

food forum

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THE JAPANESE TABLE

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Sushi

Regional Varieties and Traditions

This second installment in our series on sushi focuses on its diverse regional variations and long associations with ritual and celebration.

—
by Terutoshi Hibino

Hinamatsuri gomoku chirashi-zushi

The word “sushi” is said to have derived from the Japanese word for “sour.” The earliest type of sushi was made by souring fish and rice through fermentation; eventually, vinegar came to be mixed with rice, and this became the mainstream method for attaining the characteristic sour taste of sushi. For many, sushi is synonymous with *nigiri-zushi*: vinegared sushi rice topped with seafood. In fact, sushi styles and techniques vary by region. Not only can it be shaped by hand into *nigiri-zushi*, it can be pressed into molds, formed into rolls or mixed with rice and other ingredients that may include regional specialties—anything from raw fish to vegetables to pre-prepared dried products. It is tradition in Japan to serve special sushi on celebratory occasions such as religious and seasonal events and during ceremonies and festivals.

Ritual and tradition

In ancient times, special foods were prepared as offerings to the deities. Following rituals, these

foods would be removed from the altar and shared among those involved. In many regions, sushi has long been regarded as one such offering. At Miwa Shrine in Shiga Prefecture, for example, a ritual offering of fermented loach and catfish sushi continues to be a strictly prescribed local tradition, as is whole-fish Japanese barracuda *sugata-zushi*, offered at Shimakatsu Shrine in Mie Prefecture. Because these particular types of sushi are crucial elements in shrine rituals, they are more likely to be perpetuated for as long as those rituals are practiced in their respective communities.

Apart from rituals, various region-specific sushi dishes are traditionally prepared for annual festivities. During the New Year in Hokkaido and the Tohoku and Hokuriku regions along the Sea of Japan, it is customary to prepare particular types of preserved sushi called *izushi*, made by fermenting local fish with rice, rice *koji* and vegetables. In Kochi Prefecture, *sawachi*-style platters of assorted delicacies, which include

various types of regional sushi, are common during similar festive occasions. The western part of the country boasts the most varieties of sushi made at home, including the “scattered” or rolled types, as well as *inari-zushi* (sushi rice stuffed in deep-fried tofu pouches). Also popular in western Japan are pressed sushi such as box-pressed *hako-zushi* and rectangle-shaped *bo-zushi* formed using a leaf wrap. These, like most regional sushi, showcase local seasonal fish.

Nationally recognized favorites

These days, the only traditional celebrations where sushi preparation is de rigueur throughout Japan are probably the *Hinamatsuri* doll festival in



Izushi, Hokkaido

March and *Setsubun*, a ritual in February to mark the last day of winter on the lunar calendar. For *Hinamatsuri*, also called Girls' Day, a dish called *chirashi-zushi* ("scattered sushi") is served; on *Setsubun*, the signature dish is *ehomaki* thick sushi rolls, eaten uncut to bring good fortune. The origins of these customs are regional in nature: *chirashi-zushi* is said to have originated in eastern Gifu and northeastern Aichi prefectures, while *ehomaki* may have sprung from the Hanshin Osaka-Kobe area. In recent years, these two customs have become commercialized throughout the entire country.

Some longtime regional favorites marketed as souvenirs have become well-known and popular nationwide. There are those named after cities, including *Iwakuni-zushi* from Yamaguchi Prefecture and *Omura-zushi* from Nagasaki Prefecture, both large box-pressed sushi. Others are sold year-round as regional delicacies, among them *bara-zushi*, a scattered-sushi mixed with ingredients from the Bizen region in Okayama Prefecture. Another is box-pressed *kakinoha-zushi* from the Nara area, which features fish on sushi rice wrapped in persimmon leaves. Both *kakinoha-zushi* and *bara-zushi* can trace their origins as festive foods once enjoyed for celebrations.

Cultural heritage

Regional sushi dishes are deeply rooted in their regions, and are commonly shared at large gatherings among families and communities. Their unique traditions and preparation methods have been passed down and sustained from generation to generation. Nevertheless, some of

these sushi dishes are in fact facing some challenges as to whether or not they will be carried on into the future. They often require intensive preparation, and modern households may find it difficult to spare the time. Local festivals and traditional events in Japan have changed drastically in recent years, and some are noticeably less lively and enthusiastic. While



Saba mackerel bo-zushi



Kakinoha-zushi, Nara Prefecture



Inari-zushi

some community efforts do exist that aim to protect these culinary traditions, it can arguably be claimed that region-specific sushi has become something of an intangible cultural heritage.

Personal celebrations

Today it is commonly observed that many of the distinctive foods usually consumed on traditional occasions are being simplified, purchased or catered, rather than made at home—

and sushi is no exception. At the same time, we see a trend where younger generations are enjoying casual, more creative dishes, including sushi made for personal celebrations. One popular choice for home parties, for example, is *temaki-zushi*, where participants wrap sushi rice and their favorite fillings in sheets of *nori* seaweed right at the table.

At wedding receptions and anniversaries, people prepare the celebrants' favorite type of sushi, or order special sushi platters from restaurants. Consequently, the role of sushi is expanding from being a general indicator of regional identity to a dish that also emphasizes individuality.

Ultimately, sushi remains a much-loved part of the Japanese diet. Ingredients and styles may change, and its role may be evolving, but whatever its form, whatever the occasion, sushi evokes a comforting sense of warmth, connection and harmony. ◆

On the cover *Uni* sea urchin, featured in *Spirit of the Seasons*, page 5; and *Iwakuni-zushi*, Yamaguchi Prefecture.

Author's profile

Terutoshi Hibino was born in 1960 in Gifu Prefecture. He received his BA and MA degrees from Nagoya University, and his PhD in Japanese Culture from Aichi University. He is currently professor at Aichi Shukutoku University and honorary chairman of the Shimizu Sushi Museum (Shizuoka). His publications include *Sushi no Kao* (Portraits of sushi; 1997); *Sushi no Rekishi o Tazuneru* (Following the history of sushi; 1999); and *Sushi no Jiten* (Encyclopedia of sushi; 2015).

Bento Boxes

Japanese bento are a modern global phenomenon, winning over foodies and Japanophiles alike. They are specifically designed to present small portions of assorted foods in a pleasing balance of color, nutrition and flavor. With their nearly 1,000-year history, bento box containers are as uniquely functional—and as attractive—as they have ever been.

Bento boxes range from petite sizes for youngsters (which often feature popular anime characters), to larger-capacity two-tiered styles, to streamlined designs that fit neatly into a business briefcase. There is a bento box for every taste, age and occasion, and they are ideal for carrying food to school, while traveling, for work or on outings. There are insulated bento boxes that keep food warm, while high-tech versions can cook up fresh warm rice directly inside the box. In the face of so many options, however, there has been a notable resurgence of Japan's venerable, centuries-old *magewappa* bento boxes.

Traditional *magewappa* are round or oval wooden bento boxes

individually handcrafted using techniques developed in the sixth century. Their curved circular shape involves a single thin sheet of cypress, cedar or *hiba* (a variety of cypress), whose ends are joined with narrow strips of wild cherry or white birch bark. *Magewappa* may be unvarnished or lacquered, and not only are they lovely to look at, their appeal also lies in the smooth texture, warmth and fragrance of the natural wood. *Magewappa* are highly practical in that they are lightweight, while the wood absorbs excess moisture from the rice, which extends its freshness. Some even claim that rice kept in a *magewappa* tastes better when cold.

Another traditional container is the *shidashi* bento box, which traces its origins to elaborate *kaiseki* cuisine prepared by professional caterers and restaurants.

There is a bento box for every taste, age and occasion



Shokado bento

The foremost example of the *shidashi* bento box is the lacquered *shokado bento*, named after prominent artist and monk Shokado Shoji (1582-1639), who famously used compartmented tobacco trays. The eponymous *shokado bento* box was created in his honor: it is a lidded, deep square box with four compartments. Fitted into each section are exquisite dishes of artistically arranged food—thus diners may admire a harmonious culinary presentation complemented by the aesthetic of the box itself. ■



Classic *magewappa* and contemporary bento boxes

Grating

Our focus on Japanese culinary methods continues with grating.

Grating is an essential Japanese cooking technique that not only elicits umami and other flavors from vegetables and fruits, it breaks down their cell membranes so that enzymes and nutrients may be digested efficiently. There are a variety of graters used in Japan to produce characteristic shreds and grates suitable for different dishes. ●

Standard graters

Most Japanese households have at least one of these made of metal, plastic or ceramic. They come in various forms and produce a moist, fluffy texture most typically seen in *daikon oroshi*, grated daikon. *Daikon oroshi* is often served as a raw condiment seasoned with soy sauce to accompany grilled fish and other foods. It is also added to tempura dipping sauce and used in various sauces and dressings. *Daikon oroshi* can be cooked with meat or fish to make a range of simmered dishes called *oroshi-ni*.



Graters

Oni-oroshi

The *oni-oroshi* is used for the very coarse grating of vegetables while preserving their crispy texture, aroma and rich dietary fiber. The name *oni-oroshi* refers to its large blades of bamboo, which suggest the teeth of an ogre (*oni*).



Grating daikon with *oni-oroshi*

Condiment graters

These small graters have very fine teeth that bring out the innate flavor, spiciness and scent of ingredients such as wasabi, ginger and garlic for use as condiments. Most are made of ceramic or copper, but the distinctive sharkskin grater is uniquely intended for wasabi: rubbing wasabi root slowly and gently in circles creates a fine, fragrant and creamy texture.



Grating wasabi with sharkskin grater



Hamburg steak with *daikon oroshi*

Uni Sea Urchin

雲丹



Ichigoni soup

Featured on our cover are *uni* sea urchins, esteemed worldwide for their briny umami and creamy sweetness. Remnants of *uni* shells have been unearthed in ancient shell middens in Japan, suggesting they were consumed here as long as 5,000 years ago. Over one hundred species of *uni* (pronounced *oo-nee*) live in the seas surrounding Japan, but only about five species are consumed here, each of which is unique in size, color and taste. *Uni* are harvested throughout the year, primarily in the Hokkaido and Tohoku regions, but they are most flavorful during spring and summer.

Rich in essential fatty acids, fresh *uni* are premium ingredients in sushi and seafood rice bowls, but they are also cooked with rice and made into sauces for pasta. One well-known local delicacy from Aomori Prefecture in the Tohoku region is *ichigoni* soup, consisting of *uni* and abalone in a milky seafood broth. *Ichigoni*, which means "simmered strawberry," is a poetic reference to plump *uni* in the soup which evokes the image of wild strawberries (*ichigo*) in the morning mist. ●

Wedge Salad with Curry-Soy Sauce Dressing

Serves 3-4

524 kcal Protein 6.1 g Fat 37.9 g
(per serving)

Dressing

- 1/2 medium apple, peeled, cored, grated and strained for total 90 ml / 3/8 C
- 1 t lemon juice
- 1 1/2 T Kikkoman Soy Sauce
- 1 T grated ginger
- 1/2 t curry powder
- 200 ml / 5/6 C mayonnaise
- 1-2 t honey, optional

Wedge salad

- Iceberg lettuce, cut into small wedges
- Boiled potatoes, peeled and cut in round slices
- Boiled kidney beans
- Boiled garbanzo beans (chickpeas)
- Boiled green beans, cut in bite-sized pieces
- Cherry tomatoes
- Avocado, sliced
- Raisins

1 Grate the peeled and cored apple* into a bowl, add the lemon juice and mix. Place the grated apple in a fine strainer and drain slightly for 1 to 2 minutes without pressing. Set the juice aside.

2 Spoon the grated apple into a bowl with the remaining dressing ingredients, except for the honey. Mix well using a whisk.

3 Adjust the thickness of the dressing: if too thick, add the strained juice from Step 1; if too thin, add mayonnaise. To adjust the flavor, add more curry powder and/or honey, depending on taste preferences.

4 To serve the salads, arrange the lettuce wedges on individual plates. Alongside the wedges, portion out the potatoes, beans, cherry tomatoes and avocado. Sprinkle raisins on top, drizzle with the dressing and serve with extra dressing on the side.

* Here, the apple is grated using a Japanese grater. See Fundamentals 101 on page 5 for more about Japanese graters.

Recipe by Michiko Yamamoto



Soy sauce connects all dressing ingredients, brings out the spiciness and distinctive aromas of curry powder and ginger, and adds depth to the overall flavor. The texture of fresh grated apple defines this enjoyable fusion dressing.



Oroshi-ni is a common Japanese dish made by adding grated daikon to a simmering sauce. The addition of the daikon allows the sauce to cling well, and adds a mild, refreshing taste to the dish.

Chicken *Oroshi-ni* Simmered with Grated Daikon

Serves 2-3

318 kcal Protein 17.8 g Fat 17.3 g
(per serving)

- Daikon, 300 g / 11 oz.
- Boneless chicken thighs with skin, 350 g / 12 oz.
- 1 t Kikkoman Soy Sauce
- 1 t sake
- 1 T cornstarch

Simmering sauce

- 1/2 t dried red chili pepper, chopped, seeds removed
- 3 T Kikkoman Soy Sauce
- 3 T Kikkoman Manjo Mirin
- 2 t granulated sugar
- 300 ml / 1 ¼ C dashi stock
- 2-3 T vegetable or canola oil
- Chopped green onion for garnish

1 Grate the daikon* and set aside in a strainer to drain for 5 minutes to make a total of 1 cup drained grated daikon (see photo).



2 Remove fat from the chicken and cut into bite-sized pieces about 2.5 cm / 1 in. In a bowl, coat the meat with soy sauce and sake and leave for 5 minutes, then sprinkle with the cornstarch.

3 Place the simmering sauce ingredients in a saucepan and heat over medium heat. Just before coming to a boil, reduce heat to low and maintain a constant simmer.

4 Add the oil to a frying pan and heat over medium heat. Add the chicken and cook both sides until done. Take out the chicken pieces and place into the simmering sauce, then bring to a boil over medium heat.

5 Add the grated daikon to the saucepan and heat for about 1 minute or until the sauce warms, then turn off the heat.

6 Place the chicken on a serving dish and spoon the sauce over it. Garnish with chopped green onion.

* The daikon in this recipe is grated using a Japanese grater. See page 5.

Recipe by Kikkoman Corporation

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



Kikkoman Global Cookbook Webpage

New feature articles, enhanced search functions

The Kikkoman global website recently updated its *Global Cookbook* page, where users can explore delicious, easy-to-make recipes—including healthy, low-sodium options—made using Kikkoman Soy Sauce. Below are the enhanced new features of the webpage.

Global
Cookbook



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

Recipe of the Day

Planning a meal? Looking for easy recipes?

The *Global Cookbook* top page features Kikkoman's recommendations for delectable main and side dishes, updated daily and sure to please. Liven up your menu with appetizing recipes!

Featured Contents

Home cooks can explore popular Japanese dishes, along with cooking tips and fun facts about global cuisine. These features include a deep-dive into cooking variations on a single theme, called "Three Dishes." Recent articles include:

• *Gyudon*: A Guide to Japan's Tasty Fast Food!

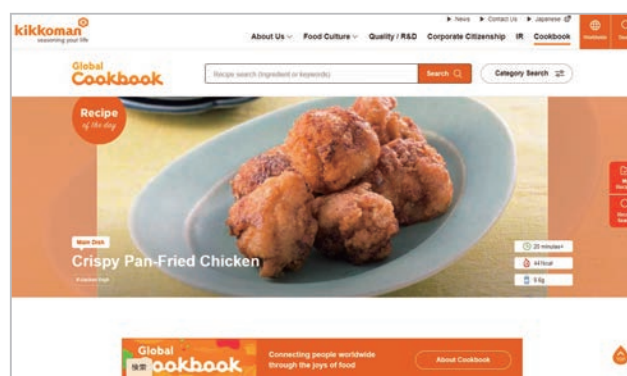
Tips on making savory *gyudon* beef bowl with explanations about the ingredients, preparation techniques and seasonings unique to Japan.

• Add Spices and Umami to Vegetarian Cuisine!

A tempting selection of vegetarian dishes from Southeast and South Asia, made extra-flavorful with spices and Kikkoman Soy Sauce.

• 3 Chicken Dishes with Different Textures in Under 20 Minutes!

Presenting three chicken recipes that use three different cooking methods: fried, sautéed and grilled. What better way to expand your culinary repertoire? Also featured are three picnic dishes, three shrimp dishes, three rice dishes... and many more. The possibilities are endless!



Enhanced Search Functions

Do a refined search for any recipe via the site's newly improved search functions. Enter key words, ingredients, methods or cooking time. Narrow searches by dietary lifestyle, such as vegan or vegetarian, or select from eight recipe themes: Easy; Health and Diet; Food Culture; *Washoku*: Japanese Cooking; Sustainable; Seasonal; Main Flavor; and By Ingredient. Every recipe includes hashtag links to related dishes—add favorites to your My Recipes list! ◆

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