

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



THE JAPANESE TABLE

Washoku: Social Customs and Observances

by Isao Kumakura

For this final installment in our series on washoku, we look at the hospitality behind Japanese cuisine and its celebratory role in various social traditions, annual events and family milestones.

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Washoku: Social Customs and Observances



Osechi ryori auspicious foods for the New Year

An Act of Community

To entertain guests or extend hospitality is called *omotenashi* in Japanese, and one of the connotations of this word includes welcoming and feasting the gods. The rituals observed during traditional annual events invariably involve inviting these spirits to the physical realm. To express gratitude to the gods for an abundant harvest, for example, it is customary to prepare special dishes and present them as offerings. The main event at harvest festivals is a banquet where food and drink are partaken as if dining together with the gods. The dishes consumed at events such as these are often prepared as a communal affair by local people working together. Such foods are the quintessence of local

cuisine, as they are made with locally distinctive ingredients and preparation methods. Through these ingredients and cooking practices, people reaffirm and strengthen their bonds as a community. In this sense, *washoku* lies at the heart of Japan's cultural and social traditions.

New Year's Observances

The most important annual household event in Japan is the New Year. Among the traditional preparations for celebrating the New Year is the making of *mochi*, known as *mochi-tsuki*, where, in a wooden or stone mortar, a batch of hot steamed glutinous rice is tirelessly pounded with a heavy wooden mallet. This eventually breaks down the rice into a sticky, chewy batch of *mochi*, which is

typically formed into round cakes or flat squares. Families gather together and neighbors collaborate in holding *mochi-tsuki* events, which contribute to the bonding of communities.

Just before the old year passes, various traditional dishes known as *osechi ryori* are prepared. They are presented to the god of the New Year, who is welcomed into homes on the first day of January. *Osechi ryori* is a combination of dishes that express people's prayers that the new year will bring happiness and good fortune. The foods that make up *osechi ryori* are many and varied. They include *tazukuri*, which means "bountiful rice paddies," and consists of small roasted sardines glazed in seasoned soy sauce, mirin and sugar. Then there is herring roe seasoned with soy sauce-based dashi, called *kazunoko*, which translates as "may there be many offspring and prosperity." Auspicious *kuromame* carry the sense of "healthy and industrious"; these are sweet simmered black beans. These and other celebratory foods carry special intent and prayers for the New Year. *Osechi ryori* is served with special sake called *o-toso*, believed to disperse harmful spirits, and a soup called *zoni*, which consists of *mochi* in a seasoned dashi broth.

Food-related decorations for the New Year include *kagami-mochi*, stacks of round *mochi* that symbolize



Mochi-tsuki, pounding mochi with mallets in a mortar



Kagami-mochi with kombu and Ise-ebi

Sekihan steamed glutinous rice with adzuki beans and grilled *tai* sea bream



the spirit of the divine and evoke the image of having received a vigorous portion of that spirit for the New Year. Traditionally arranged together with the *kagami-mochi* are kombu, which refers to *yorokobu*, a word that conveys happiness, and an *Ise-ebi* rock lobster, which is associated with the Ise Shrine in Mie Prefecture, renowned as the spiritual heart of Shintoism. This festive arrangement is typically positioned in an alcove in Japanese homes called the *tokonoma*.

Seasonal and Family Milestones

Throughout the year, and particularly during the turning points of the seasons, events are held to drive away harm. For example, on the first "Day of the Horse" (*Hatsu Uma*) in the lunar calendar, festivals are held nationwide for Inari, a deity associated with agriculture. This is the occasion to enjoy *abura-age* deep-fried tofu, thought to be favored by the fox, who is the messenger of Inari. All around Japan, many local or regional foods are prepared as a way for households and communities to acknowledge such annual milestones.

In addition to regular calendar or seasonal events, there are celebrations to mark the customary rites of passage. One of these is a baby's *okui-zome*, or "first eating of food," celebrated around the hundredth day after birth. In this ceremony,

rice is touched to the child's lips as a way of praying for healthy growth. Other important family milestones include entering and graduating school, coming-of-age ceremonies and weddings, and special birthday observances for those who turn sixty and seventy. For these and other celebratory events, it is usual to serve *sekihan*, steamed glutinous rice with adzuki beans. Glutinous rice was the main type of rice eaten in ancient Japan, and it continues to be used in preparing traditional celebratory dishes. The rice becomes infused with the red pigment from the adzuki beans, hence the usage of *seki* or "red" and *han*, "rice." Adzuki beans are believed to possess the power to drive away harmful spirits. *Sekihan* is often accompanied by grilled *tai*, or sea bream. Not only are its appearance and flavor particularly favored, the name *tai* is identified with *medetai*, meaning "happy" or "auspicious," making this dish most fitting for celebrations.

The Diminishing Impact of Washoku

Despite *washoku's* time-honored and essential role in strengthening the roots of community and familial ties, its traditional festival foods and local cuisines are gradually being forgotten, owing in part to the Westernization of Japanese lifestyles. Despite the fact that *washoku* evolved around the country's own bountiful and diverse

seasonal ingredients, Japan's self-sufficiency in food has decreased while its reliance on overseas imports has grown. The same ingredients are available all year round nowadays, thanks to advances in greenhouse cultivation and global transportation.

The original intent in submitting "*washoku* traditional dietary cultures of the Japanese" to UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage List was to serve as a reminder to the Japanese of the value of their own cultural traditions. Now, with this global validation, it is hoped that they will be encouraged to pass on their unique and remarkable culinary legacy to future generations. ◆

cover

These three auspicious dishes are usually included in New Year's *osechi ryori*: sweet black *kuromame*, golden *kazunoko* herring roe, and crispy *tazukuri* roasted sardines.

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 top left: *Tai-yaki*, *momiji-manju* and *imagawa-yaki* above a row of three *ningyo-yaki*.

Deliciously Shaped Confectionery

Among the vast range of baked confectionery, some are made with special molds, such as those used in making waffles. In Japan, such molded confections are particularly delicious and decorative; these hand-held treats are typically filled with *an* sweet adzuki bean paste, and are fun and easy to eat for both adults and children. This confectionery is usually made of wheat-flour batter baked in hinged molds, whose shapes include fish, animals, plants and even mythical gods. They are made by spooning dollops of *an* onto a layer of batter in the mold, covering with more batter, then closing the mold lid to cook.

These popular snacks include the round, *an*-filled *imagawa-yaki*. This



Baking *tai-yaki* in a mold

Decorative
confections draw
hungry crowds

cake dates to the 1700s, and its name refers to the Imagawa bridge in old Edo (Tokyo), which was near the first shop to sell them. *Imagawa-yaki* are available throughout the country, reasonably priced at about 100 yen (USD1.00) each. Another crowd-pleaser is the evocative *tai-yaki*, which is also filled with *an*. Dating from the early 20th century, it takes its shape from the lucky *tai*, or sea bream, a fish whose name is phonetically similar to *medetai*, meaning “happy” or “auspicious.” *Tai-yaki* may be baked in either individual or batch molds; some prominent shops boast distinctive *tai-yaki* styles or flavors, drawing lines of fans who wait patiently to enjoy freshly baked cakes with their crispy outer crust and thick filling of homemade *an*. Another favorite is *ningyo-yaki*,

which likely originated in a Tokyo neighborhood called Ningyocho. Stuffed with *an*, these small, soft confections represent the plump faces of Japan’s Seven Gods of Good Fortune. Beyond Tokyo, various regions of Japan are known for original special confections that symbolize some unique aspect of the area. One of these is Hiroshima’s *an*-filled *momiji-manju*, a pretty maple-leaf shaped confectionery that references the region’s famous views of maple trees.

These days, those with a sweet tooth can find these cakes in a tempting range of shapes and flavors, and new, sometimes unexpected combinations appear regularly. There are bite-sized versions of *tai-yaki*, and those made with croissant batter, for example, while *ningyo-yaki* may appear in the shapes of popular characters. Fillings might include chocolate, custard, *matcha* green tea cream or even cheese. Although the mechanized production of baked confectionery predominates to a large extent, hand-made baked confectionery still draws hungry crowds who watch the time-honored molding process and enjoy its fresh, traditional taste. ●



How to Eat *Washoku*

Rice is at the core of traditional Japanese cuisine, or *washoku*. A typical *washoku* menu consists of *ichiju san-sai*: one soup and three dishes, served with rice and pickles—but what is the best way to enjoy this tempting array? To begin, take a bite of rice and a sip of soup and another bite of rice; then take a bite of one of the side dishes. The general rule is

to return to the rice after sampling one of the other dishes, and it is desirable to refrain from eating the side dishes consecutively. It is best not to consume the entire portion of rice or any of the side dishes alone, so as to balance the pace of the meal while allowing the assorted flavors to complement each other.

This method allows the diner to mix the simple taste of rice along with more richly seasoned side dishes, and to experience favorite blends of flavors. When eating sashimi, for example, the intensity or purity of its taste can be adapted to personal preference, based on varying amounts and combinations of *wasabi*, soy sauce and rice. ●



Ichiju san-sai



A bite of rice is taken after sampling one of the other dishes.

TASTY TRAVEL



Saga *Aranabe*

Ara, also referred to as *kue* in Japan, are long tooth grouper, a fish that may reach lengths of more than one meter. With very small catches, *ara* are referred to as “the phantom fish.” Although the fish itself may appear grotesque, its somewhat fatty white flesh has a refined flavor. *Aranabe* is a popular *nabe* (hot-pot) that includes tender, tasty chunks of *ara*, Japanese long onion, napa cabbage, shiitake mushrooms, tofu and other vegetables in a kombu dashi broth. When eating, the fish and vegetables are dipped in ponzu sauce. This dish is a special treat enjoyed during autumn festivals in Karatsu, a city in Saga Prefecture in northwest Kyushu. ●



DAIKON AND MOCHI CANAPÉS

Mochi glutinous rice cakes are a traditional Japanese food, but may be difficult to swallow for those unfamiliar with their thick, chewy texture. This combination of melted *mochi* and cheese, both soft and sticky, creates a rich fondue-like texture that is easy to eat.



● *Shichimi-togarashi*

七味唐辛子

Makes 8 appetizers

112 kcal Protein 4.2 g Fat 2.5 g
(per piece)

- 1 *mochi* glutinous rice cake, approx. 50 g / 1.8 oz.
- 2 t vegetable oil or more
- 8 cm- / 3 in.- long piece of daikon, peeled and cut into 8 rounds
- 2 t Kikkoman Soy Sauce or more to taste
- *Shichimi-togarashi* seven-spice chili pepper or cayenne pepper
- Fresh thyme, or other preferred fresh herb
- 2-3 green onion stalks, finely chopped
- Total 50 g / 1.8 oz. shredded semi-hard cheese, e.g. gouda or cheddar
- 3 pimiento-stuffed olives, each sliced into thirds

1 To prepare *mochi*, cut in half and then into thin slices.

2 Heat vegetable oil in a frying pan over low to medium heat, add slices of daikon and cook until lightly browned on both sides. Turn off heat. Using paper towels, pat oil from the daikon and wipe excess oil from the pan.

3 Sprinkle 1 t soy sauce over the daikon; warm again over low heat and turn slices over, then sprinkle with the remaining 1 t soy sauce. Turn off the heat and turn the slices over again to coat evenly with soy sauce.

4 Sprinkle the daikon with a pinch of *shichimi-togarashi*; add a pinch of fresh thyme.

5 Lay out daikon slices in a dish lined with baking paper. Place three or four *mochi* slices atop each grilled daikon.

6 Grill in a toaster oven or broiler* at medium heat until the *mochi* becomes slightly puffed. Remove pan to add green onions and cheese, then continue to grill until the cheese melts.

7 Garnish with a slice of olive on top of each canapé.

* A microwave oven may be used for Step 6 with a microwave-safe dish. The method remains the same.



Recipe by Michiko Yamamoto

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



CHIKUZEN-NI SIMMERED CHICKEN AND VEGETABLES

This traditional recipe refers to an old name for northern Fukuoka Prefecture in Kyushu. Unlike typical simmered dishes, the ingredients in *Chikuzen-ni*—literally, “a simmered dish from Chikuzen”—are sautéed prior to simmering in dashi stock.



◆ Dried shiitake

Serves 4-5

260 kcal Protein 11.6 g Fat 12.3 g (per person)

- 4 dried shiitake mushrooms*
- 1 boneless chicken thigh, 250 g / 9 oz.
- 2 t Kikkoman Soy Sauce
- 2 t sake
- Burdock root 100 g / 3.5 oz.
- Lotus root 150 g / 5 oz.
- Carrot 100 g / 3.5 oz.
- 1 block of konjac, 200 g / 7 oz.
- 6 snow peas
- 1T vegetable oil

Seasonings

- 480 + 120 ml / 2 + 1/2 C dashi stock
- 3 T granulated sugar
- 4 T Kikkoman Soy Sauce
- 2 T sake
- 2 T Kikkoman Manjo Mirin

- 1 Several hours prior to cooking, soak dried shiitake mushrooms in water and then drain, cut off stems and cut into halves.
- 2 Remove fat from chicken and cut into bite sizes. Marinate in 2 t soy sauce and 2 t sake for 10 minutes.
- 3 Scrape off outer skin of the burdock root using the blunt edge of a knife; peel the lotus root and the carrot. Cut each of the vegetables into chunks. Then soak the burdock and lotus in separate bowls of water for 10 minutes.
- 4 Cut the konjac into 8 mm- / 0.3 in.- thick slices, then make a slit down the center of each slice (photo 1). Insert one end of the konjac into its center cut (photo 2) to make the classic *tazuna-konnyaku*** twist (photo 3). Parboil the konjac and then drain. String the peas and parboil with a pinch of salt, then set aside.
- 5 Heat vegetable oil in a pot over medium heat, and sauté the marinated chicken until it turns slightly white; add the drained burdock and lotus, carrot, konjac and shiitake. Cook together until all are coated with oil.
- 6 Add 2 C dashi stock to the pot and bring to a boil, then return to medium heat. Skim foam from the top, cover with a drop-lid or parchment paper and simmer for 10 minutes. If dashi becomes dramatically reduced, add another 1/2 C dashi.
- 7 Add granulated sugar and cover again to simmer for 3 minutes. Add soy sauce and sake, cover and simmer until broth is reduced to one-third. Add the mirin and stir a few times while simmering to make sure the ingredients are coated completely.
- 8 Serve garnished with snow peas in a bowl.



* Japan has many varieties of dried shiitake mushrooms; of these, the fleshy-capped *donko* are the highest quality.

** This is a traditional decorative twist in Japanese cuisine. The literal meaning of *tazuna* is “reins.”



Kikkoman *Washoku* Initiative Part 2: In Praise of Japanese Cuisine

In September 2014, Kikkoman sponsored a panel discussion in Tokyo titled “Praising the Appeal of Japanese Cuisine: *Washoku* is Wonderful! Part 2” with four young chefs of Japanese cuisine. These same chefs participated in a *washoku* panel discussion last year, and included Mr. Takuji Takahashi of Kinobu; Mr. Hisato Nakahigashi of Miyamasou; Mr. Yoshihiro Takahashi of Hyotei; and Mr. Naoyuki Yanagihara of Kinsaryu Yanagihara School of Traditional Japanese Cuisine. Their lively discussion was led by coordinator Mr. Hitoshi Kakizawa, who also moderated last year’s event. An attentive audience of over 300 attended.

As *washoku* Japanese cuisine continues to gain attention around the world, the number of Japanese restaurants worldwide is increasing steadily. This growth has been fueled by the greater availability and stable quality of Japanese ingredients, thanks to an improved, reliable global food distribution system. The quality of overseas *washoku* continues to advance as more people enjoy it.



Kikkoman’s *washoku* panel discussion

Kikkoman’s panel discussion provided a forum for these young chefs to discuss the appeal of *washoku* from an international point of view. Based on both international and domestic experiences, the panelists examined the appeal of *washoku* from the viewpoint of a chef. Some of the points they covered included techniques for cutting ingredients into various shapes according to type of dish; the importance of the freshness of fish and how to handle it;

and, in the final visual presentation of *washoku* dishes, how to achieve the apparent effortless that belies the labor-intensive preparations behind this complex cuisine. The appeal of *washoku* was another point of discussion, and the chefs touched upon its “various fresh ingredients, its use of natural tastes,” and its “emphasis on the beauty of nature in presentation.” These points were also noted by UNESCO in its designation of “*washoku* traditional dietary cultures of the Japanese” as an Intangible Cultural Heritage. This discussion, with its global point of view, provided an excellent opportunity for those in the audience to rediscover and more fully appreciate the appeal of their country’s traditional cuisine.

Kikkoman is committed to promoting the international exchange of food cultures as part of its management philosophy. Through activities like this one, the company supports the tradition of Japanese food culture by communicating its appeal both domestically and internationally, and so contributes to a richer global food culture. ◆



From left: H. Kakizawa, T. Takahashi, H. Nakahigashi, Kikkoman President and CEO N. Horikiri, Y. Takahashi and N. Yanagihara.