

food forum

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THE JAPANESE TABLE

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The Secrets of Taste in Japanese Cuisine

Smell

In our new Feature series, Food Forum looks at the complexities of taste in Japanese cuisine. Here we explore the sensation of smell and the essential role it plays in Japan's food culture.

—
by Tohru Fushiki

Smell is perhaps the paramount sense that sustains any food culture; often it is smell, in combination with taste, that adds extra flavor to our comprehensive perception of food. Taste is perceived in the mouth, and smell is captured in the nose: these are two separate sensations. Only anthropoids, among which humans are included, can sense the taste and smell of food simultaneously. This is owing to our anatomical structure that connects the nasal cavity to the oral cavity, essentially equipping us with the skills of a gourmet to evaluate food through both taste and smell.

In contrast to fragrances or smells (such as perfume), which are sensed directly via the nose, we can also experience smell when food in the mouth comes into contact with air passing through the nose. This

phenomenon is referred to as "taste-aroma," known as *fumi* in Japanese. Taste-aroma or *fumi* is indeed smell; but the brain mingles it with some taste signals, which in turn creates conditions wherein it is difficult to distinguish clearly between smell and taste.

The tongue can detect five types of taste: sweet, salty, sour, bitter and umami. These comprise the fundamental framework upon which the taste of all foods is based, and might be compared to the primary colors that combine to create myriad palettes. At the same time, the mucous membranes of the nasal cavity contain about four hundred olfactory sensors, and these sensors produce a vast array of smells which, when combined with the sense of taste, create various flavors. Our sense of smell originally evolved to detect changes in the surrounding environment, so as to avoid danger; therefore, our

sense of smell is much keener than that of taste, and so we are able to distinguish even minute differences.

Fumi in Japanese cuisine

Chefs in Western countries are adept at creating worlds of fine smells with inventive sauces by applying a range of cooking methods that involve diverse ingredients like meat, bones, seafood or vegetables. By contrast, Japanese cuisine is distinguished by the *fumi*, or taste-aroma, of dashi. The ingredients for dashi are straightforward, and can be used alone or in combination: kombu dried kelp and/or *katsuobushi* dried bonito; or *niboshi* boiled-and-dried fish and *yakiboshi* grilled-and-dried fish, e.g. sardines; or dried shiitake mushrooms. Added to the dashi are fermented seasonings such as soy sauce and miso.

With these limited ingredients, Japanese cuisine

Standard ingredients used in the making of dashi, clockwise from left: kombu, *katsuobushi* dried bonito with shavings, dried shiitake mushrooms. Miso and soy sauce are added to the dashi.

achieves an extraordinary variety of *fumi*. There is a secret to this variety. Japanese cuisine is defined, not by countless individual sauces, but rather, by the processes that elicit the intrinsic tastes and smells of a vast number of discrete ingredients—and this in turn opens up multifaceted worlds of flavor and aroma. Dashi is simple; but in Japanese cuisine, there are as many smells as there are ingredients.

Pursuit of ingredients

A Japanese chef once remarked that Western chefs devote their lives to the pursuit of a sauce having an entirely original taste-aroma, while chefs in Japan spend their lives in pursuit of ingredients. This observation captures the essential philosophy behind Japanese cuisine: integrating the aromas of ingredients in cooking.

Traditional Japanese cuisine is intended to evoke the *fumi* of ingredients, thus the use of spices and herbs is quite limited. Japanese long onions or scallions, *sansho* Japanese mountain pepper, ginger, *myoga* Japanese ginger, *shiso* perilla and *karashi* Japanese mustard are considered condiments (*yakumi*), and are used to enhance *fumi*. In the case of soups, which may contain seafood, just a touch of *suikuchi* condiments is used to temper any fishy aroma and add *fumi* to the dish. *Suikuchi* may include sliced long onion, grated ginger, *myoga* and sliced or grated *yuzu* citrus. Soups are served in covered bowls, and the lid is removed just before eating. The pleasure of these soups lies in the fragrances of dashi broth and *suikuchi* aroma that waft up upon lifting the lid.

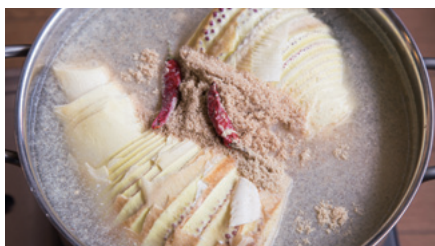
Ideals of taste

In a cuisine that places importance on the *fumi* of ingredients, what then is

the ultimate goal of taste that Japanese cuisine aims to achieve? I once asked a leading chef of Kyoto cuisine this question, and his answer was “unhindered taste” and “harmony”—in other words, a harmony of flavors, divested of unnecessary elements.



Katsuo no tataki sliced seared bonito with *yakumi*



Bamboo shoots are boiled in water with rice bran and red chili peppers to remove *aku*.

“Good” taste can be impeded by the undesirable smells of certain ingredients, and as a policy in Japanese cooking, the removal or diminishment of such elements is accomplished, not by covering them up with spices or herbs, but through the preparation of each ingredient. One example is by extracting such elements through immersion in water, thin broth or diluted sake. Acrid tastes and smells may be generated by certain components (*aku*) of some ingredients; these components can be removed by boiling in water with ash or rice bran. Often ingredients of differing textures are prepared separately, and the overall

flavor is adjusted by the *fumi* of dashi at the end. The custom of carefully removing the sources that can hinder enjoyment of the flavor of ingredients is one of the reasons that Japanese cuisine is often described as “cooking by subtraction.”

Smell and emotion

Smell cannot be expressed in words. Since neither smell nor *fumi* is remembered without reference to language, the only way to express these is through simile; for example, “like lemons,” or “like bananas.” Smells are directly connected to our emotions, as they capture nostalgia, happiness, tension and so on—the memory of a smell can be preserved for decades by the brain. In Japan’s temperate climate, with its four clearly defined seasons, available ingredients change markedly from one season to the next, so their *fumi* is associated closely with a particular season. Each seasonal vegetable has its very own distinct and delicate *fumi*, and this is why one of the special pleasures of Japanese cuisine involves savoring and recalling scenes of the changing seasons. 🍡

On the cover *Taranome Aralia elata* sprouts, featured in Spirit of the Seasons, Page 5. Clear soup with *hama* pike conger. The delicate fragrance of dashi broth and green *yuzu* citrus peel wafts up when the lid is lifted.

Author’s profile

Tohru Fushiki was born in 1953 in Kyoto. He holds a PhD from Kyoto University and specializes in food and nutrition science. From 1994 he served as professor on the Faculty of Agriculture, Kyoto University, where since 2015 he has been professor emeritus. He has served as professor at Ryukoku University since 2015, and vice president of Koshien University since 2021. His many publications include *Mikaku to Shiko no Science* (Science of sense of taste and food preferences; 2008); and *Dashi no Shimpi* (Mystery of dashi; 2017).

Canned Foods

Canning was introduced in Japan some 150 years ago by a Frenchman living here who shared the method for canning sardines in oil. Until recently, canned food in this country was regarded primarily as a go-to source for certain preserved foods like tuna or fruit, or as emergency rations. But nowadays, Japan enjoys canned foods in entirely different ways. The canning concept has evolved to include delicious pre-cooked foods intended not just for use in emergencies, but as tasty elements in everyday meals. Convenient and portable, canned foods are ideal alternatives for households too busy to cook from scratch, and are perfect for camping. Their modern, eye-catching packaging appeals to today's consumers, furthering their popularity. Most lids feature easy and safe pull-tabs, practically eliminating the need for can openers.

The variety of canned foods sold overseas ranges from fruit and vegetables to meats, sauces and soups. Japan's canned offerings are equally diverse, but may seem a bit more unusual to Western consumers.

Canned curry sauce is popular, along with well-loved Japanese dishes like canned beef bowl, *dashimaki tamago* Japanese omelet and *buta no kakuni* simmered pork. Along with these, an array of canned foods are big sellers as appetizers to accompany drinks, such as *yakitori* grilled chicken and *oden* hot pot. Even baked goods—like bread and cake—are available in cans.

Canned foods are typically enjoyed as-is, but their use as recipe ingredients has grown; for example, using canned boiled mackerel to make *gyoza* pot stickers, or adding canned oysters to paella. Canned food manufacturers share recipes on websites and social media, and there are cookbooks devoted to the topic.

Japan's many canned products are usually displayed in dedicated sections in supermarkets and

Canned foods
are enjoyed in
various ways



Canned oden and *dashimaki tamago* look freshly made.

department stores; there are specialty canned-goods stores and even a chain of canned-food bars where one pairs their choice of canned food with drinks. While canned food is generally inexpensive, for those who want to treat themselves or present a special tasty gift, there are “gourmet” options that may cost over USD10.00 per can—like *kabayaki* grilled eel, *yamatoni* simmered beef cooked with soy sauce, sugar and ginger, or even dishes from famous high-end restaurants. ●



Collection of canned foods including *yakitori*, bread, beef bowl and *saba miso-ni* mackerel simmered in miso-based sauce.

Kakushi Bocho

Food Forum presents *Fundamentals 101*, a glimpse at the underlying principles behind Japanese cuisine and food culture. To kick off this new segment, we are focusing on Japanese food-preparation techniques. Here, we shine a light on the technique of knife-scoring.

Kakushi bocho is the technique of lightly scoring the surface of ingredients with a knife, used not only in restaurants, but in home cooking. Scoring encourages the absorption of seasonings and effective heat conduction to ensure quick, even cooking, particularly with less-absorbent ingredients. This subtle technique helps increase the deliciousness of the dish. When preparing simmered dishes, for example, delicate scoring allows ingredients to maintain their

shape and texture while soaking up the simmering liquid.

Kakushi bocho is also used in preparing sashimi. The scored surface helps soy sauce transfer onto the raw fish and makes it easier to eat. When used to prepare salt-grilled or boiled fish, *kakushi bocho* prevents the skin from shrinking and allows for efficient cooking. One slight touch of the blade makes all the difference in the taste of the dish. ◆

Eggplant

1. Cut off stem and slice in half lengthwise.



2. Make shallow diagonal scoring on skin, approx. 5 mm / 0.2 in. deep, at about 2 mm / 0.1 in. intervals.



Age-bitashi deep-fried eggplant soaked in dashi-based sauce

Konnyaku konjac

1. On both sides, make shallow diagonal scoring, approx. 7 mm / 0.3 in. deep, at approx. 3-4 mm / 0.1 in. intervals.



2. Repeat to make lattice pattern.



Simmered spicy konjac

See *Japanese Ways of Cooking* on page 7 for recipe using this technique.

Taranome



Taranome tempura

Featured on our front cover are *taranome Aralia elata* sprouts. Sometimes referred to as the king of edible wild plants, *taranome* sprouts embody the essence of springtime in Japan with their distinctive aroma. *Aralia elata* is a tree which grows naturally in woodlands and mountains throughout the country, and its new offshoots can be picked between April and early June.

During their peak season, the spearheads of natural *taranome* grow dark, while the rest of the sprout darkens and turns golden ash-brown—a sign that they are particularly tender. *Taranome* picked in this moment have high mineral content, especially potassium; they also contain considerable amounts of beneficial plant fat and high quality protein, which is why some describe *taranome* as “butter that grows in the mountains.”

Taranome are usually eaten as tempura, a combination of delicious crispy batter, slightly bitter taste and somewhat springy texture. *Taranome* can also be used to make *ohitashi* boiled vegetable salad dressed with dashi and soy sauce, or may be sautéed and added to pasta dishes. ◆

Seafood Soup with Dashi

Serves 3

247 kcal Protein 32.7 g Fat 1.1 g
(per serving)

- 250 g / 1/2 lb. white fish fillet*
- Salt
- 6 clams, 220-250 g / 1/2 lb.
- 120 ml / 1/2 C sake
- 3 T water
- 6-12 prawns or shrimp with shells, 250-350 g / 1/2-3/4 lb.

- 1 onion
- 6 mushrooms
- 1 large *eryngii* mushroom**
- 1 bell pepper, any color
- 2 medium tomatoes, total 300 g / 10 oz.

Bouquet garni***

- 1 bay leaf
- 2-3 parsley stems
- 2-3 thyme stems
- 1,200 ml / 5 C dashi stock
- 1 T tomato paste
- 1/4 clove garlic, grated
- Fresh untreated orange peel, 2 x 5 cm / 0.7 x 2 in.
- 1/2 t salt
- 2 t Kikkoman Soy Sauce
- Parsley minced for garnish

1 Cut the white fish into large bite-sized pieces. Season well with salt, set aside 1-3 hours. Wash clams and place in a saucepan with the sake and water. Cover, cook over medium heat. Remove each clam as the shells open. Strain broth for sand and set aside broth and clams separately.

2 Rinse white fish lightly and pat dry with paper towel. Peel and devein prawns.

3 Cut onion in half then into 7-8 mm / 0.3 in. slices along fiber. Cut mushrooms into 4-5 mm / 0.2 in. slices. Cut *eryngii* stem into thin round slices, and the cap into thin slices. Remove seeds from bell pepper, cut in strips 1.2-2 cm / 0.5-0.8 in. wide, then cut the strips in half. Dice tomatoes. Tie herbs with string to make bouquet garni.

4 In a large pot, combine dashi stock, clam broth, tomatoes, tomato paste, grated garlic, orange peel and bouquet garni. Place over high heat and bring to a boil.

5 Add onions and simmer over low heat for 20 minutes. Add 1/2 t salt and soy sauce. Then add bell pepper and mushrooms and allow to come just to a boil. Skim off the froth, which is *aku*. Put in the fish and prawns; when they are almost cooked through, add the clams and taste. Add salt if needed.

6 Serve in individual bowls garnished with minced parsley.

* For example, cod, haddock or halibut

** May substitute 4 mushrooms

*** Fresh or dry herbs such as oregano or basil may be added if preferred.

Recipe by Michiko Yamamoto



Dashi is often made using a single ingredient, such as kombu and katsuobushi dried bonito flakes. This mellow dashi allows it to harmonize with various ingredients, and serves as a delicious soup base for Western dishes. The recipe here does not use oil, so it is healthy and low in calories.



Simmered Daikon and *Tsukune* Meatballs

Serves 4

195 kcal Protein 16.2 g Fat 13.4 g
(per serving)

- 1/2 medium daikon, about 8-10 cm / 3-4 in. diameter
- Water*
- 50 g / 1.8 oz. *mizuna* Japanese mustard greens

Simmering liquid

- 720 ml / 3 C dashi stock
- 3 T Kikkoman Soy Sauce
- 2 T Kikkoman Manjo Mirin

Tsukune meatballs

- 200 g / 7 oz. ground pork or chicken
- 1 T beaten egg
- 1 T grated *yamato-imo* glutinous yam or *naga-imo* Chinese yam
- 1 t granulated sugar
- 1 t Kikkoman Soy Sauce
- 1/4 t salt
- 2 t juice squeezed from grated ginger
- 1 T water
- *Sansho* Japanese mountain pepper powder

- Yuzu citrus peel for garnish

1 To prepare the daikon, cut 4 round slices, each 3.5 cm / 1.4 in. thick. Peel the thick skin. With a knife, make shallow cross-scoring** about a quarter of the depth of the slice (see photo). Round off edges of each slice and boil in enough water to cover the daikon over low-medium heat for 40 minutes, until tender. Allow to cool and then rinse. Drain and pat dry with paper towel.



2 Cut the *mizuna* into 3 cm / 1.2 in. lengths and set aside.

3 Place the simmering liquid ingredients in a saucepan. Add the daikon slices and cover with a drop-lid or parchment paper. Cook for 40 minutes over low heat.

4 Combine the *tsukune* ingredients in a bowl, mix and knead well. Form 12 balls using two wet tablespoons; this will make it easier to form the balls. Add the meatballs to the simmering liquid in the saucepan and simmer for 5 minutes over low-medium heat. Skim off the froth, which is *aku*.

5 Pour 120 ml / 1/2 C of the simmered liquid into another saucepan; add the *mizuna* and parboil, then remove.

6 Place the daikon, *tsukune* and *mizuna* in individual bowls. Pour simmering liquid over the ingredients and garnish with slivers of yuzu peel.

* Use rice water if available. This is water used to rinse rice prior to cooking. Rice water extracts unsavory smell, resulting in a more refined taste, and is used for parboiling daikon.

** See Fundamentals 101 on page 5 for more on *kakushi bocho* scoring technique.

Recipe by Kikkoman Corporation

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



In November 2021, Kikkoman Corporation celebrated the start of production and shipment of Kikkoman Soy Sauce at its Campinas plant in São Paulo, Brazil. The Brazil plant represents Kikkoman's eighth overseas soy sauce production facility, joining others that include two in the US, one in Europe and four in Asia.

To introduce this latest locally produced soy sauce, a celebratory launch event was held on November 1, 2021, at Restaurante Aizomê, a Japanese restaurant in Japan House São Paulo.

The celebration featured fusion dishes based on Japanese and Brazilian cuisines, as created by two prominent local chefs, Telma Shiraishi and Guga Rocha. Chef Telma Shiraishi owns Restaurante Aizomê, an authentic Japanese restaurant with two locations in São Paulo. In March 2019, she received the honorary title of Japanese Cuisine Goodwill Ambassador from Japan's Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, in recognition of her contributions to the promotion of Japanese cuisine overseas.

Celebrating Kikkoman Soy Sauce Production in Brazil

Chef Guga Rocha is a prominent figure among the new generation of Brazilian chefs, and is also a popular and talented food presenter renowned for showcasing dishes in an entertaining, easy-to-follow manner.

For the launch event, dishes involved locally grown ingredients, seasoned to accommodate local tastes while highlighting the

authentic rich flavor and aroma of Kikkoman Soy Sauce. Dining selections included a soft-shell crab tempura with ponzu sauce based on bocaiuva, a Brazilian palm plant, and a dish featuring pirarucu, a freshwater fish commonly enjoyed in Brazil. These ingenious combinations of local ingredients complemented by Kikkoman Soy Sauce were well-received by guests. ●



Above: The *kagami-biraki* launch ceremony featuring a soy sauce barrel; Kikkoman Soy Sauce produced locally in Brazil. Clockwise from center left: Pirarucu in steamed taioba leaf, with maturi nut velouté, xerém farofa and cajuína jelly and dedo-de-moça pepper; Soft-shell crab and cambuquira tempura with bocaiuva ponzu; Grilled shrimp with okra and mushrooms, spicy crustacean emulsion with cachaça and pickled maxixe; Chef Guga Rocha (L) and Chef Telma Shiraishi.

"Kikkoman Recipes from Around the World"

Kikkoman Soy Sauce is an all-purpose seasoning enjoyed worldwide. See our webpage to learn how Kikkoman Soy Sauce is used in Brazil.

<https://www.kikkoman.com/en/cookbook/kikkomanrecipes/index.html>



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