

food forum

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

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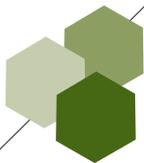
THE JAPANESE TABLE

Food Byways: Tracing the Old Kombu Route

by Masami Ishii

Our current Feature series traces Japan's traditional food byways. In this second installment, we explore the ancient routes by which kombu was conveyed throughout the country from its origins in northern Japan.

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Food Byways: Tracing the Old Kombu Route

Serving Good Fortune

Many traditional events and ceremonies are disappearing in Japan today in the face of changing lifestyles, but the custom of associating certain things with good fortune remains. The dishes served and ornaments displayed on New Year's Day or at weddings, for example, are intended to create as auspicious and happy an occasion as possible.

One of the items prized for its role as a symbol of good fortune and happiness is kelp, a species of seaweed. The Japanese word for kelp is kombu or *kobu*, which sounds very much like the word for happiness or celebrate—*yorokobu*—and so kombu often appears in some guise during special occasions.

The Travels of Kombu

Edible kombu is produced only along the coasts of Hokkaido and the northeastern part of Japan's main Honshu island in the Sanriku area, where warm and cold currents of the ocean meet. Records show that in the eighth century, the native Emishi people of northern Japan presented gifts of kombu to the Imperial Court in Nara; this food did not circulate as a market product, however, until centuries later. Around the mid-fourteenth century, the island of Hokkaido, then known as Ezochi, was developed and routes of transport connected



Kitamae-bune transport boats painted on an *ema*, a wooden votive tablet, to pray for safe journeys. *Hinomike-shoyu-senzu*, ca. late nineteenth century

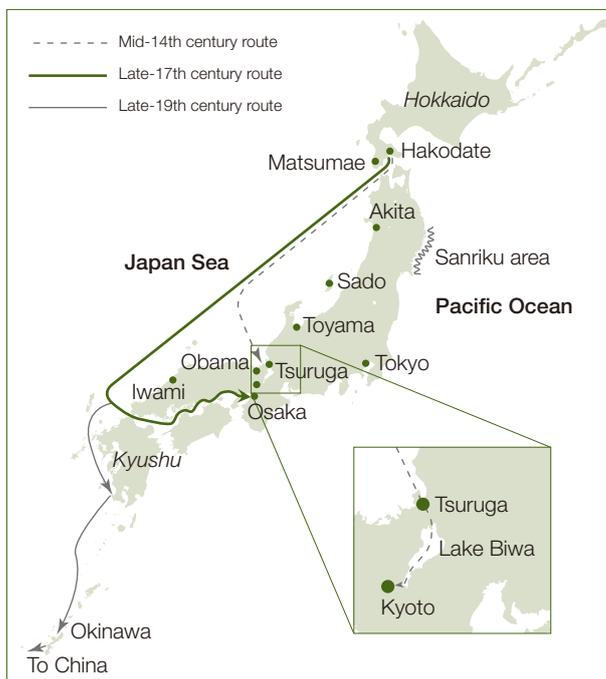
it to ports in Honshu, along the Japan Sea. After arriving at ports such as Obama and Tsuruga (both in present-day Fukui Prefecture), kombu was transported overland to Kyoto and Osaka, and it became more widely known. Around this time, *uga-kombu* (fine-quality kombu) produced near Hakodate was mentioned in a common school textbook of that time, the *Teikin orai*. Kombu was also much featured in popular culture, as in the comic Kyogen play *Kobu-uri* ("The kombu seller").

After the wealthy merchant Kawamura Zuiken (1618–1699) improved transport routes along the western side of Honshu under orders of the shogunate in the late seventeenth century, kombu could be shipped to Osaka. Carrying goods in large quantities, the great coastal transport boats known as *kitamae-bune* plied the routes between Matsumae and the commercial capital of Osaka.

Kombu was primarily consumed in Kyoto and Osaka, and the remainder was shipped eastward to Edo (present-day Tokyo), the seat of the shogunate government, or exported to Qing Dynasty (China) via the Ryukyu Dynasty (Okinawa). In the late nineteenth century, it is said that the highly profitable kombu trade via Okinawa, then controlled by the Satsuma domain of Kyushu, was the source of vast wealth that was eventually used in overthrowing the shogunate.

Regional Kombu Cuisines

Kombu was prepared in different ways along its various trade routes, and so helped shape the distinctive food culture of each region. In Toyama on the coast of the Japan Sea, people are partial to sashimi marinated between sheets of kombu



Tracing the transport routes of kombu



Matsumae-kombu gathering the Edo era (1603-1867), an illustration from the book *Nihon sankai meibutsu-zue* (1797). Courtesy National Diet Library digital archives



Okinawa's *kubu-irichi*, pork stir-fried with thinly sliced kombu

(*kobujime*); even *kamaboko* fish-paste loaf is wrapped in kombu. In Tsuruga, kombu is shaved paper-thin to make *oboro-kombu*; and in Kyoto, it is used to make the subtly flavored dashi stock that led to great refinements in Kyoto cuisine. In Osaka, the use of kombu led to the creation of side dishes such as *tsukudani*, soy sauce-flavored kombu.

In old Edo, meanwhile, dashi stock was commonly made from dried bonito, and only cheap kombu was made available there at the time; thus varied ways of cooking with kombu did not fully develop in that city. In Okinawa, however, kombu was used in cooking pork, leading to the creation of various new kombu dishes. These traditions are alive even today, and currently Okinawa prefecture has one of the highest consumption rates per capita of kombu.



Osuimono (clear broth) with *oboro-kombu*

Revival of Kombu

Since the end of World War II (1945), Western-style cooking has grown increasingly popular in Japanese households, with a steady and unmistakable movement away from the traditional Japanese-style diet. This trend was further driven by technological innovations during Japan's rapid economic growth of the 1960s, which placed high priority on convenience. As instant seasonings became more available, more people preferred to use these, rather than making dashi stock from scratch. Blocks of dried bonito from which bonito flakes are shaved and large strips of dried kombu are much less common in Japanese households, but this is not to say they have disappeared completely: they are now available in convenient, pre-prepared forms.

With the advance of globalization in the twenty-first century, diverse cuisines come together in countries all over the world, and people have become quite discriminating about what they eat. Japanese cuisine, including Kyoto's famous *Kyo-ryori*, is now popular worldwide. Developing alongside the internationalization of food has been the chemical analysis of ingredients. For some 800 years, the Japanese have cultivated an

appreciation for umami. To seek the components of umami, Professor Kikunae Ikeda analyzed kombu and in 1907 discovered that they were to be found in the monosodium L-glutamate in kombu. This was the discovery of umami, which is now called the "fifth basic taste."

Kombu, rich in umami, is now highly valued among chefs, and has won renewed recognition as a naturally healthy ingredient in home cooking. It is valued for its high levels of iodine, which helps produce thyroid hormones, and has been shown to help lower cholesterol and blood pressure. Japan's kombu is deservedly prized not only by epicures, but by advocates of healthy eating. ◆

cover

After kombu is gathered from the sea, it is dried in the sun, which allows it to be stored easily for long periods.

Author's profile

Masami Ishii was born in 1958. He graduated from Tokyo Gakugei University in 1980 from which he later received his Masters degree in Japanese language education in 1984. Prof. Ishii specializes in Japanese literature and folklore, and he has been teaching at Tokyo Gakugei University since 1993. He has authored many books and publications such as *Tono Monogatari-e-no-Goshotai* (An Introduction to Tales of Tono) and *Mukashi-banashi-to-Kanko—Kataribe-no-Shozo* (Folktales and Travel—a portrait of a storyteller).



Hamo in Kyoto



Soy sauce-based teriyaki sauce flavors *hamo-sushi*.



Hamo no otoshi served with *ume* paste

Hamo is full of
vitamin A and
has a rich flavor

Hamo, or pike conger, is a popular food eaten in Kyoto during the summer. *Hamo* are similar in appearance to eel, but have sharp teeth and inhabit ocean beds and mudflats. Plentiful in vitamin A, *hamo* meat is white but contains considerable fat, which lends it a rich flavor.

People of landlocked Kyoto have eaten *hamo* for over 1,000 years. Peddlers known as *katsugi* transported fresh fish to the city from places such as neighboring Osaka in boxes or buckets filled with seawater. In the hot summers, delivering fresh fish was difficult, but *hamo* are particularly robust and were able to survive the transport to Kyoto—a quality that gives this fish its reputation as a stamina food.

More so than other fish, *hamo* have a great many small bones that are difficult to remove, making the fish unfit for eating as-is; thus it was often ground up for consumption. Eventually, Kyoto cooks developed a special method called *honekiri* to cut up these bones using a special knife. The stomach is opened, the backbone removed, and 26 fine cuts are made every 3 centimeters without cutting into the skin. Thanks to this

method, *hamo* is soft when eaten, with no hint of any bone in the mouth. It may take nearly a decade for a chef to acquire proper *honekiri* skills in order to become a full-fledged master of the art.

When preparing *hamo*, no part of the fish is wasted. The head and bones are used to make dashi stock, and the meat may be served in a variety of ways. Parboil a *honekiri*-treated *hamo* and it curls back to open up its white meat like a flower blossom: *botan-hamo* is a soup where the fish resembles a *botan* (peony). Chill with ice water for *hamo no otoshi*, eaten with *ume* (pickled plum) paste and mustard-vinegar miso; or enjoy the ever-popular *hamo-sushi*, sushi of *hamo* meat glazed with soy sauce-based teriyaki sauce.

Hamo spawn in the autumn, so the fish tastes best around July after the rainy season, when it takes on just enough fat. Kyoto's annual Gion Festival is held around that time, and is known locally as the Hamo Festival. The people of Kyoto look forward to the season's most delicious *hamo* on the day of the festival's famous Yamaboko parade. ●



Honekiri, the art of cutting the small bones of the *hamo* with a special knife



Perspectives on
Japanese cuisine

Smooth, cool and noodle-like *tokoroten* is synonymous with Japan's hot summer months; it has been popular at least as far back as the Muromachi period (1336-1573), and there is even mention of it in sixth-century records.

With a texture similar to firm jelly, *tokoroten* is traditionally made by boiling *tengusa* seaweed (red algae), and filtering and solidifying its broth. This solid is shaped into long noodles using a tool called the *tentsuki*. *Tokoroten* is primarily made up of water; the

remaining one or two percent consists of a polysaccharide called galactan which, while low in calories and an excellent source of fiber, has little nutritional value.

Today, *tokoroten* may be made easily at home with *kanten* (agar-agar) rather than *tengusa*. Depending on the region, this refreshing dish can be dressed with *nihaizu* (soy sauce and vinegar) or *sanbaizu* (soy sauce, mirin and vinegar), green laver and Japanese mustard, or enjoyed with brown sugar syrup.



Tokoroten

Tokoroten

Serves 4

11 kcal Protein 0.1 g
(per person)

- 4 g (.14 oz.) powdered *kanten* (agar-agar)
- 2 C water
- 4 T *nihaizu* (2 T soy sauce and 2 T vinegar)
- 2 t green laver
- Japanese mustard



Long noodles shaped by the *tentsuki*

1. Put water and powdered *kanten* in a pan and bring to a boil, then reduce to low heat. Stir constantly for two minutes until melted.
2. Moisten the inside of a mold with water; pour the *kanten* into the mold, then allow to set in a refrigerator.
3. When firm, remove *tokoroten* from mold and cut into rectangular pieces that fit into the *tentsuki*. Using this tool, push out *tokoroten* noodles into a bowl.
4. Serve *tokoroten* with *nihaizu* poured on top, garnished with laver and mustard.



Tentsuki

DELECTABLE JOURNEYS

Hida-Takayama *Hoba Miso*

The city of Takayama, commonly called Hida-Takayama, is located in mountainous northern Gifu Prefecture. Conditions are harsh here during the winters, when temperatures may drop as low as -20°C. *Hoba miso* is a local delicacy believed to have originated when stored *tsukemono* (pickles) that had frozen during the depths of winter were placed atop a large *ho* (Japanese magnolia) leaf, topped with miso and cooked over a fire. The miso-pickle mix was then eaten with rice.

Today, the savory miso is usually mixed with shiitake mushrooms and Japanese long onions, placed on the dried magnolia leaf, and baked over a charcoal grill. Moisture from the food prevents the *ho*-leaf from burning, and the fragrance of the leaf and aroma of baking miso blend perfectly. These days, *hoba miso* is not only eaten on rice, it is also enjoyed as a versatile sauce to accompany beef, fish or any favorite food.

Gifu





TUNA SALAD WITH OLIVE OIL KOMBU DRESSING

Dashi stock is delicate: if the kombu is boiled, it releases an undesirable flavor. In Mr. Kitajo's fool-proof kombu water recipe, no heating is necessary—just soak the kombu in water to create a versatile dashi stock that can be used in all kinds of cuisines.

Serves 2 429 kcal Protein 17.2 g Fat 36.7g (per person)



● Kombu

Dressing

- 6 T olive oil kombu
- 1 T + 2 t Kikkoman Soy Sauce
- 1 T red wine vinegar
- 1 T capers (preferably small), drained
- Black pepper
- 3-4 C lettuce (iceberg and romaine), torn or cut into bite-sized pieces
- 2-3 dill sprigs, snip leaves
- 1/4 sweet onion, cut into thin slices
- 1 can tuna in oil (drained 135 g/ 4.8 oz.), flaked
- 3-5 green beans parboiled, cut diagonally into 2.5-3 cm- (1 in.-) pieces
- 1 medium tomato, cut in 8 pieces, then halved again
- 1 hard-boiled egg, cut lengthwise into 6 pieces
- 2-3 sprigs fresh parsley, leaves plucked
- 2-3 sprigs fresh coriander, leaves plucked

Mr. Kitajo's Kombu Water & Olive Oil Kombu



Kombu water

- 10 g (.35 oz.) kombu for dashi stock
 - 4 C soft mineral water
- Using kitchen scissors, cut the kombu into shreds 2-2.5 cm (1 in.) long and 1-2 mm (.07 in.) wide.*
 - Place kombu in a pot of water; allow to stand for more than 3 hours.
 - Strain kombu from water before use. The kombu water can be kept in the refrigerator for up to two weeks.



Olive oil kombu

- 10 g (.35 oz.) kombu (from kombu water)
 - 150 ml (5 oz.) extra virgin olive oil
- Add the olive oil to the kombu and mix well.
 - The oil and kombu can be stored up to three weeks, if refrigerated.

* Dampening the kombu with water just before cutting will make it easier to cut into thin shreds.

1 Mix the dressing ingredients and set aside.

2 Place lettuce on a serving platter and sprinkle with dill. Scatter onion over the lettuce, then add tuna, green beans, tomato and top with boiled egg.

3 Garnish with desired amount of parsley and coriander leaves, then dress the salad with about two-thirds of the dressing; add more to taste if desired.

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

Recipe by Michiko Yamamoto



FRESH SALMON *KOBU-MAKI*



◆ *Kanpyo*

Serves 8 (2 pieces per person) 131 kcal Protein 12.8 g Fat 2.4 g (per person)

- 3 1/2 C water
- 80 g (2.7 oz.) *hidaka kombu*, 4 sheets 10 cm (4 in.) wide (approx. 170 g/ 5.5 oz. after soaking)
- 25 g (.8 oz.) *kanpyo* (dried gourd strips)
- Salt
- 400 g (approx. 1 lb.) fresh salmon fillet

Simmering liquid

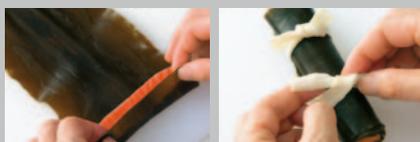
- 2 1/2 C kombu dashi stock
- 2 t vinegar
- 3 T sake
- 6 T sugar
- 3 T + 1 t Kikkoman Soy Sauce
- 2 T Kikkoman Manjo Mirin

1 To make dashi stock, soak kombu in 3 1/2 C water for 10 minutes. Remove and wipe dry with a paper towel, and cut each length in half. Reserve the stock for simmering liquid, Step 5.

2 Briefly wash *kanpyo* with water then drain. Rub *kanpyo* with salt to soften, rinse with water and drain. Cut into 15 cm (6 in.) lengths.

3 Cut salmon into a total of 8 strips that are each 9 cm (3.5 in.) long and 1.5 cm (3/4 in.) wide.

4 Place a piece of kombu on a cutting board, then lay a salmon strip in its center, and roll it up.



Secure the roll by tying up with two lengths of *kanpyo* (See photos). Repeat this step to make 8 kombu rolls.

5 Place the kombu rolls in a pan, rolled ends facing down, add the simmering liquid and cover with a drop lid. Cook over medium heat for 30 minutes. While cooking, occasionally remove lid and skim off the foam.

6 When kombu is cooked, add the sugar and 3 T soy sauce; simmer for about 15 minutes longer, or until the simmering liquid is reduced. Add another 1 t of soy sauce and 2 T mirin; bring to a boil until the rolls are caramelized.

7 Trim off both ends of the rolls, then cut them into halves to serve either warm or at room temperature.

Note: The term "*kobu*" is a common variant of the word "*kombu*," used for this particular dish.

Recipe by Kikkoman Corporation



KFI 40th Anniversary News

KFI Celebrates 40th Anniversary of Wisconsin Plant

Kikkoman Foods, Inc. (KFI) held commemorative events from June 6 to 7, to celebrate the 40th anniversary of its Wisconsin plant. To mark the occasion, the U.S.-Japan Food Distribution Symposium and the Wisconsin-U.S.-Japan Economic Development Conference were held at the Abbey Resort in Fontana, Wisconsin. The Wisconsin plant was Kikkoman's first U.S. base for the manufacture of soy sauce and made its first shipment in 1973. Since then, it has grown into one of the world's largest plants for naturally brewed soy sauce and today serves as a foothold for the international business that now makes up nearly half of the Kikkoman Group.

U.S.-Japan Food Distribution Symposium

The eighth symposium in a series took place on the subject of "The Food Retail Industry's Response to the Era of Globalization." This event offered an opportunity to examine measures related to maintaining and expanding business in the face of rapid globalization. Keynote lectures were delivered by Dr. Mitsuaki Shimaguchi, Professor Emeritus at Keio University, and by Dr. David E. Bell, Professor at Harvard Business School. These were followed by panel discussions among 170 U.S. and Japanese professionals from the food distribution industry.



KFI Wisconsin Plant

Wisconsin-U.S.-Japan Economic Development Conference

Some 300 participants attended this conference, which focused on the theme, "The Road to Prosperity: Global Innovation Economic Development." The conference was jointly sponsored by the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation, the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and KFI. Three Japanese and three U.S. speakers made presentations from academic, business and government perspectives, proposing the importance of specialized growth strategies in light of the evolving global economy.

Kikkoman Research Gift to University

In commemoration of the 40th anniversary of KFI, Kikkoman announced a grant of one million U.S. dollars to establish the Kikkoman Healthy Waters Environmental Health Laboratories in the College of Life Sciences at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Kikkoman anticipates that this research will promote economic growth through the development and commercialization of new water-related technologies, which are vital in the manufacture of high quality soy sauce. The support of such activities reflects Kikkoman's long-term corporate vision to fulfill its social responsibility as a good corporate citizen.



U.S.-Japan Food Distribution Symposium

Gala Dinner

Some 530 guests attended KFI's 40th anniversary dinner. In his opening address, Kikkoman's honorary CEO and Chairman Yuzaburo Mogi thanked KFI for 40 years of dedication, saying, "Just after the decision was made on construction, some expressed concern about the future of soy sauce-brewing in the U.S. because of cultural differences. However, we patiently established communications and worked together to overcome differences and build a partnership."

The traditional sake barrel opening ceremony was followed by a toast from Mr. Mogi, with successive Wisconsin governors and Mr. Kenichiro Sasae, Japanese Ambassador to the U.S., gathering on stage. The incumbent governor of Wisconsin, Mr. Scott Walker, commented that "... for 40 years, Kikkoman has acted as a bridge in politics and culture and has brought a lot to Wisconsin. Kikkoman is beloved by many people." Governor Walker then presented a written proclamation attesting to Kikkoman's 40 years of valuable contributions to the state of Wisconsin. ◆



Sake barrel opening ceremony at the Gala Dinner