food forum

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THE JAPANESE TABLE

Japanese Tableware
Pottery and Porcelain

by Akiyoshi Hatanaka

kikkoman

Japanese Tableware

Pottery and Porcelain

This year's Feature series explores Japanese tableware, beginning with the history of pottery and porcelain, and how they enrich the culinary experience.

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by Akiyoshi Hatanaka

Kenzan *Mukozuke* with Tatsutagawa Design (Kenzan ware Kyoto 18th C)
Photo by Gozen Koshida

A defining feature of the relationship between Japanese food and the tableware it is served on is their complementary nature. While the food itself is the main focus of a meal, in contemporary Japanese culinary culture, the vessels used to serve that food are regarded as more than mere receptacles: they play a remarkable supporting role in elevating our food experience, in much the same way that we humans wear clothing to enhance our appearance. In other words, not only the food, but the vessel itself becomes an object of appreciation by the diner.

Pottery history

The history of Japanese pottery extends back some ten thousand years. Following on the prehistoric earthenware eras of the Jomon (ca. 13,000-400 BCE), Yayoi (ca. 400 BCE-300 CE) and Kofun (ca. 200-600 CE) periods, people began to produce pottery called Sue ware around the fifth century. Fired at temperatures of 1,100°C or more, this was a hard, unglazed gray stoneware used to make jars and sake flasks. During the eighth century, China-influenced glazed pottery and three-color wares *(sansai)* began to be fired in Japan.

The influence of China's advanced pottery production technology remained significant even into the ninth century. Imported Chinese wares were held in the highest regard by court nobility, as well as by influential temples and shrines. The next-best alternative, supplied to the aristocracy and places of worship, was *shirashi*—pottery with a grayish-white base complemented by greenish-yellow ash glaze. *Shirashi* was produced in what is present-day Aichi Prefecture by the Sanage kilns, which had carried on the traditions of Sue ware.

Kiln centers

In the twelfth century, following the epoch-making transition from rule by the court aristocracy to government under the warrior elite, six major kiln centers referred to as the Six Ancient Kilns of Japan—Tokoname, Seto, Tamba, Shigaraki, Echizen and Bizen—began to fire large numbers of jars and mortars that were distributed throughout the country and utilized by common people. Among these kilns, only Seto produced glazed ware and catered to the aristocracy and to temples. During the medieval era, from the late twelfth to sixteenth centuries, high-fired, unglazed stoneware *(yakishime)* became the predominant type of pottery. These six kiln sites were not the sole producers, however; there existed over eighty small-scale kilns operating around the country supplying local needs.

New types of pottery emerged during the turbulent period of warlord rivalries in the sixteenth century, during which the art of the tea ceremony flourished. Momoyama tea wares, which include Kiseto, Shino and Oribe wares, were in high demand during the Momoyama period (1568-1615). Works from other kilns in

Parboiled *hamo* pike conger, okra and *ume* plum paste on Cutaway Oribe *Mukozuke* (17th C)
Photo by Gozen Koshida

western Japan, including Iga, Bizen and Karatsu, were also coveted by tea connoisseurs. Following Japan's Korean invasion campaigns in the 1590s, prominent kilns sprang up in Japan's southern island of Kyushu which produced Korean-influenced ware and tea pottery. Momoyama pottery pieces center around tea utensils and household tableware and they are, with their idiosyncratic shapes, glazes and decorations, considered the finest wares produced in the history of Japanese pottery and porcelain.

Porcelain

Japan's first porcelain ceramics, Imari and Nabeshima wares, appeared in northern Kyushu during the seventeenth century. Around that same time, pottery began to be made in the old capital of Kyoto as well. Developments in Kyoto ware eventually led to the production of colorful food vessels, exemplified by the works of master artisans Nonomura Ninsei (ca. 17th C) and Ogata Kenzan (1663-1743).

During the nineteenth century, pottery-making began to flourish as never before. Lords of domains around the country developed their own wares *(oniwa-yaki)*, and rural areas established kilns that fired vessels for their communities. These developments led to the widespread use of pottery for tableware that gradually replaced lacquerware, which had previously accounted for most tableware. As Japan's food culture matured, diverse variations emerged that have been passed down to contemporary times.

Serving appreciation

The relationship between Japanese cuisine and its vessels attained its present state by building on pottery and porcelain traditions cultivated over centuries. The result is an inseparable union, wherein diners enjoy food while admiring the ware it is served upon. Perhaps a significant example of this relationship can be experienced through the works of the master craftsman Ogata Kenzan. One of his most acclaimed works is a set of ten overglaze enamel *mukozuke* dishes—small shallow dishes often used to serve traditional Japanese *kaiseki* cuisine. This set, titled "Kenzan *Mukozuke* with Tatsutagawa Design," features motifs of the Tatsuta River, and is discussed in *Hocho Yowa*,[1] a collection of essays by prominent *washoku* chef Kaichi Tsuji (1907-1988). Chef Tsuji was the second-generation proprietor of the restaurant Tsujitome, and was known for his *kaiseki* cuisine served at tea gatherings.

Porcelain Bowl with Water Fowl in Lotus Pond Design
(China 17th C)

Sea bream sashimi, rock tripe and wasabi served on Kenzan *Mukozuke* with Tatsutagawa Design (Kenzan ware)
Photo by Gozen Koshida

In one of these essays, Tsuji describes his reaction when asked to use Kenzan's celebrated Tatsutagawa set at a late-autumn tea gathering. The chef, overwhelmed by their decorative beauty, is concerned that the dishes are too ornamental for serving food, and struggles to decide what to serve on them. Yet on the day of the gathering, after arranging the food on the dishes, he perceives an exquisite harmony between them. This humbling experience allows the chef to recognize the true greatness of Kenzan's artistry, one which is rooted not only in brushstrokes, but in a deep understanding of the Japanese *wabi-sabi* aesthetic. Tsuji describes the affinity between the food and the *mukozuke* dishes: it seems as if the curvature of the dishes matches and welcomes the shape of folded sea bream sashimi garnished with chrysanthemum and rock tripe, while the black of the rock tripe unifies the composition. One can appreciate Tsuji's wonder as Kenzan's dishes reveal an impressive capacity to embrace the food that is served.

Many of Kenzan's pieces incorporate classical literary themes, perhaps reflecting the upbringing and lineage of the Ogata family and the culture of Kyoto. This thematic imagery is expressed in his Tatsutagawa *mukozuke*: their maple leaf and flowing-water motif, seemingly a straightforward evocation of autumn, conceals refined sensibility and cultivation. If they should notice that the design represents the Tatsuta River, famed for its autumn maples, and recall even a single piece of classical poetry related to that site, the tea gathering will almost certainly be enlivened by spirited conversation. Such is the nature of Kenzan's work: endlessly profound, revealing greater depths the more one learns about it.

[1] "Kitchen knife anecdotes," Tokyo: Nikkei Inc., 1974.

On the cover *Biwa,* featured in Spirit of the Seasons, page 5; and whiting sashimi with *shiso* flower buds, rock tripe and wasabi on Willow Design *Mukozuke* with Foliate Rim (Karatsu ware 17th C) *Photo by Gozen Koshida*

Author's profile
Akiyoshi Hatanaka, born in 1959, specializes in pottery, porcelain and tea utensils. Formerly head curator at MIHO MUSEUM in Shiga Prefecture from 2017 until 2025, he currently serves as a specially appointed curator to the museum. In addition to curating special exhibitions of Ogata Kenzan, he established the museum's collaborative school program over two decades ago, which continues to provide students with opportunities to experience authentic works of art today.

Gumi Candy

Gummy chewy candy originated in Germany in the 1920s, and was first introduced to Japan in the 1980s, where it was marketed as *gumi*. Although gummy candy has long had a tasty reputation in this country, only in the past decade has the domestic *gumi* market exploded: current sales of *gumi* now surpass chewing gum, and it is one of the fastest-growing categories among snacks in Japan. Furthermore, as Japanese confectioners craft products that tempt not only youngsters but adults, this broad appeal—supported by a strong cultural reputation for quality, presentation and innovation—has made Japan's *gumi* wildly popular worldwide.

Gummies fundamentally consist of fruit or other flavorings added to gelatin and sugars, but Japanese candy manufacturers continually experiment and expand on this simple concept to produce novel *gumi* flavors, shapes and textures. There are apparently no limits to the possibilities: there are juicy, natural-tasting *gumi* that resemble real fruit, visually and taste-wise, while others are fusions of bitter and sweet, like matcha-chocolate. *Gumi* inspired by *wagashi* traditional Japanese confectionery include *mitarashi dango* (rice dumplings with sweet soy sauce glaze), and there are seasonal offerings like autumn muscat grape and spring sakura infusions.

Gumi shapes can be surprising, ranging from basic round or square to long and flat, like noodles, and character-shaped gummies win over anime and manga fans—some even glow in the dark. Texture-wise, most *gumi* are elastic, chewy and soft, but now-popular "hard-type" gummies offer up a mouthfeel of firm plus chewy in a single bite. One can enjoy *gumi* with powder coatings that introduce a crunch followed by chewy filling; others may prefer a crisp chocolate-coated gummy—and for any *gumi*-lovers who might be health-conscious, *gumi* supplemented with vitamins, proteins or collagen present nutritious options.

Gumi *are popular worldwide*

Social media clearly plays a large role in burgeoning *gumi* demand by highlighting aspects like quirky off-beat flavors, choice ingredients and cute limited-edition series—often backed by videos that feature gummy-chewing sounds. Given their robust social media presence, fresh realistic flavors, clever shapes and unexpected textures, it's unsurprising that *gumi* are sought-after souvenirs by overseas visitors. The offbeat appeal of Japanese *gumi* offers those from other cultures a memorable way to connect with the taste and spirit of Japan.

A tempting variety of *gumi* colors, shapes and flavors

An Sweet Paste

This year, Fundamentals 101 introduces the essentials of wagashi *traditional Japanese confectionery. We begin with* an *sweet paste, a quintessential element of sweetness used in* wagashi.

Wagashi are made using distinctive natural Japanese ingredients, and are unique in their gentle sweetness, seasonal symbolism and elegant presentation. *An* generally refers to various smooth pastes made from boiled beans, sweet potatoes or chestnuts sweetened with sugar, and is indispensable in making many types of *wagashi*. The focus here is on the most commonly used *azuki-an* red bean paste and *shiro-an* white kidney bean paste.

Dorayaki

Nerikiri

Azuki-an

Considered the "classic" *an*, *azuki-an* is made by gently simmering azuki red beans until soft and then sweetening with sugar to use as filling for various *wagashi*, including *dorayaki*, *daifuku* and *manju* buns. There are two types of *azuki-an*, the first of which is *tsubu-an*, prepared by coarsely mashing the beans without removing their skins to produce a chunky paste. This method preserves the full depth of the natural azuki bean flavor, characterized by concentrated umami, a slight astringency and a distinctive aroma. The second type is *koshi-an*, made by pressing and straining boiled azuki beans to remove their outer skins before adding sugar. This paste is then kneaded until smooth. *Koshi-an* is prized for its silky texture and refined sweetness of the beans.

Azuki red beans, *tsubu-an* (below) and *koshi-an*

Shiro-an

Made with boiled white kidney beans or white azuki beans, *shiro-an* is a smooth white paste. The softened beans are strained and sweetened with sugar. Because of its pale color, *shiro-an* can be tinted with natural colorings, such as matcha, to produce delicate hues. With a mild sweetness and velvety texture, *shiro-an* enhances and complements the flavors of its fellow ingredients. *Shiro-an* is used in *manju* buns, *yokan* and *monaka*, to name a few examples. It is also a key component of *nerikiri*, a classic form of artistic *wagashi* known for expressing seasonal changes and nature. *Nerikiri* are among the traditional *wagashi* served during the tea ceremony.

White kidney beans and *shiro-an*

Biwa

枇杷

Sliced loquat

Loquat fruit, pictured on the cover, is called *biwa* in Japanese. The oval-shaped golden *biwa* is a juicy sweet-tasting stone fruit complemented by a delicate yet refreshing tartness. The *biwa* is mentioned in eighth-century Japanese records, but today's most widely cultivated *biwa* variety, the Mogi, likely originated from seeds brought from China to Nagasaki Prefecture in the 1830s.

Loquat trees blossom in winter and the fruit matures from May to June. Nagasaki and Chiba prefectures, with their warm climates and relatively dry summers, produce high quality loquats: the Nagasaki Mogi is prized for its elegant aroma and mild acidity, while Chiba's juicy Boshu *biwa* is larger in size. Rich in dietary fiber and nutrients such as beta-carotene and potassium, loquats are delicate and require labor-intensive cultivation; this extra care classifies them as a premium fruit which is often used in formal Japanese gift-giving. As such, *biwa* have been presented as a seasonal gift to the Imperial Household for over a century.

The fruit can be enjoyed peeled and eaten fresh, served in a refreshing jelly, or prepared as jam. Japanese *biwa-cha* tea, made of loquat leaves, contains potent antioxidants, and has long been considered beneficial in supporting overall health.

Meatloaf with Sukiyaki Vegetable Topping

Serves 4
476 kcal
Protein 29.1 g
Fat 28.9 g
(per serving)

- 1 t + 1/2 T vegetable oil
- 100 g / 3.5 oz. onion, finely chopped
- 450-480 g / approx. 1 lb. ground meat*
- 2 T tomato paste
- 2 T Kikkoman Soy Sauce
- 1/2 t ground cumin
- Coarse ground black pepper
- 1 C bread cubes from trimmed crusty loaf; cubes cut 5 mm / 0.2 in.
- 2 medium eggs, beaten

- Butter

***Warishita* sukiyaki seasoning**
- 4 T Kikkoman Soy Sauce
- 4 T Kikkoman Manjo Mirin**
- 4 T water
- 2 T granulated sugar

Sukiyaki vegetable topping
- 1 t vegetable oil
- 200 g / 7 oz. onion, cut in half lengthwise and sliced
- 4 medium shiitake mushrooms, total 60 g / 2 oz., thinly sliced
- 40 g / 1.4 oz. enoki mushrooms, bottoms trimmed, cut in half-length
- Several watercress sprigs; separate tender stems with leaves from thick stems

Meatloaf is a home-style comfort food in the West. This recipe involves baking pre-cooked meat in a loaf pan. Topped with vegetables simmered in Japanese warishita *sukiyaki seasoning, this dish offers up a new and distinctive fusion taste experience.*

1 To prepare the meatloaf, sauté chopped onion in a frying pan in 1 t vegetable oil over low heat. Cook until translucent, then remove from pan. In the same pan, add 1/2 T vegetable oil and sauté the ground meat over high heat until color changes. Reduce heat to low, add the sautéed onion and mix well. Add tomato paste and soy sauce, mixing completely with the meat. Season with cumin and black pepper. Turn off heat. (1)

2 Add bread cubes to the meat mix in the frying pan and stir until well blended. (2)

3 Add beaten eggs into this mixture and blend thoroughly. (3)

4 Prepare 2 mini loaf pans (16 x 7 x 6 cm / 6.3 x 2.8 x 2.4 in.) and grease with butter. Line the bottom of each with a strip of foil wide enough to cover the base and extend up one side for easy removal after baking. Grease the foil with butter. Divide the meat mixture evenly into both pans, pressing on the meat with a spoon to smooth the surface and release any trapped air. (4) Bake in a preheated 180°C / 356°F oven for about 25 minutes, or until meatloaf surface springs back when lightly pressed. Rest both loaves before removing. Place on a plate with bottom sides facing up.

5 To prepare sukiyaki vegetable topping, first mix the *warishita* seasoning ingredients and set aside. Heat 1 t oil in a pan to sauté the onion over medium heat until transparent. Add and sauté the shiitake until soft. Pour in the sukiyaki seasoning and mix over high heat. Add the enoki mushrooms and 1/3 of the tender watercress stems; stir until sauce is slightly thickened. (5) Spoon sukiyaki vegetable topping and sauce over both loaves. Garnish with remaining fresh watercress.

* This recipe uses beef/pork mix at 1:1 ratio.
** If mirin is unavailable, substitute with 4 T sake + 2 T granulated sugar.

Recipe by Michiko Yamamoto

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

Warishita *sukiyaki seasoning*

Sukiyaki has two preparation styles: In Japan's western Kansai region, meat is seared and seasoned before simmering; in eastern Kanto, meat and vegetables are simmered together in *warishita*, a liquid seasoning blend of soy sauce, mirin, sake and sugar.

Discover Kikkoman #3

Teppanyaki Colza

"Discover Kikkoman" as Kikona, Kikkoman's official brand mascot, visits the restaurant Teppanyaki Colza in Ginza.

Having operated restaurants in Tokyo for fifty years, Kikkoman relaunched its Teppanyaki Colza in November 2024 at a new location in Ginza under the concept, "Tradition and innovation, hospitality, and the discovery of new deliciousness." Teppanyaki Colza is known for its fusion pairing menus that highlight Japanese soy sauce along with gourmet meats and fine wines.

When first entering, diners encounter an accent table crafted from old wooden Kikkoman Soy Sauce brewing barrels. Here amidst Colza's serene, contemporary Japanese aesthetic, we are seated around the iron teppan grill, where the chef prepares meals right before our eyes. As the chef chats with us directly, we can experience a true appreciation of how the food is prepared.

After looking over the menu, let's start with Linguine Bolognese with Mushrooms and Japanese Pear. This East-West fusion dish features pasta with Japanese wagyu beef and Japanese pear. Savory soy sauce and butter impart a rich aroma and perfectly complement the gentle sweetness of the pear. Three kinds of mushrooms add a pleasant accent of texture.

At Colza, guests may select from two types of steaks as their main course. We tried the Colza Selected Premium Wagyu Sirloin Beef Steak, where thick-cut wagyu is enjoyed by dipping in Goyogura Soy Sauce. At Colza, the chef recommends the best way to prepare each cut, and for this visit, we followed his suggestion of medium rare. Goyogura Soy Sauce is a special soy sauce that Kikkoman has long supplied to the Imperial Household, and is available only at Colza, the Kikkoman Soy Sauce Museum and on Kikkoman's online shop (Japan delivery only), which is why many guests choose to purchase it here as a souvenir. The steak is accompanied by freshly steamed Premium Tako rice CELEB, a rarely available rice often referred to as "the legendary rice." The tender juicy steak, enhanced by aromatic Goyogura Soy Sauce, releases abundant umami with every bite. Eaten together with the glistening, perfectly cooked rice, this dish is a unique Japanese indulgence.

Goyogura Soy Sauce

Premium Wagyu Sirloin Beef Steak

Premium Tako rice CELEB

It all tastes simply amazing and unforgettable. We were completely satisfied, and enjoyed every bite, including dessert!

Yujiro Ogai, general manager of Colza, shared his insights: "At Colza, we serve our dishes with the intention of integrating overseas cuisines into Japan's unique food culture, transforming them into something distinctly Japanese. In doing so, we aim to create meals that can be enjoyed not only by our Japanese guests, but by visitors from abroad. We hope that by thoughtfully engaging with soy sauce—something people use casually every day—guests can rediscover flavors that are uniquely Japanese."

Teppanyaki Colza creates truly *delicious memories*. Not only do guests enjoy the shared excitement of live cooking, they can savor innovative dishes that pair soy sauce with select ingredients. We highly recommend giving Colza a try!

Teppanyaki Colza
Lunch: Thur. Fri. Sat. 12:00-15:00 LO: 13:30
Dinner: Mon.-Sat. 17:00-22:00 LO: 20:00
Closed Sundays, Year-end & New Year holidays

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For more information and reservations
www.colza.co.jp

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