

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



THE JAPANESE TABLE

Sake in Japanese Food Culture

Distinctive Customs of Drinking Sake

by Noritake Kanzaki

This final installment in our series about Japanese sake takes a closer look at the traditions and foods that revolve around social drinking.

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Sake in Japanese Food Culture

Distinctive Customs of Drinking Sake



From left: *Sakana* tidbits such as *shio-kara* salt-fermented squid and dried squid accompany the drinking of sake.

Snacks with Sake

Japan has a few unusual practices related to the drinking of sake. One is that sake drinkers typically nibble on dishes of tidbits called *sakana* between sips of their drink. This snacking while drinking sake, called *kuchitori-sakana*, is distinct from eating appetizers intended to stimulate the appetite. Even without food to accompany the sake, a knowledgeable sake drinker will, at the very least, lick a bit of salt between sips. Sake is very high in sugar content, so taking a tiny morsel of salt refreshes the palate and enhances the pleasure of the drink.

This long-established enjoyment of *sakana* with sake remains popular even today, as any visitor to a modern *izakaya* Japanese-style pub can attest. After ordering sake—or any alcoholic beverage for that matter—a *sakana* snack invariably appears as part of the order. These small and savory dishes are a customary and essential element of Japan's sake culture.

Another time-honored element in sake-drinking culture is *sakazuki-goto*, a kind of ritual in which each participant drains three cups of sake in three sips each, in order to seal a pledge or cement a deal. It is still performed in marriage ceremonies today. An accompanying tray of food might include kombu, dried squid or *umeboshi* pickled Japanese apricots.

Ritual and Custom

Also distinctive is the custom of warming sake before drinking. The practice of pasteurizing sake can be traced back to as early as the fourteenth century. At that time, it was difficult to preserve the beverage for long periods, especially in those regions where temperature and humidity are high in spring and summer. Brewers thus pasteurized their sake before shipment to maintain its quality. Awareness of the antibacterial advantages afforded by this hint from brewers may have prompted people to warm their sake before imbibing. A further reason may be that warmed sake brings out the best in the variety of simmered dishes that were originally served at festive drinking parties. The two make for a very satisfying match. The drinking of warm sake with simmered dishes is a relatively new tradition, having become popular during the eighteenth century in urban areas such as Edo (Tokyo), Kyoto and Osaka, as dining out developed as an industry, and as simmered dishes were customarily served at shops and food stalls.

Social Changes

It was much later that the concept of social sake-drinking spread from the cities to rural agricultural and fishing villages, where sake had

previously been brewed privately just for special observances and presented as an offering, which people would then drink “together with the gods” during a rite called *naorai*. It wasn't until around the end of the nineteenth century that sake was purchased as a distinct commodity in both urban and rural areas throughout Japan, and the act of drinking sake moved beyond strictly ritual significance towards the broader social role it plays today. This way of drinking sake transformed once-special events to ordinary occasions, and such opportunities in turn increased the demand for sake.

One major factor behind this shift was that, in addition to the traditional banquets held to celebrate annual and seasonal events, semi-official banquets called *enkai* were conducted more frequently following the Meiji Restoration of 1868. *Enkai* included parties organized by companies and government offices, as well as celebrations to send men off to battle and welcome them back during Japan's times of war with China (1894–95) and Russia (1904–05). Like social drinking, *enkai* originated in urban areas and gradually became more widespread. Testimony to the banquet boom of those times was the sharp increase

Traditional celebratory dishes from the Seto Inland Sea region accompany sake.



in the quantity of sake produced, as more sake breweries came to be established in various parts of the country from around 1897. Indeed, that increase continued to rise to the point where sake taxes collected by the national government came to account for a full third of the country's tax revenues.

While the word "banquet" is used here, an *enkai* was not intended to be a lavish dining experience, but rather an



Details of *sakana* accompanying sake, as served upon Admiral Togo's victorious return to Tokyo in 1905: Three *sakazuki-goto* cups, *kachi-guri* ("winning chestnut") and *uchi-awabi* ("beaten abalone"). Depicted by artist Shokoku Yamamoto in the magazine *Fuzokugaho*, vol. 328.

opportunity for people to drink together and forge closer bonds. Such occasions sometimes went on for hours. The food served at these drinking parties, moreover, was prepared expressly to be eaten while drinking sake, and was quite different from appetizers or side dishes that might accompany a regular meal. *Enkai* served classic, *kaiseki* course-style Japanese cuisine that consists of five dishes, served simultaneously on a tray-table: rice; *o-sumashi* clear soup; *namasu* vinegared vegetables, or raw seafood, or *su-miso-ae* vegetables with seafood dressed in vinegared miso; a simmered dish flavored with soy sauce; and grilled, salted fish. The amount of rice was very small—only about three mouthfuls—and the soup had a moderate salt content. Both were intended to complement copious amounts of sake: the rice to assuage immediate hunger, and the soup to cleanse the palate. In later years, sashimi was served instead of grilled fish. The soy sauce that accompanies these delicate slices of raw fish is the integral element that makes sashimi the ultimate in *sakana* snacks. To wrap up these drinking parties, a substantial serving of rice, a bowl of miso soup, and *tsukemono* pickles were served to finish with a "proper

meal." This practice continues even today at parties where sake is served. Quite a long succession of tasty *sakana* dishes may be offered, but eventually it is all brought to a conclusion with the *shime no shokuji*, or "closing meal."

This tradition of mingling specific, customary foods while drinking sake is unlike typical Western social drinking, and also differs, for example, from how wine is consumed during course-style meals. Japanese sake might perhaps best be considered a delightful aperitif that characterizes the country's distinctive culture of enjoying sake while forging bonds. ◆

Translated by Lynne E. Riggs

cover

Sakana snacks are enjoyed while sipping sake. Here, a small simmered dish of seasonal vegetables complements warmed sake.

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").



CLOSE-UP JAPAN

Traditions and trends
in Japanese food culture



Left: *Yu-dofu*; Below clockwise from top: *abura-age*, *hirousu* and *atsu-age*.



Tofu Culture in Kyoto

Tofu, high in protein, is popular around the world; in Japan, Kyoto is known to be the best source for delicious tofu. Soybeans are farmed in this region, but the main reason is its water: tofu is made with soybeans, but is 90% water. Green and mountainous, the area around Kyoto is blessed with high quality soft water. Tofu was introduced to Japan from China in the seventh and eighth centuries, after Buddhism arrived from the continent; it was not until the fourteenth century, however, that tofu

Kyoto is famous for its delicious tofu

became more widely popular. Kyoto is known for its numerous temples, and tofu flourished as an essential ingredient in *shojin-ryori* vegetarian temple cuisine—thus a diverse and complex “tofu culture” evolved here.

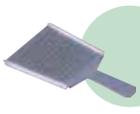
A tofu restaurant on the grounds of Nanzenji temple is famous for *yu-dofu*, made by placing kombu in a pot of water, and heating cut-up blocks of tofu in the pot. The warm tofu is then served in a soy sauce-based sauce with condiments such as Japanese long onion and *katsubushi* shaved dried bonito. *Niken-jaya*, two tea houses in front of the gates of Yasaka shrine, were best known for tofu *dengaku*; one of them

still serves visitors today, as it has for over 400 years. *Tofu dengaku* is prepared by slowly grilling skewered tofu coated with flavorful *kinome miso*—miso mixed with *sansho* mountain pepper sprouts—over a charcoal fire. Kyoto also boasts many tofu stores, some established over a century ago, whose fresh hand-made tofu is popular among locals and tourists alike. Kyoto’s countless specialty tofu stores and restaurants have served generations of customers—all thanks to the peerless quality of its water.

Tofu may be classified into various types: firm *momen*, with its slightly rough texture; soft *kinugoshi*, which is “silky” and fine; and the processed types, such as *yaki-dofu* grilled tofu, deep-fried *abura-age* and *atsu-age*. *Hirousu*, also known as *ganmodoki*, is a kind of “tofu fritter” made by mixing tofu with several ingredients such as carrot, ginkgo nut and lily root, forming into balls, and deep-frying in oil. ●



Cutting tofu into blocks



Chawan-mushi

Chawan-mushi steamed savory custard has a soft, smooth texture with rich umami, and is served in small individual cups. The dish is prepared by placing bite-sized pieces of chicken, shrimp, shiitake mushrooms and *kamaboko* steamed fish cake, as well as ginkgo nuts and *mitsuba* (trefoil), into each cup. A mixture of beaten egg, dashi stock, soy sauce and salt is poured over these ingredients, then the cups are covered and steamed. This method prevents overcooking, while preserving natural flavors and nutrients.

Chawan-mushi has a

long history. Nagasaki's *tojin yashiki* compound, built for Chinese merchants in the seventeenth century during the period of Japan's self-imposed isolation, was a source of cultural and culinary influence. The origins of *chawan-mushi* emerged during the eighteenth century, and can be traced to Nagasaki's *Shippoku* banquet cuisine, consisting of an abundant array of both Chinese and Western foods. *Chawan-mushi* is both delicious and versatile: nowadays, it not only appears in *kaiseki-ryori*, Japanese haute cuisine, but is also made and enjoyed at home. ◆



Steaming cups of *chawan-mushi*



In the past, chopsticks were used; today it is usually eaten with a spoon.

TASTY TRAVEL



Hiroshima



From top: Preparing *okonomiyaki* in front of customers; Hiroshima-style *okonomiyaki*.

Hiroshima-Style *Okonomiyaki*

Okonomiyaki is a relatively new dish in Japanese cuisine, having first appeared in the twentieth century. *Okonomiyaki* is a kind of pancake filled with a variety of ingredients cooked on a hot iron griddle, then topped with *okonomiyaki* sauce and *aonori* green laver. The dish takes its name from the Japanese *okonomi*, literally, "as you like," and is popular throughout Japan, particularly in Hiroshima Prefecture, which makes its own unique style of *okonomiyaki*. In Hiroshima-style *okonomiyaki*, its various ingredients are layered, rather than mixed into wheat batter, as is common in most regions. Hiroshima-style *okonomiyaki* also typically incorporates a mountain of shredded cabbage and fried noodles. Some 2,000 restaurants in Hiroshima Prefecture specialize in Hiroshima-style *okonomiyaki*. ◆



SIMMERED MUSHROOMS WITH DASHI STOCK

Japanese cuisine is based on simple, natural flavors: just a little soy sauce brings out the umami of the mushrooms here, which salt alone can't do. Italian parsley and lemon substituted for traditional *mitsuba* and *yuzu*, respectively, approximate an authentic Japanese taste.



◆ Shiitake

Serves 3

16 kcal Protein 2.2 g Fat 0.3 g
(per person)

- 3 x 3 cm / 1 x 1 in. piece of kombu
- 100 ml / 3.5 oz. dashi stock
- 8 medium white mushrooms, 150 g / 5 oz., halved
- 5 medium shiitake mushrooms, 100 g / 3.5 oz., remove hard ends of stem and quarter
- Italian parsley leaves, picked
- 1 t Kikkoman Soy Sauce, plus a few extra drops to taste
- Untreated lemon

1 Place kombu in dashi stock and allow to soak for over 30 minutes. Remove the kombu; set aside the stock.

2 Place soaked kombu in a pot* and add white mushrooms, shiitake and Italian parsley.

3 In a separate bowl, mix the dashi stock and soy sauce, and pour into the pot. Cover and simmer over low heat for about 5 minutes or until coming to a boil; remove the lid and stir. Taste and add a little more soy sauce if desired.

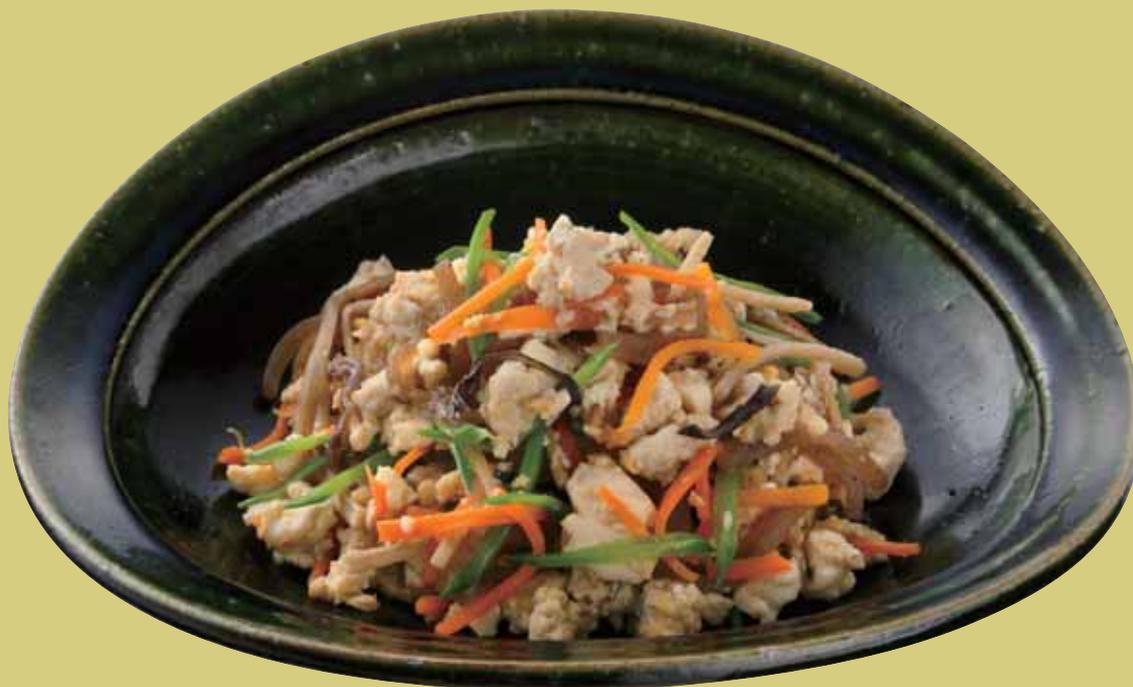
4 Cover once again and simmer for another 2-3 minutes, or until a skewer passes smoothly through the white mushrooms.

5 Serve the mushrooms together with the soup in individual bowls, garnished with grated lemon rind.

* A smaller pot requires less liquid, which will bring out the umami of the mushrooms. Suggested pot diameter about 15 cm / 6 in.

Recipe by Michiko Yamamoto

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



IRI-DOFU SCRAMBLED TOFU

Iri-dofu scrambled tofu is a popular dish, often made at home. In addition to the ingredients suggested here, tofu mixes well with a variety of other vegetables, including Japanese long onion and shiitake mushrooms. *Iri-dofu* is also delicious served at room temperature.



● Konjac

Serves 4

151 kcal Protein 9.1 g Fat 8.8 g
(per person)

- One block firm tofu, 400 g / 14 oz.
- 50 g / 2 oz. carrot
- 40 g / 1.5 oz. burdock root
- 1/4 block konjac, 50 g / 2 oz.
- 2-3 pieces of dried cloud ear mushrooms
- 8 snow peas
- Salt
- 1 T vegetable oil

Seasoning

- 1 1/2 T granulated sugar
- 2 T Kikkoman Light Color Soy Sauce
- 1 T sake

- 1 egg, beaten

- 1 Cut tofu into quarters, boil for 1 minute in a pot, then drain.
- 2 Cut both carrot and burdock into julienned strips 4 cm / 1 1/2 in. long. Set aside the carrot; soak the burdock in water for 10 minutes, then drain.
- 3 Boil konjac for 2 minutes in a pot and drain. Slice thinly crosswise, then cut into julienned strips 4 cm / 1 1/2 in. long.
- 4 Soak dried cloud ear mushrooms in water for 30 minutes, drain and put in a bowl. Pour hot water over the mushrooms and soak for a minute; drain and discard tough ends; cut mushrooms into thin strips.
- 5 String the snow peas. Parboil in salted hot water, then drain. Slice diagonally.
- 6 Heat oil in a pan and on high heat, add konjac, burdock and carrot, sautéing each before adding the next ingredient. Add the cloud ear mushrooms, then the tofu.
- 7 On continued high heat, sauté the tofu, breaking it up coarsely.
- 8 Add the seasoning ingredients, stir well, then add the snow peas.
- 9 Finally, pour in the beaten egg and stir gently. Remove from heat and serve.

Recipe by Kikkoman Corporation



PKI and KSP Celebrate Anniversaries

25 Years for PKI in Taiwan

This October 2015, President Kikkoman Inc. (PKI), a Kikkoman Group company, commemorated 25 years in Taiwan by holding a ceremony in the city of Tainan. PKI made its start in 1990 as a joint venture between Kikkoman and Uni-President Enterprises Corp., the largest food company in Taiwan; since then, PKI has grown apace, benefitting from the Uni-President sales network as well as from Kikkoman's excellent soy sauce brewing technology.

Prior to the commemorative event, Kikkoman Corporation's Honorary CEO and Chairman of the Board Yuzaburo Mogi, PKI directors and other representatives visited the PKI plant, where Mr. Mogi gave a speech praising employees as being one of the reasons behind PKI's success over the last quarter-century, and commended the "united efforts made by those who have taken part in PKI from both Japan and Taiwan to develop the company." He also added, "I ask for PKI to hold true to its principle of customers first, to manufacture safe and hygienic products, and to achieve further growth, making the most of Kikkoman's technology and Uni-President's sales capabilities." Following a toast by PKI Chairman Kenichi Saito, guests from Uni-President, PKI distributors and corporate customers enjoyed an evening of live entertainment.



PKI Chairman Saito (r.) offers a celebratory toast.



30th Anniversary for Singapore's KSP

Kikkoman held another commemoration ceremony this October, this time to mark the 30th anniversary of Kikkoman (S) Pte Ltd (KSP) in Singapore. About one hundred supporters and contributors to KSP's success attended a dinner held at the Shangri-La Hotel, Singapore. Following a welcome speech by Kikkoman Honorary CEO and Chairman of the Board Yuzaburo Mogi, congratulations were offered by both the Ambassador of Japan to Singapore, Haruhisa Takeuchi, and Singapore's former Minister for Transport, Lui Tuck Yew. The event was then kicked off with a traditional sake barrel opening ceremony. A professional harpist entertained guests during this congenial celebratory gathering.



Top: Welcome speech by Mr. Mogi; Tree-planting at Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve (l.-r.): Mr. Takeuchi, Mr. Mogi, Khaw Boon Wan (Coordinating Minister for Infrastructure and Minister of Transport) and Chew Hock Yong (Second Permanent Secretary, Ministry of National Development).

Donation to Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve

To recognize KSP's 30th anniversary in Singapore, Kikkoman donated SGD500,000 (USD350,000) for tree-planting and environmental education programs at Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve. Preserving and maintaining this important mangrove wetland ecosystem in the face of Singapore's rapid development is one of the country's environmental objectives. Kikkoman understands the significance of protecting the reserve as a place for environmental education, where people can come in direct contact with nature and learn the importance of conservation.

By making social contributions such as these, Kikkoman reaffirms its stance as "a company whose existence is meaningful to the global society," thus reflecting its management philosophy. The company is involved with all its host communities, including those in Singapore and Taiwan, as a generous and supportive corporate citizen, and is proactive in initiating both environmental preservation and cultural exchange. ●