

food forum

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Japanese Tableware

Glassware

The third installment of our series on Japanese Tableware focuses on glassware.

—
by Yoko Azuma

Picnic set of sake bottle, tiered
jubako and serving dishes
with wood carrier (ca. 1673-1717)

During the sixteenth century, merchant ships from Portugal and Spain arrived in Japan to establish overseas trade routes. They carried with them various goods, including glassware which sparked considerable interest throughout the country. Records indicate that in 1551, Jesuit priest and missionary Francis Xavier presented Ouchi Yoshitaka, daimyo of what is now Yamaguchi Prefecture, with “clear glass vessels, a mirror and eyeglasses of extraordinary beauty.” We can imagine how the clarity and brilliance of such glasswork must have appeared to the Japanese of that time as embodying the sophistication of foreign culture.

In the early seventeenth century, Japan began two centuries of isolation by closing off its borders to most countries. Nagasaki was designated to serve as the country’s only trading port and point of contact with the West. It was here where European and Chinese glassware was introduced, and as

their production techniques came to be understood, Japanese artisans were inspired to develop their own unique glass forms and aesthetic. This moment in time is considered the dawn of Japanese glassware.

Decorative motifs

“The Picnic Set” (late 17th C) is a fine example of Japanese glassware dating from this early era. The set was designed for Japanese cherry blossom viewing and other excursions where food and drink were enjoyed outdoors. The sake bottle, tiered food vessel (*jubako*) and serving dishes, which had traditionally been made of ceramic or lacquerware, are instead crafted in glass. All the pieces were designed to fit neatly into a wood carrying case with a lid and handle for easy transport. This glassware is mold-blown and features classic Japanese designs: the tiered glass *jubako* is decorated with an interlocking circle pattern known as *shippo-tsunagi*, referring to *shippo*, or “seven treasures,” while the serving dishes are adorned in relief with the character

for longevity (*kotobuki*). These traditional auspicious motifs symbolize good fortune and celebration, and their exquisite detail, complemented by the fine workmanship of the wood carrier, suggests that this was an exceptionally luxurious tableware set.

Most early Japanese glasswork was decorated in such a way as to reveal floral or scrolled patterns in relief when the glass was blown into the metal mold. The undulations visible on the surface of the glass are the result of rapid cooling when molten glass came into contact with the mold, an effect that lends the



Blue-green lidded bowl with grape design,
mold-blown glass (ca. 1711-1781)

piece a soft, delicate appearance with subtle shadows.

Serving on glassware

What kinds of food would have been served on such elegant tableware? One example can be seen on the menu for a tea gathering held in July 1717, hosted by court noble and cultural leader Konoe Iehiro (1667–1736). The dishes for this summer repast began with carp sashimi, rice and soup, followed by a dish described as “lidded *bidoro* bowl.” *Bidoro*, a Japanese loan word that originates from the Portuguese *vidro* (glass), refers to glassware originally imported into Japan in the sixteenth century and later came to encompass Japan-made glass products as well. The lidded *bidoro* bowl held an arrangement of refreshing tofu and green peas—no doubt just slightly visible through the cool-looking glass. This dish was served with a traditional seasoning sauce called *irizake*, made by simmering *umeboshi* pickled plums, kombu and *katsuobushi* bonito flakes in sake to flavor the tofu. Next on the menu came grilled *ayu* sweetfish, and a clear soup of crane meat, burdock root and *hasuimo* Japanese taro stalk. The inclusion of crane meat, considered the finest delicacy at the time, signals that no expense was spared, while the use of a *bidoro* bowl at such an elevated occasion suggests that glass tableware was considered suitable for this highly refined menu.

At another tea gathering in May 1727, Iehiro used a glass vessel to serve sweets that accompany tea at the conclusion of the event. The presentation involved a celadon bowl filled with water, into which a glass container was placed. The



Purple *kiriko* dishes (ca.1844-1887)

glass vessel held sugar candies called *konpeito* and was covered with a lid of fresh cedar wood. Water in a light blue celadon bowl and a plain wood lid on a glass dish—these are classic aesthetic choices intended to evoke a sense of refreshment and coolness. Konoe Iehiro used glassware only from May through July to offer his guests a sense of relief from the heat of summer.

Giyaman and kiriko

During the Edo period (1603-1867), other kinds of glass tableware were introduced to Japan in addition to *bidoro*. Imported glassware and similar pieces made in Japan around this time are known as *giyaman*, derived from the Dutch word for diamond (*diamant*). *Giyaman* was a general term for clear colorless glassware; among these was cut glass, also known as *kiriko*. Imported cut glass and domestically made cut glass were produced using different techniques: imported cut glass was produced using a rotary tool to cut the glass, while Japanese-made cut glass was crafted by hand, every cut painstakingly hand carved using a metal file. Japanese craftsmen must have thought that *giyaman* was prized highly enough to justify the exacting efforts required to produce it. Initially made from colorless transparent glass, *kiriko* later came to be produced in a variety of colors.

Around 1850, Momokawaro, the leading haute cuisine restaurant in

Edo (Tokyo), used various *giyaman* cut-glass dishes. Meals would begin with a *yokan* sweet bean jelly served on a *giyaman* cut-glass dish. Diners were served in a room where black lacquered tables were arranged upon a red carpet. The table settings featured drinking glasses, dishes, sake flasks and chopstick holders—all of *giyaman* cut glass. Six kinds of side dishes would be served on *giyaman* vessels, and the meal would progress with marinated carp on a square-shaped *giyaman* dish, followed by sea bream served on a *giyaman* plate lined with a bamboo mat, concluding with soup, rice and pickled vegetables.

From the time of its earliest production in Japan, glassware has been served alongside the finest ceramic and lacquer wares as luxury tableware. With its radiant brilliance and refreshing beauty, glassware has continued to grace Japanese tables from the Edo period to the present day. ■

Note: Dates in photo captions reflect current scholarly dating of the works.



Typical use of glass tableware today: chilled noodles with dipping sauce and condiments.

On the cover *Nashi* Japanese pear, featured in *Spirit of the Seasons*, page 5; and Satsuma *kiriko* copper red overlay glass bowl with cross design (ca. 1846-1863)

Author's profile

Yoko Azuma was born in 1959. A specialist in glass crafts, she is currently specially appointed curator at the MIHO MUSEUM, Shiga Prefecture. Her numerous curated exhibitions include: “The Spirit of Japanese Glass: From Magatama to Vidro/Diamant” (2006); “Ancient Glass: Feast of Color” (2013); “The Beauty of Japanese Glass: The Bindeisha Collection” (2017); and “Ancient Glass: Brilliant Design, Stunning Technique” (2024). She is a board member of the Association for Glass Art Studies, Japan.

Japanese Wellness Teas

Japan is well known for its matcha and green teas, but the country's ancient tea culture extends beyond these. For centuries, Japan has cherished teas made by brewing grains, beans, dried fruit peels, roots and tree leaves. These simple, mild-flavored drinks have been consumed for their medicinal properties as a long-standing tradition. Recently, however, they have been rediscovered and presented as *kenko-cha* wellness teas. Buoyed by the ongoing interest in healthy lifestyles, various *kenko-cha* are marketed, most of them naturally caffeine-free, making them suitable for everyone from children to the elderly. Thanks to this broad appeal, *kenko-cha* are now a part of Japan's contemporary daily life.

Traditional *kenko-cha* include *mugi-cha* (roasted barley tea), *soba-cha* (roasted buckwheat tea) and *kuromame-cha* (roasted black soybean tea). *Mugi-cha* barley tea, originally a staple summer drink in Japanese homes, is now enjoyed year round as one of the most popular caffeine-free beverages. It has a refreshing roasted flavor and replenishes the

body's minerals, often lost in hot weather. *Soba-cha* buckwheat tea has traditionally been a regional drink where buckwheat is grown, but is now widely available throughout Japan. It is prized for its toasty aromatic flavor as well as its antioxidant rutin, contained in buckwheat. *Kuromame-cha* black soybean tea, once more common only during colder months, is also high in antioxidants. It is appreciated for its distinctive roasted soybean aroma and smooth, mellow taste. Other wellness teas include *dokudami-cha* (houltuynia cordata tea), gobo burdock tea, and blended herbal and grain teas.

The wellness tea market in Japan is expanding beyond traditional teas such as these to encompass functional-wellness teas having specific health claims to, for example, reduce fat absorption, lower stress and moderate



Mugi-cha

blood sugar. These are sold in Japan as Foods with Function Claims (FFC) or Foods for Specified Health Uses (FOSHU). While a bit more expensive, many choose these to incorporate functional ingredients such as catechins, GABA and dietary fiber in their self-care regimens.

Once available mostly seasonally or in specialized tea stores, *kenko-cha* and functional-wellness teas are now sold in ready-to-drink bottles at convenience stores and vending machines throughout the country. As Japanese consumers become increasingly health-conscious, new and innovative varieties of *kenko-cha* are expected to emerge in the years ahead. ◆

A part of Japan's modern life



An assortment of bottled wellness teas, accompanied by traditional tea ingredients (front, l-r): roasted black soybeans, roasted barley, dried *dokudami* leaves and stems, and roasted buckwheat kernels.

Rice Flour

More about the unique ingredients and processes used to make Japanese wagashi confectionery.

Rice is broadly divided into two categories: *uruchi-mai* non-glutinous rice, commonly eaten as steamed rice; and *mochi-gome* glutinous rice, used to make *mochi*. Both types are used in making rice flour, which is a primary ingredient of *wagashi*. Depending on milling and preparation processes, the rice yields characteristic flours intended to produce a specific quality and texture of *wagashi*—a clean bite, chewy-sticky or smooth, for example. The three essential types of rice flour are *joshin-ko*, *domyoji-ko* and *dango-ko*. ◆

Joshin-ko

Made from *uruchi-mai* non-glutinous rice, *joshin-ko* is produced by washing, drying and milling the rice into flour, then sifting it to obtain uniform particle size. Mixed with boiling water and kneaded, this dough has a firm, springy texture. *Joshin-ko* is commonly used to make *wagashi* such as *uiro* steamed rice cakes, *kusa-mochi* mugwort *mochi* and *kashiwa-mochi* wrapped in oak leaf.

Domyoji-ko

Domyoji-ko is made by steaming, drying and then coarsely grinding glutinous *mochi-gome*. This unique process preserves the distinctive flavor and aroma of glutinous rice, which are fully elicited when the dough is steamed to make *wagashi*. *Wagashi* made using *domyoji-ko* are soft and slightly sticky, distinguished by a chunky appearance containing visible rice granules. The best-known example is Kansai-style *sakura-mochi*—light pink rice cake filled with *anko* sweet red bean paste, wrapped in a fragrant, salt-pickled cherry leaf.

Dango-ko

This flour is milled from a blend of washed and dried *uruchi-mai* and *mochi-gome*. *Dango-ko* dough comes together rather easily when water is added for kneading, thanks to the sticky quality of the glutinous rice. The dough is shaped into small balls and boiled to produce *dango*, which have a smooth, chewy and pleasantly springy bite. Cooked *dango* are typically threaded onto skewers and enjoyed with a variety of toppings like *anko* sweet red bean paste or *mitarashi* sweet-savory soy sauce glaze.



Clockwise from top:
joshin-ko, *dango-ko*, *domyoji-ko*



Uiro steamed rice cakes



Sakura-mochi



Dango with sweet red bean paste
and sweet soy sauce glaze

Nashi Japanese Pear

梨



Sliced *nashi* Japanese pear

Nashi Japanese pears, shown on our cover, are in season from late summer to autumn. Unlike European pears, *nashi* ripen fully on the tree rather than after harvest. *Nashi* are distinguished by their round shape and juicy, yet firm bite. Their crisp-textured flesh is characterized by high level of sweetness and mild acidity.

Nashi were likely cultivated in Japan as early as the Yayoi period (ca. 400 BCE-300 CE). During the Edo period (1603-1867), extensive cultivar development gave rise to regional varieties with distinctive flavors, textures and appearance, which laid the foundation for the wide range of *nashi* enjoyed today.

Among the best-known of these are the *Kosui*, prized for its exceptional sweetness; the *Hosui*, with a well-balanced sweetness and acidity; the *Niitaka*, recognized by its large size; and the *Nijusseiki*, refreshingly tart and gently sweet.

Major production regions include Chiba, Ibaraki, Fukushima and Tochigi prefectures, where differences in climate and soil contribute to subtle variations in flavor and texture. Japanese pears are usually enjoyed fresh, chilled and peeled. They are used in salads and desserts, as well as in juices, jams and various sweets. ◆

Tofu Salad with Dried Persimmon

Serves 2

636 kcal
Protein 23.6 g
Fat 49.9 g
(per serving)

- 3-4 dried persimmons (*hoshigaki*), total 70-90 g / 2.5-3.2 oz.
- 1 block firm tofu, 360-400 g / 12-14 oz.

Dressing

- 6 T mayonnaise
- 2 t Kikkoman Soy Sauce
- Black pepper, freshly ground

- 25 g / 1 oz. roasted walnuts, coarsely chopped

- Salad greens
- 6-8 slices of prosciutto, 60 g / 2 oz.



Inspired by shira-ae, a traditional Japanese tofu dish, this salad highlights tofu in a fresh way. Tofu pairs well with mayonnaise, while the sweetness of dried persimmon and the saltiness of prosciutto create a flavorful contrast. A touch of soy sauce in the dressing brings everything into balance. Draining the tofu removes excess moisture. This concentrates its natural flavor and umami, and creates a richer taste and firmer texture.

- 1 Remove stems of dried persimmons and slice them into thin pieces 2.5 cm - / 1 in. long. ⁽¹⁾
- 2 Wrap the tofu in paper towels. ⁽²⁾ If the tofu is more than 5 cm / 2 in. thick, slice it in half horizontally so that each piece is about 2.5 cm / 1 in. thick. Place wrapped tofu on a microwave-safe plate. Microwave at 600 W for about 3.5 minutes to remove excess moisture. If the center surface is still cool, microwave in 30-second intervals, checking each time, until the center surface is hot. Set aside to cool.
- 3 Combine the dressing ingredients in a small bowl and mix well. ⁽³⁾ Add a little more soy sauce to taste.
- 4 Remove paper towel from tofu. With a spoon, break up the tofu into pieces roughly 2.5 cm / 1 in. and place in a bowl. ⁽⁴⁾
- 5 Add the sliced persimmons, chopped walnuts and mayonnaise dressing to the bowl. Toss gently with a wooden spatula until all ingredients are evenly coated. ⁽⁵⁾ Arrange salad greens on a serving plate and spoon out the salad on top. Serve alongside slices of prosciutto.

Recipe by Michiko Yamamoto

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

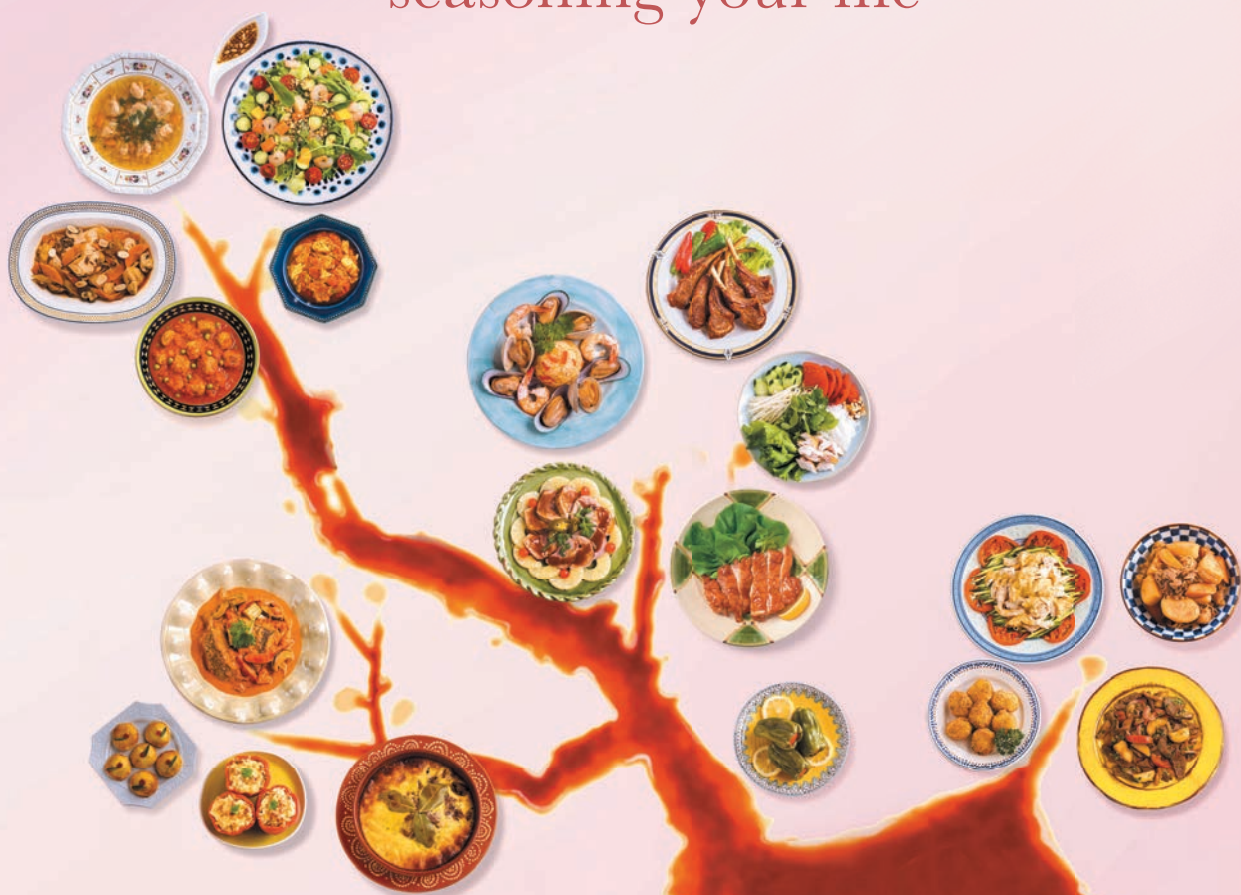


Hoshigaki Dried Persimmon

Japanese *hoshigaki* are traditionally made by hanging peeled astringent persimmons outside to dry in the sun and cool breezes. As they dry, their astringency fades and their sweetness becomes concentrated. Sugars crystallize on the fruit surface to form a delicate white coating.



seasoning your life



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