

food forum

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THE JAPANESE TABLE

The Secrets of Taste in Japanese Cuisine: Visual Appeal

by Tohru Fushiki

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The Secrets of Taste in Japanese Cuisine

Visual Appeal

The subtle character and tastes of Japanese dishes are informed by sensory experiences. Following on smell, flavor and texture, our series concludes with a look at how culinary visual appeal is also integral to Japanese cuisine.

—
by Tohru Fushiki

A chef slices sashimi with a special long, thin-bladed knife.

Japanese cuisine is often described as a feast for the eyes. The beauty of color variation and food presentation, the expression of seasonality through the colors and flavors of fresh seasonal ingredients, the allure of the vessels upon which the food is arranged—all these elements create a delightful experience for the eye as well as for the palate.

The *hassun*

Among the courses in the basic menu of a meal served at *ryotei*, refined and exclusive Japanese-style restaurants, the most visually striking is a dish called *hassun*. The *sun* is an old Japanese measuring unit equivalent to 3 centimeters; *hassun* translates literally as “eight *sun*,” or about 24 centimeters (9.4 inches). The *hassun* comprises small assorted delicacies served upon a flat 24-centimeter tray, served with

drinks or as an appetizer. Its artful arrangement of foods “from sea and land” represents the beauty of nature and its changing seasons—the essence of culinary appeal.

Chef Takuji Takahashi, third-generation master chef and owner of the renowned Kyoto *ryotei* Kinobu, explains that there are rules for the arrangement of food in a *hassun* dish. A pair of bamboo chopsticks is positioned in front of the tray, while bite-sized seafood delicacies and tidbits from the forest and mountain are placed on the upper right or lower left of the tray. Together, this arrangement generates a pure, tranquil feel to the platter as a whole. The ingredients used are those that are at their very best in the season, or those that are carefully chosen to symbolize an annual event in the traditional calendar, all presented so as to make the meal an unforgettable experience.

A harmony of colors

Japanese cuisine has emphasized visual appeal from antiquity. Artistry was particularly required with regard to color, cutting technique and serving arrangements.¹ Japanese cuisine traditionally revolves around five colors, namely black, green, red, yellow and white. A variety of ingredients are used to express these colors; representative ingredients for black include black sesame, *nori* seaweed and squid ink; seasonal vegetables embody green; red is suggested by salmon, *umeboshi* pickled apricots and red turnip; yellow is invoked by egg yolk, *kabocha* squash and satsuma (*mikan*); and white is depicted through rice, tofu and daikon.

This concept of the five colors is thought to be associated with the ancient Taoist worldview of harmony, and in Japanese cuisine, the colors are presented in a balanced way to signify a healthy meal. The vessels upon which

food is served are considered embellishment—important elements that harmonize and complement the food itself, to the greater delight of the eyes.

Technique and arrangement

One unique feature of Japanese cuisine is the emphasis placed on cutting techniques, which determine the appeal of a dish. This is particularly apparent in the preparation of fish for sashimi, considered the pinnacle of the cuisine, and allocated high status among menu items. Appearance is a significant component of sashimi: slicing is the only form of preparation involved and a selection of the best-quality fish that is fresh and fatty with good color is required. Sashimi is sliced into bite-sized pieces with a single stroke using a special long, thin-bladed knife. A chef can devote a lifetime to attain the ideal beauty of the cut surface and shape of each sashimi slice. A platter of sashimi is called *otsukuri* (“something that is built”), a term that suggests a three-dimensional form; indeed, arrangements of Japanese food on serving ware are characteristically three-dimensional.

Arrangement style in food presentation is another distinctive aspect of Japanese cuisine. Traditional arrangements do not emphasize volume, and never allow food to overflow the vessel. Presentation is often enhanced by leaving some modest void on the plate—expressing the Japanese aesthetic that cherishes the beauty of empty space—rather than focusing on the luxury or extravagance of the food.

Visual sensibility

It is not easy to explain where and how this aesthetic originated

and came to be nurtured, but according to Japanese historian and academic Isao Kumakura, its traces can be found in various expressions of art and culture throughout history.² For example, a traditional aesthetic concept called *yugen*, used to describe a



Autumn *hassun* at Kinobu: Elements of food and nature harmonize in elegant expression of the season. Decorative autumnal leaves and pine needles evoke the essence of autumn; from the sea comes mackerel sushi, and mountain delicacies include sweet simmered chestnuts and grilled ginkgo nuts.



Salmon roe and *nametake* mushrooms with grated daikon, served in tea bowl with pine motif by ceramic artist Kenzan Ogata.

“subtle profundity,” was expressed in the performance of Noh drama in the fifteenth century. Another aesthetic notion, often conveyed in the sixteenth century, is *wabi-sabi*, the “sense of fulfillment found in solitude and loneliness felt after passing through the best days of life.” This philosophical concept is most deeply rooted and imparted through the Japanese tea ceremony (*chanoyu*). And the elegant paintings of the Rimpa School, prominent during the

seventeenth century, realize the beauty of empty space, together with a highly decorative design sensibility. All of these aesthetic threads have influenced the visual aspects of Japanese cuisine at contemporary *ryotei* restaurants, and are also reflected in home cooking today.

Emphasis on the beauty of presentation is not limited to the dining experience at the table. Some examples can be seen in the ingenious and creative food arrangements of Japanese *bento* lunch boxes, including *makunouchi* (lit., “between curtains”) *bento* traditionally sold and eaten during theater intermission; *ekiben* (“station *bento*”) enjoyed on trains; and *shokado bento*, wherein the *bento* box is divided into four compartments, each of which symbolizes the individual vessels that comprise a gourmet *ryotei* meal. These small works of visual art in an ordinary lunch box convey to us the distilled essence of Japanese cuisine. ■

1. Hiromi Akahori, “Kaiseki Ryori no Miryoku,” (Appeal of *kaiseki* cuisine), *vesta*, no. 89 (Winter 2013): 30.

2. Isao Kumakura, “Artistic Awareness,” in *Introduction to Japanese Cuisine: Nature, History and Culture*, in the series “The Japanese Culinary Academy’s Complete Japanese Cuisine” (Tokyo, Shuhari Initiative Ltd., 2015): 84.

On the cover Napa cabbage, featured in *Spirit of the Seasons*, page 5; and a seasonal summer *shokado bento* served at Kinobu that includes grilled tilefish and eggplant with sweet miso paste.

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).

Food Vending Machines

Vending machines are ubiquitous in Japan. Whether indoors, outdoors, in cities, alongside country rice paddies, in the mountains or by the beach, a handy snack or drink is always within arm's reach. Vending machines typically sell beverages, but there is a recent uptick in food vending machines that offer up a surprisingly wide range of frozen foods, like *gyoza* dumplings, ramen, *karaage* Japanese deep-fried chicken, pizza, sashimi—even caviar.

The food vending machine trend has gained traction, thanks in part to the country's ongoing labor shortage, and to demand for contactless shopping spurred by the pandemic. But the most significant contributions to their expansion are advancements in refrigeration and freezing technologies, along with storage capabilities that can adapt to products of varying shape, size and weight. Products in frozen food vending machines were once limited to small items such as ice cream, but today's machines with adjustable compartments can store a broader range of goods.

Food vending machines are being embraced by restaurants that install them in front of their shops, so customers with a craving can buy menu items in frozen form, day or night. There are unmanned vending shops dedicated to machines that sell frozen foods from well-known restaurants and specialty stores across Japan: for example, a customer can buy Osaka *okonomiyaki* (savory "pancakes"), Sendai *yakiniku* grilled meat or Hakata ramen at vending machines in Tokyo. Generally speaking, such machine products are slightly more expensive than food sold at retailers or supermarkets, but cost about the same or even a little less than actually dining in the restaurants.

There's something for everyone, everywhere. Vending machines sell distinctive confectionery on city

A grab-and-go gourmet experience

streets, fresh cut fruit in train stations, and steak and barbeque in residential areas. Japan's innovative food vending machines have made frozen meals a fun and effortless option, providing busy consumers with a convenient grab-and-go gourmet experience at home. ◆



Tsukemen dipping noodles, purchased frozen from this vending machine on a Tokyo street.



Near a busy train station in Tokyo, this unmanned vending machine shop sells various frozen foods, including *okonomiyaki* and *yakiniku* grilled meat.

Shimofuri

Preparing Fish

Shimofuri is a technique used in preparing fish, when making simmered dishes. Hot water is poured over fillets; it removes oil and outer membranes on the surface of the fish that might cause unsavory smells or a fishy odor. *Shimofuri* literally means "frosting," as the hot water turns the surface of the fish a frosty white. ◆

1. To prepare *kinmedai* (alfonsino) fillets, score the skin of the fillet crosswise in order to prevent the fish from breaking apart, owing to shrinkage of the skin during simmering.



2. Place the fillets skin-side up on a flat strainer. Gently pour boiling water over the fillets until the skin slightly changes color.*

* Fillets may also be placed in a bowl. Pour in copious amounts of boiling water to cover the fish.



3. Immediately place the fish in ice water to halt the cooking process. Remove any remaining scales. Pat dry with a paper towel.



Simmered *kinmedai* and burdock seasoned with soy sauce, mirin, sake and sugar, garnished with shredded Japanese long onion

Napa Cabbage

白菜



Napa cabbage and sliced pork *nabe* hot pot

Napa cabbage, shown on our cover, is one of the most widely produced vegetables in Japan. It is also known as Chinese cabbage, or *hakusai* in Japanese, and is in season from autumn through late winter. Said to have originated in the Mediterranean region, napa cabbage was introduced to Japan via China in the late nineteenth century. Its cultivation is now concentrated in Japan's central Honshu, Ibaraki and Nagano prefectures, which together account for around 50 percent of total national production.

Napa cabbage contains vitamins C and K, minerals and dietary fiber, and its high water content, around 90 percent, makes it a good low-calorie diet choice. The most commonly consumed variety has an elongated or almost oval shape with tightly packed, overlapping leaves; these dense cabbage heads can weigh between 2-3 kg (4-7 lbs.). When simmered, napa cabbage turns tender and its natural subtle sweetness is more pronounced, making it a staple ingredient for *nabe* hot pot winter dishes. It is also enjoyed raw, and its crunchy texture is appreciated in salads or when pickled. ◆

Chicken with Blueberry-Wine Sauce

Serves 3-4

354 kcal Protein 36.2 g Fat 17.2 g
(per serving)

Sautéed chicken

- 2 boneless chicken breasts, 450-600 g / 1-1 1/3 lb.
- *Shio koji* salted malt*
- Flour, for coating
- Crushed black peppercorns, to taste
- 1 T pure olive oil
- 4 sprigs of fresh rosemary
- 1-2 T sake or white wine

Sautéed mushrooms

- 8 shiitake mushrooms
- 2 eryngi mushrooms
- 1 T pure olive oil
- 1 t butter
- Salt and ground black pepper

Blueberry-wine sauce

- 1 T pure olive oil
- 1/4 onion, finely chopped (55 g / 2 oz.)
- 1 T tomato paste
- 1 T Kikkoman Soy Sauce
- 100 ml / 3.5 oz. red wine
- 100 ml / 3.5 oz. dashi stock or vegetable stock
- 20 black peppercorns, crushed
- 40 g / 1.4 oz. fresh or frozen blueberries
- 1 T honey

1 Trim excess fat and butterfly the thick part of the chicken breasts for even cooking. Rub *shio koji* on both sides to season and tenderize; chill in refrigerator for 30-60 minutes.

2 To prepare mushrooms, remove shiitake stems, cut caps in halves. Cut eryngi into halves then into 4-5 slices. Heat olive oil in a frying pan; sauté shiitake until slightly soft, then add eryngi. When tender, add 1 t butter, season with salt and pepper. Remove from pan, set aside.

3 To prepare sauce, heat olive oil and sauté onion in a saucepan over lower-medium heat, until transparent. Reduce heat, add tomato paste and stir. Add soy sauce, mix well. Add red wine, raise to high heat and bring to a boil, then reduce to low and simmer for 3 minutes. Add dashi stock, crushed black peppercorns and blueberries; simmer for 10-15 minutes over low heat. Lightly crush blueberries. Add 1 T honey. Stir constantly until sauce thickens slightly. Remove from heat, set aside.

4 Lightly wipe *shio koji* from chicken with paper towel; cut into halves along fiber. Coat both sides with flour, shake off excess. Sprinkle crushed black peppercorns on one side. Heat 1 T olive oil in a frying pan. Add chicken and 2 sprigs rosemary. Cook over medium heat until golden brown. Turn, cook the other side until slightly colored. Add 1-2 T of sake, cover and simmer until a skewer passes easily through chicken. Remove from pan, add remaining chicken juice to sauce; bring to another boil.

5 Cut chicken into 2 cm- / 3/4 in.-wide pieces, place on serving platter. Drizzle sauce over chicken. Serve with sautéed mushrooms garnished with remaining rosemary.

* There are two types of *shio koji*: clear liquid and thick ivory-colored liquid. Use the latter in this recipe: 1 t per 100 g / 3.5 oz. of chicken or 1 1/2 T per 1 lb. of chicken.

Recipe by Michiko Yamamoto



Blueberries add a rich flavor with a bit of tartness when combined with soy sauce, tomato paste and red wine. This versatile sauce can be adapted to accompany various meats.



Shabu-Shabu Beef Salad

Serves 4

343 kcal Protein 22.3 g Fat 22.5 g
(per serving)

- 400 g / 14 oz. thinly sliced beef for shabu-shabu*
- 10 cm / 4 in. length of daikon; 8 cm / 3 in. diameter
- 5 cm / 2 in. length of carrot
- 1 celery stalk
- 1 Japanese cucumber or Persian cucumber
- 2 iceberg lettuce leaves
- 1/4 purple onion
- 1 C watercress leaves

Dressing sauce

- 120 ml / 1/2 C Kikkoman Soy Sauce
- 120 ml / 1/2 C grain vinegar
- 120 ml / 1/2 C vegetable oil

1 Prepare beef: each slice should be approximately 10 x 15 cm / 4 x 6 in. and flattened out evenly.

2 Cut daikon in half to make 2 pieces of 5 cm / 2 in. Peel and julienne both daikon and carrot. String and julienne the celery; julienne the cucumber and lettuce into 5 cm / 2 in. lengths. Cut the purple onion into thin slices.

3 Soak all julienned vegetables and onion in a bowl of water for 5 minutes to make them crisper. Drain and remove excess water, then add the watercress leaves.

4 Mix the dressing sauce ingredients in a saucepan and heat just to boiling. Lower the heat and continue to simmer. Gently dip the beef slices into the sauce, ensuring that the slice is spread out (see photo). Cook briefly until the color of the meat changes, then remove from the sauce and set aside.



5 Skim off the froth (*aku*) from the sauce and remove from heat. This sauce mixture will be used as dressing for the salad.

6 Arrange the vegetables in individual bowls and lay out the beef atop the vegetables. Serve with the sauce as dressing on the side.

* Shabu-shabu beef is much thinner than sukiyaki beef and is preferred for this dish, but sukiyaki beef may be substituted. If neither is available, use well-marbled beef for roast. If lightly frozen, the beef can be sliced very thin.

Recipe by Kikkoman Corporation

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



Kikkoman's Cookbook Webpage

Essential preparation tips & content upgrade

The Kikkoman global website is home to the *Cookbook* webpage. *Cookbook* presents a wide variety of recipes, all enhanced by Kikkoman seasonings, including Kikkoman Soy Sauce. These dishes are easy to make at home and include healthy, low-sodium options.

In November 2022, *Cookbook* expanded its "Cooking Basics" section (located at bottom of webpage), which features preparation tips and how-to photos and videos. Preparation of ingredients is key to putting together delicious meals. "Cooking Basics" links users to culinary fundamentals, which include tips like vegetable cutting techniques and how to fillet fish. Updated content also describes how to properly prepare and handle meats, make dashi stock and cook rice. Each step is explained clearly with photos for easy understanding.

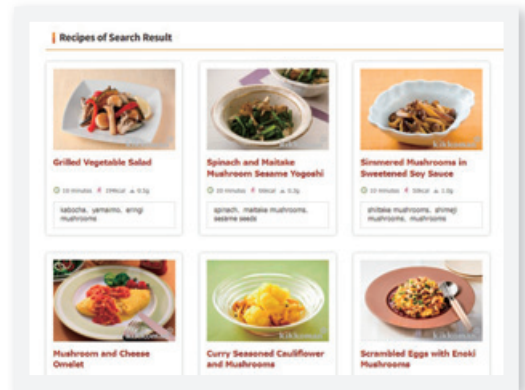
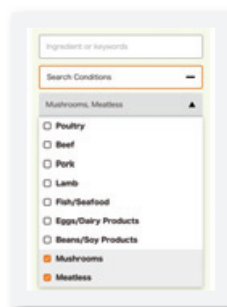


Cooking Basics: Preparing broad beans and cooking rice

The latest *Cookbook* also includes these convenient features:

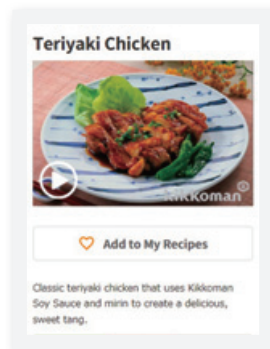
Recipe Search

For fast, "on-demand" recipe searches, users can choose their main ingredient preferences, type of dish (main, side, etc.), cooking method, calories, cooking time or sodium content. New search options include "mushrooms" and "meatless" for quick links to vegetarian recipes.



My Recipes

Users can save their favorite recipes by clicking on the "Add to My Recipes" button. It's easy to create a personalized "recipe book" by collecting and organizing favorite dishes, all accessible with a quick click.



Glossary

Jump back and forth between recipes and cooking terms in the Glossary, which provides descriptions and definitions of unique Japanese ingredients and seasonings. The Glossary also suggests various recipes related to ingredients or seasonings under the search feature.



Kikkoman continues to promote the international exchange of food culture through the spirit of our corporate slogan, *seasoning your life*, by creating delicious memories with recipes for everyday cooking. 🍡

Global Cookbook



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



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