

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



THE JAPANESE TABLE

Sake in Japanese Food Culture Annual Events and Traditions

by Noritake Kanzaki

Sake, Japan's traditional brewed alcoholic beverage, is made from rice, water and rice koji fermentation starter. Our new feature series introduces this venerable drink and how it has influenced Japan's food culture, starting with a look at the essential role sake has played in Japan's rituals and ceremonial events since ancient times.

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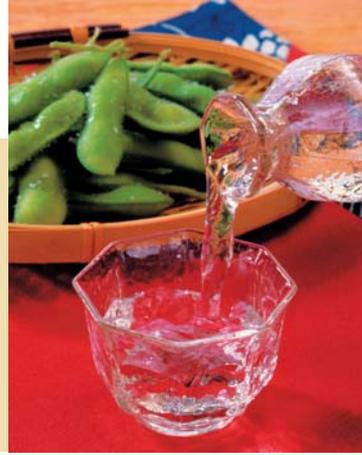
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Sake in Japanese Food Culture

Annual Events and Traditions



From left: *Nigori-zake*, thought to be the most ancient form of sake; tidbits called *o-toshi* or *o-tsumami* are enjoyed with sake at *izakaya* Japanese pubs.

Sanctity of Sake

Sake has been produced since ancient times as an inseparable part of sacred rites and rituals that are dedicated to divine spirits. Indeed, it may be said that the origins of sake arose as ritual offerings to these spirits. An old adage affirms that Japanese divine spirits have a liking for sake. The *sa* is a prefix that can be interpreted as the idea of “purity.” We find the same *sa* in words like *saniwa* (sacred ground) and *saotome* (maiden planting rice), and it is understood as something that reflects a pure state. The *ke* refers to “food,” and thus *sake* is an offering that was considered to be particularly pristine.

In olden times, sake was brewed for festival events. Sake brewing itself was said to be the work of the divine spirits, as expressed in an ancient poem by the master brewer Ikuhi, ancestor of the master brewer of Oomiwa Shrine in Nara Prefecture; the divinity of this shrine is associated with the making of sake. Sake is produced with painstaking care from rice, which was highly honored as representing *chikara*, meaning growth or power; in other words, it is nourishment that contains divine power. Thus it was called *sake*, or “sacred food,” and was considered a medium of communication with the divine. Probably the very oldest form of sake is unfiltered or “cloudy” *nigori-zake*.

Ritual and Ceremony

Even today, sake is essential to any sort of sacred rite. One of the definitions of a ritual lies in the act of food and drink being partaken as if dining together with the gods, where people and the gods are thought to mingle during a banquet. This is best reflected in the rite of *naorai*, which conveys the meaning of release from acts of purification that are practiced before participating in sacred rites. This is not some sort of sake-drinking affair for pleasure; it is entirely about sake as ritual, where the sake itself serves as a profound intermediary between humans and their gods.

The most notable way in which *naorai* has been passed down is still

seen today in those festivities held at shrines immediately following a ceremony. Sake that has been offered to the gods is taken down from the altar and distributed among the organizers of the ceremony. Thus *naorai* refers, in the strict sense, to the sharing or union with the gods to be felt in partaking of the very drink “sipped” by those gods. The procedures or ceremonies of the sake rite are not necessarily standardized, but one well-known formal procedure is the *shiki-san-kon* or “three formal rounds.” This stems from the term *shikikon*, the formal partaking of sake, in which *shiki* signifies ritual, while *kon* refers to sake and an accompanying bit of food. In the *shiki-san-kon* ceremony, guests receive



Shiki-san-kon, as depicted in *Gyokko-onari-no-gozenbu*, a 17th-century illustration that portrays three trays holding sake and food such as rice, seafood, salt and condiments. Together, these comprise the “three rounds” served to guests. The three cups are stacked on the tray at right. Courtesy of Mankameru

Gosannen kassen ekotoba. This is a copy of a ca. 14th-century scroll painting. It depicts the rite of a friendship contract among warriors, where sake is passed from the lord to a warrior before battle. Courtesy of Waseda University Library



three servings of sake, referred to as *san-kon*, each in a different cup. To partake of sacred sake that has been offered to the gods, refreshing one's mouth with food, and drinking three times with deep respect and reflection, represents a ceremonial kind of mutual promise or contract; in this case, with the divine. And it is believed that through such a ceremony, people may avail themselves of the blessings of the gods.

Confirming a Vow

The formal *shikikon* ceremony is thought to have begun as a palace rite during the Heian period (794-1185). Later, with the development of the warrior class in succeeding centuries, the form became established in the ritual servings of sake as a way in which to confirm a pledge or vow. Warriors going off to battle, for example, would gather to exchange such cups, confirming their solidarity and valor. Favorite delicacies served with the sake on such occasions were those with auspicious names: *uchi-awabi* (also called *noshi-awabi*, thinly stretched abalone); *kachi-guri* (dried chestnuts); and kombu (kelp). Their names reflected good fortune: *uchi* means "strike" or "overwhelm"; *kachi* signifies "to win" or "victory"; kombu evokes the word *yorokobu*, or "happiness" and "delight." Together they convey *uchi-kachi-yorokobu*: "we strike, we win, we rejoice." The word for a combination of

light foods chosen to suit the occasion of ceremonial servings of sake is *kondate*, the contemporary term for "menu," wherein *kon* refers to *shikikon*.

The custom of serving sake with a bit of food continues today. When one orders sake or another alcoholic beverage at an *izakaya* Japanese-style pub, they invariably receive a small dish of what are referred to as *o-toshi* or *o-tsumami* refreshments to accompany their drink. Even when riding Shinkansen bullet trains, service includes sales of *o-tsumami* to eat with the alcoholic beverages that are sold; this custom represents a very long and unbroken tradition.

Other forms of this ancient custom are seen today in traditional New Year's ceremonies held in some local communities and in societies of craftsmen, as well as in the exchange of nuptial cups at a marriage ceremony, called *san-san-ku-do*—three rounds of three cups. Until several decades ago, there were customs of exchanging cups to affirm a dutiful relationship reflective of parent and child (*oyako sakazuki*), as well as cup exchanges that expressed a relationship evocative of siblings (*kyodai sakazuki*), as a supportive way of confirming a vow or pledge. This exchange of cups as symbolic of solidifying agreement or mutual promise is uniquely Japanese.

Then there are *reiko*, rituals that involve sake which are conducted at parties. When someone comes late to

a party, having missed the opening formalities, he is often urged to "catch up" with the drinking by having a quick three rounds of drink. In any case, after the *reiko* formalities are over, the informal enjoyment—*bureiko*—can begin. Today, beer is more often used for the toast at banquets and parties, so words like *shikikon* and *reiko* are falling into disuse. However, those customs practiced when Japanese drink can be traced back to sake.

Sake in Japan is more than just for celebrations. It possesses a rich history as a special libation that forms and solidifies bonds between one person and another, and between people and the divine spirits. ◆

Translated by Lynne E. Riggs

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San-san-ku-do at a wedding. This term literally means "three, three, nine times." Both bride and groom take three sips each of three different cups of sake in turn, with each cup larger than the last.

Author's profile

Noritake Kanzaki was born in 1944. He is a specialist in Japanese folklore and president of the Institute for the Culture of Travel. He serves on the Council for Cultural Affairs of the Agency for Cultural Affairs, and as guest professor at the Tokyo University of Agriculture. He is chief priest at the Usa Hachiman Shrine in Okayama Prefecture. His many published works include *Sake no Nihon bunka: Shitte okitai o-sake no hanashi* ("Sake in Japanese culture: convenient stories to know about sake"); *Shikitari no Nihon bunka* ("Manners and customs of Japanese culture"); and *Edo no tabi bunka* ("The culture of travel in the Edo period").



**SPECIAL
REPORT**
from Hong Kong

Japanese Cuisine Around the World

Japanese are introducing their country's cuisine in different countries around the globe. In this year's annual report, we introduce Ryuko Abe, managing director of AHT International Limited, who shares with us his extensive experience and contributions in promoting an understanding of Japanese cuisine in Hong Kong for over 40 years.



Ryuko Abe

Born 1954 in Hokkaido. Mr. Abe's career began at Tokyo's Shinbashi Kanetanaka restaurant; he moved to Hong Kong in 1974, where he worked for 10 years at the Teppanyaki Restaurant Okahan. From 1985, Mr. Abe served as general manager of Kanetanaka restaurant in Hong Kong, and in 1992 opened his own tempura restaurant, Japanese Restaurant Agehan. In 2002, he founded AHT International Limited and proceeded to open Ramen Shop Sapporo, Ramen Shop Hakodate and Ramen Shop Otaru, followed by specialty restaurants Yakinikuya Kinzan (Japanese-style barbecue), Teppanyaki Restaurant Rin and Japanese Restaurant Yasuhan. In 1983, he became a member of the international gastronomic society *Chaîne des Rôtisseurs*, and in 2013 received the Minister's Award for Overseas Promotion of Japanese Food from the Japanese Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries.



Mr. Abe at Japanese Restaurant Yasuhan

I have loved eating and cooking since I was a child, and I knew I wanted to be a chef. After I graduated from high school, I went to a professional training college for cooking, and around that time I became interested in going abroad. I wanted to test myself while I was still young. I was working part-time at a restaurant, and my boss there told me about Kanetanaka, a high-end Japanese traditional restaurant that was setting up shop in Hong Kong. He said, "If you want to go abroad, go to Hong Kong," and I immediately fell in with this idea. After I graduated, I got a job at Kanetanaka's main restaurant Shinbashi Kanetanaka, and in September 1974, I was transferred to Teppanyaki Restaurant Okahan, which Kanetanaka ran in Hong Kong.

Food Culture Surprises

I went to Teppanyaki Restaurant Okahan as assistant master chef. Later I became head chef, then restaurant manager. Teppanyaki Restaurant Okahan not only served *teppanyaki*, but also *sukiyaki*, *shabu-shabu*, *udon-suki* and *sashimi*. One thing that surprised me about

Hong Kong eating habits was that, instead of dipping their super-fatty tuna (*o-toro*) sashimi in soy sauce, diners ate it with XO brandy—I guess because of its disinfectant properties.

Going Independent

In June 1992, I went into business for myself. I found a basement-level location at the Furama Hotel in Hong Kong's Central district, and opened a restaurant called Japanese Restaurant Agehan that specialized in tempura, which was deep-fried right in front of the customers—something that was then quite new in Hong Kong. Preparations to open the restaurant were going smoothly until suddenly, only a week before opening, my main financial backer vanished with the funds we had been counting on, and I had to scramble to recover the start-up capital I needed. We managed to open the shop amid great uncertainty, but once it was open, we had full tables day after day. Our location was excellent. We were right in the middle of Hong Kong's financial district, so we had a particularly large number of lunch customers. About a year later,



At the *teppanyaki* counter in Teppanyaki Restaurant Okahan



Making *teppanyaki* at Teppanyaki Restaurant Rin



Cooking for judges from Chaîne des Rôtisseurs during the test to become a member

a new financial backer appeared, and that cleared up our financial concerns.

In 2002, the hotel was slated to be demolished, so I established my own self-financed company: AHT International Limited. I reopened Japanese Restaurant Agehan, not as a joint operation but as my own enterprise, on the second floor of Hong Kong's massive high-rise, Exchange Square—which was also the location of the Consulate General of Japan. I opened several more restaurants, until in 2009 I opened a *kappo*-style restaurant called Japanese Restaurant Yasuhan. Here, unlike my other restaurants, we take customers by reservation only, and there is no menu. Customers may bring their own beverages, but they leave the food up to us. It is a small shop with only 18 to 20 seats, intimate enough so that we can communicate with all our customers personally.

Japanese Cuisine in Hong Kong

In the mid-1970s when I first came to Hong Kong, there were only about 30 Japanese restaurants, and mostly Japanese were involved in these. The customers were primarily Japanese expatriates and wealthy local residents. Of the Hong Kong people who came to our shop, only about 20 or 30 percent would eat raw fish. At that time, we received Japanese ingredients from Tokyo: one shipment of ingredients every two months by sea and one air shipment per week. Kikkoman's soy sauce and noodle dipping sauce were regulars in the sea shipments, while the air shipments

included Japanese eggplant, Japanese cucumbers and daikon that we used for our *nukazuke* pickles (vegetables pickled in rice bran), along with Matsuzaka beef, fatty tuna (*toro*) and other fresh seafood. At that time, a single serving of *sukiyaki* would have cost nearly the same as one month's salary for some people, and so Japanese cuisine was considered a luxury in those days.

Currently, there are some 1,300 to 1,400 Japanese restaurants in Hong Kong, ranging from the affordable to the exclusive. The majority are "Japanese-style" restaurants run by local people whose cooks trained here for several years in restaurants staffed by Japanese. I had a surprise experience in one of these restaurants, when miso soup was served instead of tea when I sat down at the table. On the other hand, these days the people of Hong Kong have more opportunities to enjoy the real thing if they have the chance to visit an authentic Japanese restaurant, or travel to Japan. This kind of exposure is turning their tastes toward more genuine Japanese cuisine. The number of Hong Kong people who order raw fish has been increasing. Salmon, *hamachi* (yellowtail), *uni* (sea urchin) and *akagai* (ark shell) are all quite popular now.

Championing Japan's Food Culture

For many years, I've been engaged in activities to spread an appreciation for Japanese food culture. Since 1985, I have been a member of the Hong Kong Japanese Restaurant

Association, which was founded in 1980. With them, I was involved in negotiations between the Hong Kong and Japanese governments over the issue of mercury levels in tuna, and in organizing Unagi Festivals during the 1980s and 1990s, where we offered *unagi* (eel) at Japanese restaurants to familiarize Hong Kong with the taste of *unagi* cuisine. Following the March 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake, we launched a month-long event starting in May 2011 called "Love Japanese Food" to promote understanding about the safety of Japanese food products, and this involved 350 restaurants who organized various promotional campaigns.

Japanese Restaurants in Hong Kong

What I always try to do is to serve Japanese food that tastes no different from that served in Japan. We don't modify the taste of our dishes to suit the local palate; we create only authentic Japanese cuisine. I hope Japanese restaurants in Hong Kong continue to improve their skills, especially in regard to flavor and fish-cooking techniques. What I want to do now, using my own experience, is to teach Japanese food culture to those who operate Japanese restaurants in Hong Kong, while continuing to support activities that promote an understanding of the safety of Japanese food products. My dream is to build a cooking school in Hong Kong, where chefs can learn authentic Japanese cuisine. ■



MASHED AVOCADO AND TOFU APPETIZER

The sauce for this recipe is made with two classic Japanese seasonings, soy sauce and mirin, and a touch of lemon. This sauce doesn't mask the natural flavor of the food, unlike some oil-based sauces, and brings out the natural flavors of the food, which is one of the important elements of Japanese cuisine.



● Tofu

Serves 6 131 kcal Protein 3.7 g Fat 1.5 g (per person)

- One block of salted tofu
 - 1 small avocado
 - 3/4 t lemon juice
- Sauce**
- 1/2 T lemon juice
 - 2 T Kikkoman Soy Sauce
 - 1 T Kikkoman Manjo Mirin
 - Lettuce leaf, any type
 - Tomato, peeled and seeds removed, cut into strips *
 - Red or white onion cut into thin slices

Salted tofu

- One block of soft tofu, 300-350 g / 10-12 oz.
- 1/2 t salt



1 Sprinkle and rub 1/4 t salt over the top and sides of the tofu. With a spatula, place the tofu, unsalted side up, on a paper towel; sprinkle and rub 1/4 t salt onto this side as well.



2 Gently wrap the tofu with the paper towel, place in a container and refrigerate for one day.

1 Unwrap the prepared salted tofu, drain and wipe off excess moisture with a paper towel; mash roughly with a fork (*photo*).

2 Cut the avocado in half, remove the seed and peel. Mash roughly with a fork and add 3/4 t lemon juice.

3 Mix the mashed tofu and avocado together. Blend the sauce ingredients and set aside.

4 Lay out lettuce leaf on a serving plate. Spoon out the tofu and avocado mixture atop the lettuce and garnish with the tomato and sliced onion.

5 Serve with the sauce on the side.

* The tomato can be peeled easily if parboiled.

Note: A food processor may be used instead of a fork if desired; if so, allow the mixture to remain a bit chunky. Alternatively, if preferred, this tofu and avocado mixture may be enjoyed as a dip by making the texture completely smooth and adjusting the seasoning to taste.



Recipe by Michiko Yamamoto

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



BUTA NO KAKUNI SIMMERED PORK

This classic recipe uses the popular traditional Japanese seasoning combination of soy sauce, sake and mirin. Additional ingredients cooked with the pork sometimes differ, depending on regional tastes; as an example, in certain parts of the country, this dish may call for boiled eggs or daikon, or both.



● Pork belly

Serves 4
496 kcal Protein 16.6 g Fat 36.5 g
(per person)

- 500 g / 1 lb. pork belly*
- Green part of Japanese long onion or leek
- 2 thin slices of unpeeled fresh ginger
- 960 ml / 4 C water

Seasoning

- 60 ml / ¼ C Kikkoman Soy Sauce
- 60 ml / ¼ C sake
- 60 ml / ¼ C Kikkoman Manjo Mirin
- 3 T sugar
- Mustard

- 1 Cut pork into 8 pieces, each about 3-4 cm / 1.5 in. thick.
- 2 Heat a frying pan over medium heat and cook the meat until it turns golden brown.
- 3 In a pot, place the browned pork and add the green onion, the ginger and 4 cups of water. Bring to a boil over high heat, then reduce to low heat and simmer for one hour.
- 4 After an hour, turn off the heat. Set aside the pot in a cool place for a half or whole day until the fat is solidified (*photo*). If pressed for time, set the pot in a bowl of ice water, and the fat will solidify in one or two hours.
- 5 Remove the solid fat from the surface of the liquid. Drain the ingredients in the pot, while saving the liquid to use when simmering in Step 6; top up with additional water if less than 2 cups. Remove onion and ginger. Wipe any additional fat from inside the pot with paper towels.
- 6 Return the meat to the same pot. Add the 2 cups of saved liquid and the seasoning. Bring to a boil over medium-high heat, then lower to medium and simmer for one hour, keeping a steady simmer of small bubbles going continuously. Stir a few times while simmering, until the liquid has reduced and glazed.
- 7 Serve the pork garnished with mustard.



* Shoulder or shin cuts may be substituted.

Recipe by Kikkoman Corporation



Kikkoman Group Event: Kikkoman Nabe-Festival



Clockwise from top: Kikkoman Nabe-Festival award winners and Kikkoman President and CEO Noriaki Horikiri; original *nabe* hot pots; voting for hot pot favorites; participants and visitors enjoying the event.

The Kikkoman Group held its first-ever joint event, the Kikkoman Nabe-Festival, on February 22 in Tokyo. The festival helped build a sense of unity, as participating teams from Kikkoman Group companies were invited to share their original *nabe* hot pot dishes, while visitors voted for their favorite. The festival attracted over 650 employees and their families, who enjoyed a wide variety of delicious hot pot recipes.

Typically, companies arrange internal seasonal or sports-related activities to help motivate and foster communications within their organizations; in this case, the Kikkoman Group selected the theme of food to energize its businesses this year. *Nabe* is a type of home cooking very familiar to Japanese, where several people gather around a hot pot and enjoy eating together. Over 30 teams enrolled in the festival and presented hot pots based on original recipes made using products that each

Group company manufactures and sells, such as soy sauce, soy milk, tomato-based products, mirin and wine. Overseas teams introduced their own culinary tastes via Japanese *nabe* culture, as they served up their own distinctive and creative “transborder” hot pots. To vote for their favorite, visitors received a new pencil, and placed it in a ballot box positioned in front of their preferred hot pot entry. The pencils were later donated to an organization that supports children in developing countries.

Kikkoman’s corporate slogan is “seasoning your life.” This sentiment reflects the company’s wish to help consumers enrich their lives as they savor memories in harmony with flavorful food-related experiences. The Kikkoman Nabe-Festival aimed at creating such long-lasting memories that bring families closer together, as well as uniting the Kikkoman Group as a whole through a fun and delightful food experience. ◆