food forum

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THE JAPANESE TABLE

Japanese Tableware

Lacquerware

by Yasuo Kuwabara

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Goma-dofu sesame tofu, *somen-uri* spaghetti squash, *warabi* bracken fern, *kinome* Japanese pepper leaves served in Bowl with Pine and Bamboo Design (Hidehira bowl style) (16th-17th C)
Photo by Gozen Koshida

Japanese Tableware

Lacquerware

Our Feature series on Japanese Tableware continues with lacquerware.

by Yasuo Kuwabara

Writer, artist and philosopher Mushanokoji Saneatsu (1885-1976), wrote: *"Nature is a genius at creating all kinds of things; humans are geniuses at bringing out the best in them."*

Indeed, we are adept at discovering myriad different materials within nature and fulfilling their potential, and we Japanese have learned to coexist with nature.

One may say that Mushanokoji's words aptly sum up the character of the Japanese and their culture, and I cannot help but relate his thoughts—not only to the traditional Japanese cuisine of *washoku*, which makes the most of nature's seasonal ingredients—but to the topic discussed here: lacquerware.

Urushi lacquer

A fragment of wood from the Japanese lacquer tree *urushi* (*Toxicodendron vernicifluum*) was unearthed during the archeological excavation of a nearly 12,000-year-old site in Japan; and *urushi*-coated vessels dating back almost 9,000 years have been discovered. These ancient findings reveal that the Japanese have utilized *urushi* as an adhesive and a coating for millennia. One cannot help but admire the fact that nature produced such a plant, and marvel at the ways in which human beings recognized how its sap could be put to use.

Processing lacquer

When the outer bark of the *urushi* tree is cut, sap is secreted from the incised grooves as the tree attempts to repair itself. This raw, unprocessed sap (*ki-urushi*) has a high water content; it is absorbed easily by wood and strengthens it, so it is applied as an initial base coat when lacquering wooden vessels. To make *urushi* coating material, raw sap is gathered and undergoes a refining process called *kurome*, which involves slowly stirring and heating the sap to evaporate excess moisture, resulting in a transparent, brownish and viscous coating lacquer known as *kurome-urushi*, or *suki-urushi* (refined lacquer) that is applied to create a thicker finish while eliciting the distinctive color, shine and beauty of the wooden vessels. The further attraction of a lacquered surface is its smooth texture and warm feel, making it particularly sought-after in making tableware.

Texture and appeal

The Japanese have long been fond of lacquer's pleasing texture. Artifacts excavated at eighth-century archaeological sites in Japan's ancient capital of Heijo-kyo indicate that lacquer eating utensils and vessels have been used for more than one thousand years. Moreover, given that wooden lacquer vessels are light in weight and do not readily conduct heat, the practice of lifting a bowl to one's mouth while eating likely arose naturally as a custom unique to *washoku* dining.

The appeal of lacquerware lies not only in the deep luster or pleasing amber color of the coated wood surface, but also in the serendipitous beauty that arises over time, thanks to the durability of the ware. Examples can be seen in the red lacquerware known as Negoro, distinguished by *urushi* mixed

Negoro Round Tray (15th-16th C); clockwise: Sake Flask with Plant Design (18th-19th C); Sake Cups with Bird and Willow Design (China, 16th-17th C); Katade Sake Cup (Korea, 16th C)

with vermilion pigment (produced by mercury sulfide). This pigment was long considered valuable, therefore only a thin layer of vermilion *urushi* lacquer was applied. Over long years of handling, some of this red outer layer rubbed off to expose the black *urushi* base coating beneath, to pleasing effect. The artisans who produced such works hundreds of years ago perhaps never imagined how treasured these pieces would be for the beauty resulting from this effect. It is a beauty that can only become revealed in a vessel that remains sturdy over a considerable length of time.

Lacquerware artistry

Maki-e "sprinkled-picture" lacquer presents another form of beauty that makes use of the special qualities of *urushi*. The *urushi* coating process is described as "drying," but as no solvent is involved, it is more accurate to say "hardening." In a normal environment, *urushi* lacquer coating does not harden, thus it is placed for several days in a high-humidity cabinet called an *urushiburo* (*urushi*-bath).

The *maki-e* technique takes advantage of this characteristic of lacquer, wherein the timing of the drying can be controlled: a picture is drawn using *urushi* on a lacquered surface and gold powder is sprinkled over it; the vessel is then placed in the *urushiburo* to fix the design. If *urushi* were to have the innate property of hardening naturally, the gold powder could not adhere. The lacquer artist can therefore harness the properties of lacquer through a variety of *maki-e* techniques—by applying different purities of gold to change color, or adjusting size, shape and density of sprinkled gold powders, or incising fine lines into the surface prior to drying. This expressive, rich artistry reveals *maki-e* as a unique art form in its own right. Further decorative practices emerged in the form of *urushi-e* lacquer paintings, where lacquer is incorporated with red and yellow pigments, or with indigo to create green hues.

Maki-e lacquer on wood. Portable Lunch Box Set with Cherry Blossom and Maple Leaf Design (attributed to Shunsho, 18th C) accompanied by Square Dishes with Inverted Corners and Various Designs (Kenzan ware, 18th C) *Photo by Gozen Koshida*

Future of *urushi*

The Japanese have a unique connection with *urushi* lacquerware that has endured for over ten thousand years. Throughout the centuries, as *washoku* cuisine has advanced, its associated lacquered vessels have been elevated as an esteemed form of art. Today, the overall industry of lacquerware production is declining steadily; yet at the same time, new applications for *urushi* and *maki-e* are being explored and attracting attention as decorative elements for items such as fountain pens, watches and other luxury goods, as well as in contemporary crafts and artistic media. Such novel and innovative applications reflect the trends of our times and should be regarded as a natural extension and evolution in the history of *urushi* artists, who have always adapted their craft in response to the changing needs of clients.

Alongside such innovations, it is hoped that *urushi* lacquerware will continue to be used for tableware—particularly for those items that come into direct contact with the mouth, such as chopsticks, spoons, soup bowls and so on—allowing diners to experience and share with others the pleasant and unique sensibility that lacquerware brings to *washoku* cuisine.

Maki-e lacquer on wood with mother-of-pearl inlay. Lidded Bowls with Various Designs (Nagata Yuji, 18th C)

On the cover Peaches, featured in Spirit of the Seasons, page 5; and *maki-e* lacquer on wood. Pair of Sake Bottles with Weeping Cherry Design (16th C)

Author's profile
Yasuo Kuwabara was born in 1967. Chief curator at the MIHO MUSEUM, Shiga Prefecture, he is a specialist in lacquer craft, including *maki-e* and Negoro ware, as well as the performing arts of Noh and Sarugaku. He has overseen numerous special exhibitions at the museum, including "Lacquer Craft Legend Sano Chokan" (2025) and "The *Maki-e* Masters: Their Edo-period Flowering" (2023). He is closely involved with the surveying and conservation of cultural properties in Shiga Prefecture.

Seiro Steamer

Many around the world associate the *seiro* steamer with the preparation of Chinese dim sum, but this simple basket of bamboo, cedar or cypress has been used in Japan for thousands of years to steam rice, and for hundreds of years to steam beans, root vegetables and other foods. Because of its simplicity, the easy-to-use *seiro* is attracting fresh attention and becoming newly popular in today's Japanese kitchens.

Seiro cooking is as straightforward as adding meat, vegetables, fish or rice to the basket and placing it over a pot of boiling water—the steam does all the cooking. Various ingredients can be steamed all together or separately: a large *seiro* can handle a mix of foods, while smaller baskets of individual ingredients can be stacked to cook all at once. Precise heat control is never a worry, as *seiro*-style cooking is not just convenient, it is less prone to cooking failures. The natural materials of the *seiro* conduct heat gently and so allow ingredients to cook evenly; naturally absorbent, the *seiro* regulates the amount of steam and condensation—and best of all, it can be cleaned with a quick water rinse and left to dry naturally.

Steaming brings out the natural flavor and umami of ingredients without the use of oil, which not only supports lower-calorie dishes, but offers healthy benefits. Nutrients such as water-soluble vitamins and minerals—often diminished through boiling, simmering or frying—are more effectively retained in steamed foods. And although this method may be easy, the gentle aroma of the ingredients, together with the subtle scent of wood or bamboo, rise with the steam, enhancing both the appetite and overall experience.

The visual appeal of *seiro* is not lost on social media, which is driving its current popularity. It can be placed right on the table for serving, where it adds a warm, casual sensibility to the setting. A single-serving meal arranged in *seiro* involving entrée, vegetables, rice or bread, is often presented as a one-plate dish and has become especially popular. A burgeoning assortment of *seiro* recipe books offer ideas on complementary ingredients, optimal cooking times, dipping sauces and photogenic arrangements, further fueling its trendy appeal.

The seiro *enhances one's experience of a dish*

Seiro-steamed rice topped with sweet soy sauce-braised pork and egg cocotte

Modest yet versatile, the *seiro* steamer is a traditional culinary tool with a long history, whose rediscovery is inspiring new ways of supporting healthy—and busy—modern lifestyles.

Seiro-steamed pork and vegetables

Kanten and *Kuzu*

Our look at the essentials of wagashi *traditional Japanese confectionery focuses here on* kanten *agar-agar and* kuzu.

Wagashi confectionery reflects the sensibility of the changing seasons, and ingredients such as *kanten* agar-agar and *kuzu* are used to evoke the clarity and coolness of water in the summer. Although both have textures similar to gelatin, they are plant-based: *kanten* is derived from seaweed and *kuzu* from the roots of the Japanese arrowroot vine, known also as kudzu.

Kanten

Seaweed such as *tengusa* red algae is boiled until dissolved, then repeatedly frozen and dried to produce *kanten*. Dried *kanten* comes in stick, strand and powdered forms. When making *wagashi*, it is dissolved in boiling water then allowed to set at room temperature, upon which it retains its shape with a jelly-like texture. Fiber-rich and virtually calorie-free, neutral-tasting *kanten* mixes well with a wide range of flavors. *Kanten*-based *wagashi* include firm jellied *yokan* made of *kanten* and *an* sweet bean paste; *kohakuto*, a semi-translucent sugar confection known as "edible jewels"; and *anmitsu*, cubed *kanten* jelly topped with *an* sweet bean paste, fruit and brown sugar syrup.

Kanten clockwise from top right: stick, powdered, strand forms

Yokan

Kohakuto

Kuzu

Kuzu starch is obtained from roots of the Japanese arrowroot, or kudzu. Traditional *hon-kuzu*, pure kudzu starch, is made from thick wild roots foraged after decades of growth. These are crushed and soaked in water and repeatedly rinsed to extract the starch, which is allowed to settle and dry. This labor-intensive process can produce only a small amount at a time, thus most commercially available *kuzu* is blended with other starches such as potato starch. Dissolved in water and heated, *kuzu* becomes a translucent gel; cooled, it forms into a jelly-like solid with an elastic texture and smooth mouthfeel. This is used to make *kuzu-kiri* translucent noodles served with brown sugar syrup, and *kuzu-manju*, a summer sweet of *an* paste wrapped in *kuzu*-based gel.

Kuzu

Kuzu-kiri

Kuzu-manju

Peach

桃

Peach slices

Our cover features peaches, called *momo* in Japan, likely introduced from China around the third or fourth century. Traditionally valued for medicinal and ornamental purposes, significant cultivar development from the Meiji period (1868-1912) onward has resulted in today's sweet, juicy varieties. Half of Japan's domestic production comes from Yamanashi and Fukushima prefectures, where abundant sunlight and fluctuating day-night temperatures generate their rich fragrance and velvety texture.

The vast majority of peaches grown in Japan are white peaches, and major varieties include Yamanashi's *Hakuho* and Fukushima's *Akatsuki*. The premium *Shimizu Hakuto* from Okayama Prefecture is also famous and is referred to as the "queen of peaches." Japanese *momo* are often grown using the bagging technique, where each fruit is hand-covered with a paper bag as protection against rain, insects and sunburn. As a result, their flavor is particularly succulent and their attractive appearance is preserved. They are enjoyed peeled and eaten fresh.

Peaches are regarded in many Asian cultures as symbols of longevity and protection. In the Japanese folktale *Momotaro*, a boy born from a giant peach defeats wicked ogres, while during the Doll Festival (*Hinamatsuri*), it is customary to display peach blossoms to symbolize health and well-being.

Salmon Sushi Bowl

Serves 4
316 kcal
Protein 25.9 g
Fat 25.2 g
(per serving)

- 400 g / 14 oz. sashimi-grade salmon fillets
- 1 ½ t salt

Sushi vinegar
- 6 T grain vinegar
- 5 t granulated sugar
- 1/2 t salt

Sauce
- 6 T Kikkoman Soy Sauce
- 2 ½ T granulated sugar
- 3 T water
- 2 T fresh lemon juice
- Zest from half an organic lemon

- 1 avocado
- 600 g / 4 C cooked rice
- White sesame seeds
- Fresh dill

Enjoy sushi flavor at home—no special skills needed! This easy recipe satisfies sushi cravings with minimal preparation. Drizzle homemade sushi vinegar and sweet soy sauce over rice and top with sashimi and creamy avocado. These versatile seasonings also work with canned tuna or cooked fish, perfect for a satisfying meal.

1 Sprinkle salt on both sides of the salmon fillets and gently rub into the surface. Set aside in the refrigerator for 1 hour. Pat dry excess moisture with paper towel. (1)

2 To make the sushi vinegar, combine grain vinegar, granulated sugar and salt in a heat-resistant bowl. Warm in a microwave for approx. 1 minute 20 seconds at medium heat / 600 W or until it bubbles, then stir to dissolve the sugar and salt. To make the sauce, add soy sauce, granulated sugar and water to a small pan. Bring to a boil over high heat then set aside. (2) When it cools, add lemon juice and the grated zest, mix well.

3 Cut the salmon into 5 mm / 0.2 in. slices. (3) Cut avocado in half lengthwise, peel and cut into 8 mm / 0.3 in. slices.

4 Set out the salmon slices in a single layer in a prep tray and sprinkle with 3-4 T sauce. (4)

5 Spoon out the cooked rice divided evenly into individual bowls. For each serving: drizzle 2 t sushi vinegar over the rice or more to taste, and sprinkle with sesame seeds. Drizzle 1 t sauce evenly over each serving, cover with avocado and salmon slices (5) garnished with fresh dill. Serve with extra sauce on the side.

Note: Both sushi vinegar and sauce can be prepared either in microwave or on stovetop using the method above.

Recipe by Michiko Yamamoto

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

Sushi Vinegar

Sushi vinegar is a blend of vinegar, sugar and salt. While rice or grain vinegar is commonly used, Edo-style *nigiri* uses *akazu* red vinegar *(photo left)*, which gives the rice a light brown tint. To make glossy sushi rice, sprinkle sushi vinegar over hot rice and gently fold in with a paddle using a slicing motion while fanning to cool. This motion requires skill to keep the grains intact.

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