

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



## THE JAPANESE TABLE

# Washoku: Respect for Nature

by Isao Kumakura

*Washoku traditional dietary cultures of the Japanese were recently added to UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage list. In this year's new Feature series, we take a close look at this unique Japanese cuisine, starting with how a respect for nature has shaped the origins of the Japanese diet.*

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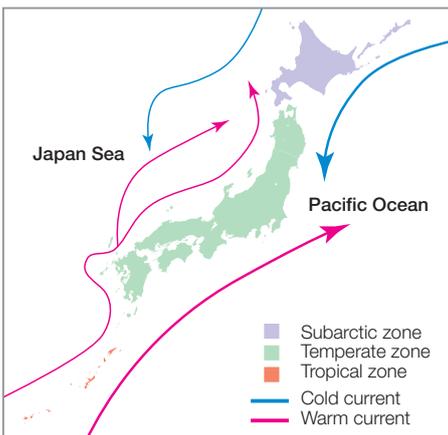
# Washoku: Respect for Nature



## Nature's Bounty

A respect for nature is seen as part of the culture in every country, but it occupies a particularly important place in the hearts of the Japanese. The great poet Matsuo Basho (1644-1694) said that the sense of beauty shared by Japan's leading artists—the great painter Sesshu (1420-1506) and the tea master Sen no Rikyu (1522-1591), for example—came from yielding one's body to the rhythms of nature and taking pleasure in the changing seasons. A keen awareness of how human life unfolds within the larger scheme of nature grew out of the ancient traditions of animism that form the basis of Japanese religiosity.

Japan's food culture grew from this awareness. Food has always been considered as the bounty bestowed by our natural environment. That



Overview of climate zones and ocean currents

environment varies within Japan's long archipelago, starting from the northernmost island of Hokkaido in the subarctic zone to the southernmost islands of Okinawa in the tropical zone, with most of the rest of the country midway in the temperate zone. This chain of islands, surrounded by seas where warm and cold currents meet, has a coastline that totals some 34,000 kilometers.

Along with the more than 4,000 varieties of fish that inhabit the country's rivers and seas, shellfish and seaweed such as nori, kombu and wakame are popular ingredients on the Japanese table. The country's territory is by no means large—about 70 percent is mountainous, making it unsuitable for large-scale agriculture—yet each year its abundant rainfall of some 1,700 millimeters flows into clear streams and irrigates rice paddies, fields and orchards. Japan's seas, mountains and valleys are rich with all kinds of food ingredients.

## Veneration of the Seasons

The monsoon climate around most of the archipelago creates four clearly defined seasons, and the dishes served and the ways they are prepared follow these seasons. For example, the especially tasty *tai* (sea bream) harvested around the

time cherry blossoms bloom in spring—known as *sakura-dai* (cherry blossom sea bream)—is much prized by gourmands. Japanese daikon, harvested as winter approaches, is simmered and eaten with miso sauce—a simple, warming dish called *furofuki-daikon*, perfectly suited to an early-winter table.

Cooks pay special attention to the *shun* (peak season) for each ingredient, but the seasons are also divided into even finer increments. The period just before the *shun* when a vegetable or fish begins to appear on the market is called the *hashiri*—the first much-anticipated opportunity to enjoy the flavor for which one has waited a year. After the *shun* is mainly over, there is the *nagori* mature flavor that can be savored as the season gradually wanes. In this way, through the enjoyment of dishes that capture the flavors of each season, we feel the pleasure afforded by living in tune with nature.

Japanese have a way of thinking of food as resulting more from the power of nature than from the power of human beings. The farmer's labor and the fisherman's toils are naturally appreciated, but obviously that is not all. Rather, it is the role of nature that is seen as dominant, with human hands serving to assist and support in the harvest. People feel a

From left: *Sakuradai no chirashi-sushi*, mixed sushi topped with sea bream sashimi; *furofuki-daikon*, simmered daikon with miso sauce; seafood and vegetables from Hokkaido; harvested daikon drying in the sun to make *tsukemono*, Japanese pickles



certain piety with regard to the food that is received through the bounty of nature, and this is the basis of the words *itadakimasu* (“I receive”), customarily spoken before eating, and the sentiment *gochisosama* (“thank you for the meal”), that concludes the meal. *Itadakimasu* also expresses thanks to the person who has prepared the food; but at its core, the word carries a feeling of gratitude toward the universal, omnipresent spirit thought to abide within the food itself. Whether a plant or an animal, we obtain life-giving nourishment from it, and such gratitude naturally gives rise to a sense of reverence. When we were children, we were taught not to leave even one grain of rice in our bowls because it was wasteful and sure to bring down punishment from heaven. The admonition that one must not waste food is expressed in the word *mottainai*, which means, literally, “it is a pity not to be able to treasure the use of things.” The spirit of Japanese cuisine—of treasuring the bounty of nature and using everything without waste—is in close accord with current ecological concepts that call for conservation of our natural environment.

### Sustaining Nature’s Spirit

Today, however, great changes are taking place in Japanese food culture,

alongside a shift in Japanese attitudes toward both nature and food. Like so many other countries, Japan’s environment has been ravaged in the wake of industrialization, and its society is gripped by the vicious cycle of mass production and mass consumption. There are more and more young people with no experience in a primary industry such as agriculture or fisheries, and thus their connection with the environment and sense of respect for nature is often undeveloped.

Moreover, even though traditional food culture was based upon the use of ingredients provided by Japan’s own natural environment, its food self-sufficiency ratio has dramatically decreased and has fallen under 40 percent on a calorie supply basis. This is a result of Japan’s shift away from ingredients produced domestically toward cheaper imports. Foods imported from around the world all year round no longer reflect Japan’s own seasons, nor even the seasons of their foreign origins; who grew and who harvested them is unknown. Such conditions do not foster a sense of gratitude toward nature for the bounty of what we eat, and this leads to increased waste of anything that seems unnecessary—even if it can be eaten—and this waste leads to degradation of the environment.

These trends arouse concern as to whether the spirit that sustains the traditions of the Japanese table may be lost, and whether the Japanese awareness of being part of nature—along with their distinctive sensitivity to the changing seasons—may be eroding the very spirit that sustains the traditions of Japanese food culture. The listing of Japanese cuisine as a recognized UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage offers us a unique opportunity to revive and reinvigorate this prized aspect of our *washoku* traditions. ●

#### cover

Rice, Japan’s staple food, growing in terraced rice fields.

#### 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”).



**SPECIAL  
REPORT**  
from Australia

# Japanese Cuisine Around the World

*Food Forum annually profiles Japanese who are introducing the taste and traditions of Japanese cuisine throughout the world. This year we introduce Hideo Dekura, who runs the cooking school Culinary Studio Dekura in Sydney—a venture that has contributed significantly to the popularity of Japanese cuisine in Australia.*



## Hideo Dekura

Born in Tokyo in 1944, Hideo Dekura moved to Sydney, Australia in 1972; a specialist and consultant on food and cuisine, he is known for his pioneering work in introducing Japanese cuisine to Australia. Mr. Dekura teaches Japanese cooking at his school, Culinary Studio Dekura, and is a master of the Sydney *Shijoshin-ryu* school of Japanese cuisine in Australia. In 2007, Mr. Dekura was honored by the Japanese government for his contributions in promoting Japanese cuisine overseas. He has authored various books on Japanese cuisine and cooking, the most recent of which is *Eat with Your Hands: Sushi for Kids* (New Holland Publishers, Australia, 2013).



## Culinary Studio Dekura

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I was brought up in my parents' Japanese restaurant in Tokyo. My father taught me the art of making sushi and preparing *kappo*-style cuisine (fine cuisine prepared and served by a chef at a counter). When I was in high school, I met my father's friend Mr. Soken Shishikura, master teacher of the *Shijoshin-ryu* school of traditional Japanese cuisine, where I learned its formal ceremonies and traditional etiquette. Here is where I also learned to perform the traditional *hocho shiki* (cooking knife ceremony)—the ritual of filleting a fish using only knife and metal chopsticks without touching the fish by hand. I continue to perform this ceremony as part of my activities in introducing the spirit of Japanese food culture.

## Laying the Foundations

I first went to Sydney in 1972 to consult for the opening of an Australian-owned Japanese restaurant there; two years later, I was involved as consulting chef for Suehiro, a

Tokyo-based meat-specialty restaurant, for a sushi department they planned to open in a restaurant there. I went independent in 1975, establishing Australia's first event-catering service, and also succeeded in setting up my own company, JX Uohide. I later became the first Japanese to obtain credentials to purchase fresh fish at auction at the Sydney Fish Market, and began to work with a local agent to promote Kikkoman products in Australia. It was in 1982 that I opened my restaurant Sabo Dekura, in an attempt to introduce *kaiseki* cuisine in Australia: this venture was somewhat ahead of its time, however, and I sold the business three years later. In 2006, I presented a *hocho shiki* performance at a cultural exchange event between Japan and Australia. That was a memorable year, as I opened the Sydney *Shijoshin-ryu*.

## Teaching Japanese Cooking

In 1990, I started to teach "Sushi & Sashimi" classes at the Sydney



Mr. Dekura (right) at a tuna auction in Sydney (1998)



Book launch event at Sydney Seafood School (2010)



Chef's *tsukuri*: sashimi of squid and tuna on flatfish; at right, Mr. Dekura performs the *hocho shiki* ceremony (2012)



Seafood School, which had opened at the Sydney Fish Market; these continue today. I established Culinary Studio Dekura in 2010, where we offer Japanese cooking classes for both amateurs and professionals. I have also been introducing the hospitality of Japanese cuisine at hotel schools. Through the NSW Technical and Further Education Commission (TAFE NSW), together with the New South Wales Board of Study project team, I am currently involved in introducing Japanese cuisine and culture to primary and high school students, with the cooperation of Kikkoman and the Japan Food Corporation (JFC). Although some Asian Cookery courses offering national certificates and diplomas in hospitality include Japanese Cookery classes, there is no specific qualification for Japanese Cookery alone; I have been working to establish a national diploma of Japanese Cookery in Australia for over 15 years. I am also involved in food consulting for different states of

Australia and with Japan-Australia food development, as well as with the establishment of restaurants. I have written 13 books about Japanese cooking, and another is about to come out this year.

### Australia's Changing Food Culture

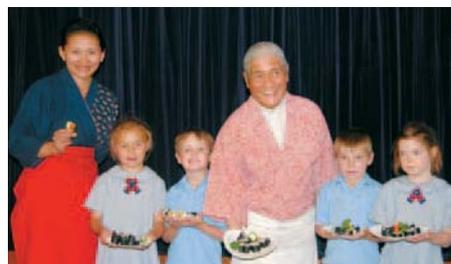
Australia has a multinational food culture, but when I arrived in the early seventies, it was mostly focused on Western and some Chinese cuisines. At the time, I worked in a modest way so that the spirit of Japanese food would be accepted and make a place for itself there. It was important to overcome preconceptions by listening carefully and discussing how both perspectives could be developed. Although Australia has access to a wealth of delicious fresh fish, the way seafood was handled and prepared in the past wasted that freshness. We have been able to initiate discussions about that issue, and about production

technology as well. Today considerable progress has been made with logistics, and as changes have been made, we've seen a greater awareness and appreciation of the freshness and quality of fish in various fields of food culture in Australia. Compared to four decades ago, the variety of Japanese food products available has increased as well. Since the early 1980s, many more companies are importing food from Japan, and locally grown and produced rice, green tea and sake can also be found. With the support of the Japanese government, organizations of food producers from Japan often visit Sydney to promote their products, and this increased activity is sure to bring further opportunities in Australia. In Sydney, we also see Japanese food products made in other Asian countries on the shelves, but I believe shoppers are becoming more aware and will come to understand how to select truly genuine products.

Generally speaking, market needs differ depending on specific cultural or ethnic contexts; and so, in order to fully convey what Japanese cuisine is all about, I strive to be a food specialist capable of communicating and introducing food-culture topics that range from the traditional to the contemporary. I am happy to have found my mission in life by introducing Japanese food culture, which benefits not only Australia, but Japan as well. In closing, let me say that I greatly look forward to the opening of a new chapter in the history of Japanese cultural diplomacy through food. ◆



Mr. Dekura's books on Japanese cuisine



Making sushi rolls at a primary school class (2013)



## NIKU-JAGA STYLE MINI-MEAT PATTIES AND POTATOES

*Niku-jaga* is a classic Japanese dish of potatoes and beef simmered in soy sauce-based dashi stock. Sliced beef is usually used, but here tender meat patties make a nice substitute. Herbs add a Western flavor to the rich soy sauce foundation.



◆ Shiitake

### Serves 3

246 kcal Protein 24.9 g Fat 18.9 g  
(per person)

- 6 dried shiitake mushrooms (22 g / .7 oz. incl. stems)
- 600 ml (2 1/2 C) water
- 5 cm (2 in.) stale baguette

### Patties

- 300 g (10 oz.) ground pork\*
- 1 thumb-sized ginger, peeled and grated
- Black pepper
- 1 t Kikkoman Soy Sauce
- 1 t sake
- Approx. 1/2 beaten egg
- 1 t butter
- 1 t vegetable oil
- 1 small onion, 150 g (5 oz.), cut in half lengthwise; 5 mm (1/4 in.) slices
- water
- 1 bouillon cube
- 1 peeled carrot, 150 g (5 oz.), cut in round slices 5 mm (1/4 in.) thick
- 1 parsley stem, 1 sprig thyme, 1/2 bay leaf
- 3 medium potatoes, total 400 g (approx. 1 lb.) peeled and quartered
- 1 1/2 T Kikkoman Soy Sauce
- Sour cream, if desired

- 1 Soak 6 dried shiitake mushrooms in 2 1/2 C water for several hours. Drain, squeeze off excess water, remove stems and cut each mushroom diagonally into 2-3 slices. Reserve soaking water.
- 2 Remove bread crust; soak bread in water, then squeeze out water and tear into small pieces. In a bowl, add this bread to patties ingredients except for egg; mix together well. Add enough beaten egg till texture is smooth, but can still be kneaded. Divide into 16 pieces; form balls and press lightly to shape into small patties.
- 3 Add both butter and vegetable oil to a frying pan. Cook patties over medium heat until both sides are lightly browned. Turn off heat, remove patties and set aside. Remove all but about 1 T of accumulated fat from the pan.
- 4 Over medium heat, add sliced shiitake mushrooms and onion to the pan; stir, scraping off browned bits stuck to bottom of pan; add 1 C of the soaking water that was set aside.
- 5 Bring to a boil, pour contents of pan into a stew pot.\*\* Add bouillon cube, remaining soaking water with additional water to make 1 C, sliced carrot, and parsley, thyme and bay leaf wrapped in cheesecloth.
- 6 Simmer for 8 minutes over low heat; add the potatoes. Place parchment paper directly atop potatoes (*see photo*); simmer for 10 minutes or until a wooden pick can be inserted smoothly into potato. Make sure there is just enough broth to cover ingredients; if needed, add a little water.
- 7 Add patties, black pepper and soy sauce, simmer for another 5-7 minutes. Add more soy sauce to taste. Serve with bread or rice, with sour cream if desired.



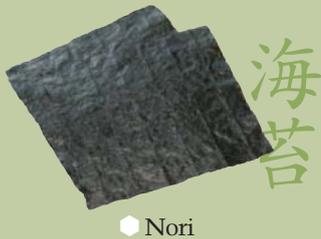
\* May use other ground meat such as beef, chicken or mixtures.

\*\* If using a heavy-bottomed pan, no need to transfer contents to a stew pot.

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



## FUTO-MAKI JUMBO SUSHI ROLL



◆ Nori

### Serves 8 (4 rolls)

312 kcal Protein 7.7 g Fat 4.0 g  
(per person)

- 4 dried shiitake mushrooms
- 360 ml (1 1/2 C) water

### Shiitake seasoning

- 60 ml (1/4 C) mushroom soaking water
- 1 T Kikkoman Soy Sauce
- 1 T granulated sugar
- 1 T Kikkoman Manjo Mirin

- Hot cooked *Japonica* rice\*

### Sushi vinegar mixture

- 4 T rice vinegar
- 1 t granulated sugar
- 1 t salt

- 135 g (4.8 oz.) canned flaked tuna in oil

### Tuna seasoning

- 1 T Kikkoman Soy Sauce
- 1/2 T granulated sugar
- 1/2 T Kikkoman Manjo Mirin

### Tamago-yaki Japanese omelet

- Vegetable oil
- 2 eggs
- 2 t granulated sugar
- A pinch of salt

- 4 sheets roasted nori seaweed
- Cucumber
- 12 sticks imitation crab meat

**1** Soak dried shiitake mushrooms in water for several hours; drain and squeeze off excess water and remove stems. Reserve soaking water. Simmer with shiitake seasoning in small pan for about 5 minutes over medium heat until the liquid has nearly evaporated. Cut shiitake into 3 mm (0.1 in.) slices.

**2** Mix hot cooked rice with sushi vinegar mixture, fan to cool. Drain excess oil from tuna. Place tuna and tuna seasoning in a small pan, heat over medium heat until liquid has nearly evaporated.

**3** To make *tamago-yaki*, heat vegetable oil over medium heat in a rectangular frying pan\*\* and pour in 1/3 egg mixture. When eggs are half-set, fold omelet by lifting the far end and rolling it toward you. Lightly grease the empty area of the pan, move omelet to this far side; grease the other half of pan. Pour in another third egg mixture and allow this new layer to seep beneath omelet. When the new layer is half-set, fold it as the first layer; repeat this process for the third layer, cook until lightly browned. After omelet has cooled, cut into 1 cm (1/3 in.) square long strips, as per cucumber in next step.

**4** Trim the cucumber into same length as the nori seaweed; then cut lengthwise into 6 mm (1/4 in.) strips.

**5** To make the sushi roll, place a sheet of nori on a bamboo mat. Spread the sushi rice out evenly on the nori, leaving the top and bottom of the sheet uncovered. Lay out a strip of cucumber, slices of shiitake, a quarter of the tuna, 3 crab sticks and 2 strips of *tamago-yaki*, all centered atop the rice (see photo 1). Roll up the nori sheet using the bamboo mat, holding the fillings tightly in place (see photos 2 and 3). Repeat with each sheet of nori.

**6** Cut each roll into 8 pieces. When cutting, use a dry cutting board to prevent nori from sticking, and wipe the knife with a damp kitchen towel before cutting each piece.

\* 2C *Japonica* rice and 530 ml (2 C+3 T) water

\*\* If a Japanese-style rectangular omelet pan is unavailable, use an 18 cm (7 in.) round pan to make the long omelet strips.





## Kikkoman *Washoku* Initiative: In Praise of Japanese Cuisine

In December 2013, “*washoku* traditional dietary cultures of the Japanese” were added to UNESCO’s Intangible Cultural Heritage list. In recent years, it has been observed that traditional Japanese food culture is deteriorating in Japan, owing to a range of issues that include eating alone and unbalanced nutrition because of changes in diet. As an Intangible Cultural Heritage, *washoku* was noted for its inclusion of “various fresh ingredients, its use of natural tastes and its well-balanced and healthy diets.” This recognition by UNESCO is expected to reaffirm the distinctive advantages of *washoku*, which will help nurture and promote traditional Japanese food culture, not only abroad, but in Japan.

Over the years, Kikkoman, the leading manufacturer of traditional Japanese soy sauce seasoning, has set forth various initiatives to support the growth of *washoku*. One of the most recent of these was held in Tokyo in November 2013, when Kikkoman sponsored a panel discussion titled “Praising the Appeal of Japanese Cuisine: *Washoku* is Wonderful!” With an eye to enhancing next-generation awareness of *washoku*, the panel comprised four young chefs of Japanese cuisine: Mr. Takuji Takahashi of Kinobu; Mr. Hisato Nakahigashi of Miyamasou; Mr. Yoshihiro Takahashi of Hyotei; and Mr. Naoyuki Yanagihara of Kinsa-ryu Yanagihara School of Traditional Japanese Cuisine. The lively discussion was led by coordinator Mr. Hitoshi Kakizawa.

Each chef is based in either Kyoto or Tokyo, and all are active in promoting *washoku* in Japan and abroad. Their discussion touched on issues that included various aspects of *washoku*, its value and appeal, while inspiring the audience to

cook *washoku* recipes with ways to include them in their daily diet.

The four chefs later held a series of four cooking classes, wherein participants learned not only how to prepare the basic *washoku* meal of *ichiju san-sai* (one soup and three dishes, served with rice and pickles), but how to take a comprehensive approach to *washoku*, including tips on tableware and food arrangement. In addition, they introduced the sensibility of seasonal elements in *washoku*, together with how traditional festivals and celebrations influence Japanese cuisine.

For over 50 years, Kikkoman has been promoting its soy sauce around the world. Through its business activities, the company is also committed to the global introduction of Japanese food culture in its promotion of the international exchange of food cultures; this is an integral part of its management philosophy. This philosophy is called “Kikkoman’s Promise,” which proposes a well-balanced and nutritious diet that brings out the flavor of the ingredients.

Kikkoman aims to contribute to a greater awareness of *washoku* and encourage its role in daily life. By creating delicious dishes through encounters with other food cultures, Kikkoman continues to advance a clearer understanding of this healthy dietary approach and its relevance to our lives, our times and our cultures. ◆



Clockwise from top: Cooking class; Kikkoman’s *washoku* panel discussion; panel coordinator (left) and four participating chefs.