spaghetti

Author’s profile

Yoshiki Tsuji was born in 1964 in Osaka, and educated in the UK and the US. He is chairman and head of the Board of Directors of Tsuji Culinary Institute. His numerous publications encompass the subjects of the modern transitions of gastronomy, and Japanese cuisine. He was awarded France’s National Order of Merit in 2018.



CLOSE-UP JAPAN

Traditions and trends
in Japanese food culture



Kansai-style oval *tsukimi-dango* wrapped in sweetened *azuki* bean paste; bunny-shaped *manju* buns.

Otsukimi Full Moon Viewing

Otsukimi, the Japanese tradition of full moon viewing, falls on the fifteenth night of the eighth month of the lunar calendar, roughly September or early October on the Gregorian calendar. This day is called *jugoya*, believed to be the night when the most beautiful moon of the year can be observed. This celebration of the full moon originated in China as the Mid-Autumn Festival. In Japan, the moon is regarded as embodying the spirit of agriculture, and *otsukimi* is held to express gratitude for a bountiful harvest.



The moon, *tsukimi-dango* and *susuki* grass

Otsukimi have been held for centuries

Special offerings are made to the harvest moon during *otsukimi*, the most iconic of which are *tsukimi-dango* round white moon-like dumplings of kneaded and steamed rice flour. Another traditional offering is newly harvested *satoimo* taro, which is why the festival is also referred to as *imo-meigetsu*, or “taro harvest moon.” Accompanying these food presentations is a vase of *susuki* Japanese silver grass that evokes the spirit of autumn.

Tsukimi-dango differ in shape, depending on the region. In eastern Japan, they are typically rolled into round balls and piled in a pyramid; in western Japan, they are often formed in

taro-like oval shapes and wrapped in an sweetened *azuki* bean paste.

Otsukimi have been held for centuries: the earliest is recorded as being held by the emperor in the early tenth century. In the seventeenth century, *otsukimi* became more popular among the general public, and it was during this time that today's customs of presenting *tsukimi-dango* offerings and displaying *susuki* grass began.

Otsukimi is infused by an ancient folktale about a rabbit on the moon who pounds *mochi* using a mortar and pestle, and people often imagine seeing that image when they look up at the full moon. As *otsukimi* approaches, a wide range of rabbit-themed confectionery begin to appear. People enjoy steamed buns, cakes and *yokan* sweet bean jelly with bunny and moon motifs. Fast-food restaurants offer moon-themed hamburgers, while convenience stores sell *otsukimi*-themed Japanese desserts with a Western twist, like *tsukimi-dango* combined with custard pudding and cream. ●

Kaki Japanese Persimmon



Fuyu-gaki, non-astringent kaki

Known as the “fruit of autumn,” many varieties of persimmon, or kaki, are cultivated in Japan. Kaki are classified as astringent and non-astringent types: the former were introduced here from China in the Yayoi period (400 BC-300 AD); non-astringent kaki originated in Japan. Japanese kaki made inroads into Europe and the US after the seventeenth century, and are generally referred to as “kaki” rather than “persimmons.” This nutritious fruit contains beta-carotene,

potassium and twice as much Vitamin C as citrus fruit. Fermented astringent kaki juice, *kakishibu*, traditionally has been used to dye fabric and paper, as it imparts strengthening, antiseptic and water-resistant qualities.

Non-astringent kaki are eaten fresh after being peeled. Astringent varieties are enjoyed after reducing their astringency, either with *shochu* or by air-drying. *Hoshigaki* air-dried kaki are often made at home by peeling and blanching the

fruit, then hanging it outside for two weeks to a month. During the drying process, a natural coating of white sugar crystals forms on the fruit surface and the *hoshigaki* acquires a concentrated sweetness. One type of *hoshigaki* is *ampo-gaki*, made by fumigating with sulfur before drying. This generates a distinctive, jelly-like texture with melting sweetness. Kaki are used to make *wagashi* Japanese confectionery, and are also added to salads and *aemono* dishes. ◆



Kaki hanging to dry



Hoshigaki



Ampo-gaki

TASTY TRAVEL



Ehime



Tako-meshi

Ehime *Tako-meshi*

Tako-meshi octopus rice is a specialty of Ehime Prefecture, which lies along the Seto Inland Sea. The rapid currents of this sea are renowned for producing abundant, delicious seafood, and octopus is no exception: it is firm and rich in umami, yet tender to eat. *Tako-meshi* involves bite-size pieces of octopus and other ingredients, with seasoning that includes soy sauce and sake, all steamed together with rice. *Tako-meshi* likely originated as a quick meal thrown together by fishermen on their boats while at sea. The port city of Matsuyama is home to *tako-meshi* specialty restaurants, but locals usually enjoy this easy-to-prepare dish at home. Tasty *tako-meshi* is popular throughout the Seto Inland Sea region, and is even served in local elementary school lunches. ◆



MEATBALL SOUP WITH MUSHROOMS AND *SHIRATAKI* NOODLES

Low in calories and fiber-rich, *shirataki* noodles are popular additions to Western menus as an alternative to pasta. This recipe features the noodles as most often served in Japan, in soups or simmered dishes. A teaspoon of sesame oil added to bowls before serving transforms it into a Chinese-style flavor.



◆ *Maitake* mushroom

Serves 3 to 4

166 kcal Protein 12.6 g Fat 10.0 g

- 2 T finely chopped onion
- Vegetable oil
- 200 g / 7 oz. *shirataki* (konjac) noodles
- 1/2 slice of bread or baguette
- 1 knob unpeeled ginger, about 10 g / 0.35 oz.
- 200 g / 7 oz. ground pork*
- 1/4 t salt
- 1/2 t Kikkoman Soy Sauce
- 1/2 beaten egg
- Black pepper

Soup

- 1,200 ml / 5 C dashi stock**
- 1 1/2 T Kikkoman Soy Sauce
- 1/2 t salt
- 1 C shiitake mushrooms, 55 g / 2 oz., remove hard stem ends; cut in thin slices***
- 1 C *maitake* mushrooms, 55 g / 2 oz., torn into small pieces by hand***
- Green onion, chopped for garnish

1 In preparation for making the meatballs, sauté the chopped onion in a little vegetable oil over low heat in a frying pan until translucent. Remove onion from pan, set aside and allow to cool.

2 Lightly rinse the *shirataki* noodles. Parboil, drain, then cut into pieces about 5 cm / 2 in. long and set aside. Soak the bread in a bowl of water, drain and squeeze out moisture and tear into small pieces to total of about 2 T. Grate ginger with skin, squeeze out 1 to 1 1/2 t of juice, set aside.

3 Place ground pork in a bowl, add 1/4 t salt and knead until meat becomes sticky. Add 1/2 t soy sauce, the bread and onion, and knead together. Add ginger juice and most of the beaten egg, saving the remainder. Knead well. If texture is a little stiff to form meatballs, add the rest of the egg. Add black pepper. Form a total of 12-16 meatballs.

4 Place dashi stock in a saucepan. Add 1 1/2 T soy sauce and 1/2 t salt, and bring to a boil over high heat. Reduce to lower medium heat and place meatballs one by one into the pan. When the meatballs rise to the surface, skim off foam. Add the *shirataki* noodles and bring to another boil; add shiitake and *maitake* mushrooms, allow to simmer briefly until they turn soft. Season with additional salt and black pepper to taste.

5 Serve the meatball soup in individual bowls. Garnish generously with chopped green onion.

* May substitute other kinds of ground meat such as beef, beef-pork mix or chicken.

** Meat- or vegetable-based bouillon cubes or granules may also be used. Since bouillon contains salt, do not add 1/2 t salt in *Step 4*. Taste in *Step 5*, and add salt only if needed.

*** Any available mushrooms may be used in place of shiitake or *maitake* mushrooms.

Recipe by Michiko Yamamoto

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



SALMON NAMBAN-ZUKE



◆ Salmon

Serves 4
281 kcal Protein 16.4 g Fat 11.5 g

- 300 g / 10.6 oz. salmon fillet*
- Salt
- 1 onion, 150 g / 5.3 oz.
- 1 small green bell pepper, total 80 g / 2.8 oz.
- 1/2 small carrot, total 50 g / 1.7 oz.
- 1 knob ginger, about 10 g / 0.35 oz.
- 1 dried red chili pepper

Marinade

- 3 T Kikkoman Soy Sauce
- 3 T grain vinegar
- 2 T granulated sugar
- 1 T sake
- 2 T water
- Cornstarch
- Vegetable oil for deep-frying

1 Remove salmon skin from the fillet; slice diagonally into bite-sized pieces (*see photo*), then sprinkle both sides lightly with salt. Set aside.



2 Cut the onion in half lengthwise and then cut into thin slices along the fibers. Cut the green bell pepper in half lengthwise, remove core and seeds, then julienne. Peel and julienne both the carrot and the ginger. The dried chili seeds are spicy, so first remove them before cutting the chili pepper into small pieces.

3 Add the marinade ingredients to a small saucepan. Stir and bring to a boil over medium heat. Add the onion, green bell pepper, carrot, ginger and chili pepper, stir and remove from heat.

4 Pat the salmon with a paper towel to remove moisture and coat lightly with cornstarch. Heat the vegetable oil in a fryer to about 170 °C / 340 °F and deep-fry the salmon until lightly browned. Drain off excess oil and transfer the fried salmon to a heat-resistant tray (20×25 cm / 7.8×9.8 in.).

5 Pour the vegetable-marinade sauce over the salmon and marinate for 2-3 hours at room temperature.**

6 Serve the salmon with julienned vegetables in individual bowls.

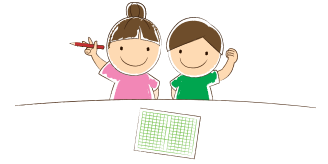
* May substitute other types of fish; e.g., horse mackerel or cod. Chicken may also be used.

** Marinating the salmon at room temperature for 2-3 hours will allow it to better absorb the flavor; however, the dish may be enjoyed immediately. If refrigerated, it can be kept for up to 3 days.

Recipe by Kikkoman Corporation



“seasoning your life” Essay and Writing Contest 2020 Grand Prize Award Essay



In early 2021, Kikkoman Corporation announced the Grand Prize Award and Excellence Prize Award winner of its “seasoning your life” 2020 Essay and Writing Contest. The Kikkoman corporate slogan “seasoning your life” conveys the core message that Kikkoman helps us savor the joys of life, and suggests that, as Kikkoman seasons and enriches our food, it brings fulfillment to life as a whole. This contest was held for employees of the entire Kikkoman Group and their families. There were 812 entries received from thirty-one companies and nine countries from around the world. Jury members included the renowned novelist Ichiriki Yamamoto, 2002 winner of Japan’s prestigious Naoki literary prize. Here we feature the Grand Prize Award essay by Ms. Lucy Maylee Chuang, daughter of Mr. Kung Chi Chuang of JFC International Inc. ●



Ms. Lucy Maylee Chuang; Mr. Kung Chi Chuang of JFC International Inc.

Dumplings Folded with Love

In my family, food is a universal language of love. Born and raised in the United States as a daughter of Asian immigrants, I often faced language barriers when communicating with my mother and father. However, the simple act of cooking family recipes in our humble kitchen taught me to connect more deeply with my cultural heritage and understand food as a greater symbol of my parents’ resilience, warmth, and sacrifice. Over many years, my family has crafted countless spicy noodle dishes and hearty chicken broths. The intimate cooking experiences have allowed us to become emotionally connected, triumphing over language barriers and cultural divides alike.

My father’s recipe for fried dumplings is the most meaningful technique passed on to me throughout my family’s cooking legacy. As a young child, I would watch my father and mother create art when they folded dumplings (otherwise known as gyoza). Together, they would finely chop pork, cabbage, chives, carrots, onions, and mushrooms to fill the dumplings. They would carefully pour in spices such as soy sauce, sesame oil, and garlic to create a sweet and salty flavor profile. However, the most magical moment of the dumpling-making process was my father’s method of folding the dumplings. His giant hands were able to fold each delicate dumpling skin with calculated precision and a gentle touch that always shaped the perfect crescent moon. His dumplings are distinctly beautiful; he tells me that Chuang dumplings are unique because they are folded with love.

Every action I have ever seen my father make has been motivated by love. When he first immigrated to the United States from his homeland of Taiwan, he worked brutal 16-hour shifts to provide for my family’s livelihood. He

had no financial or social safety nets; my father worked as both a food delivery driver and a Japanese restaurant chef to make ends meet. Even without a formal college education, my father is one of the wisest people in my life because of his dedication to family, his desire to understand diverse cultures, and his curiosity for the world. Influenced by my father’s selfless actions, his love for cooking, and his incredible work ethic, I have begun to shape my own identity as a dedicated scholar and future lawyer.

As a current student at Princeton University, I carry my father’s life lessons and cooking recipes wherever I go. Recently, I moved back to my childhood home in Georgia due to the Coronavirus Pandemic. Every evening as I study tirelessly for my classes, my father exhibits an equal work ethic. He chatters on the phone with the local grocery store owners and restaurant owners for his company, JFC International. Despite my father’s passion for his job, he still finds time on Sunday afternoons to make dumplings with me. To my father, having a strong family connection has always been a priority.

My dumplings are nowhere near as perfect as my father’s. My dumplings are often crooked and thin, they are sometimes missing soy sauce flavoring inside the meat, and they even burst open during the frying process as they lose their juicy insides. Even though I am inexperienced in the kitchen, my father always stares proudly at my work and encourages me to continue trying. He fries each ugly dumpling in oil carefully, letting them sizzle and crunch until they, too, are filled with love.

