

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



THE JAPANESE TABLE

Japanese Tea

Sencha

by Mitsuru Shirai

In this issue of Food Forum, our ongoing series on Japanese tea focuses on the subtleties of sencha green tea and its essential place in washoku traditional Japanese cuisine.

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Japanese Tea

Sencha



Sweet and savory accompaniments include, from left: *Ohagi* glutinous rice ball sweets coated in sweet *azuki* red bean paste and *kinako* roasted soybean flour mixed with sugar; *Sembei* and *okaki* rice crackers; A cup of *sencha*.

Variations of Sencha

In much of the world, green tea is processed by pan-roasting, but *sencha* Japanese tea, which accounts for 80 percent of all tea consumed in Japan, is steamed. Steamed *sencha* has a bracing, refreshing aroma and contains more umami than other teas. *Sencha* comprises a variety of teas, from high grade *sencha* to more common and affordable types of *sencha*, *hojicha* and *bancha*.

High grade *sencha* contains more constituents of umami compared to other Japanese teas, and thus offers a rich, rewarding flavor. It is often presented as a gift, and served on special occasions or to guests. *Hojicha* leaves are roasted after steaming, and this tea has recently become quite popular for its pleasant fragrance and mild taste. *Bancha* is made with tea leaves picked later in the season; both *hojicha* and *bancha* complement daily meals.

Processing Methods

The method of making *sencha* begins with steaming tea leaves that have been harvested from the fields. This heating process through steaming halts the oxidation process (allowing oxidation to progress results in oolong tea and so-called black tea). After steaming, the leaves are rolled in order to break up their structure, which allows nutrients contained within their cell components to be more readily released when steeped in hot water. Through further rolling and twisting, the leaves either form into needle-like shapes and thin rolls, or they are chopped. The technique of rolling the leaves is particularly important. Until the end of the nineteenth century, tea leaves were predominantly hand-rolled, but as tea production became mechanized in Japan, a “rolling and twisting” machine was invented in the late 1890s. Over the years, advancements

to the machine were made until it came to reproduce and replace the subtle and skillful techniques of hand-rolling, making it possible to mass-produce fine *sencha*. Most tea today is made by machine, but some high grade *sencha* tea varieties are still rolled by hand, which requires great expertise.

Following the rolling process, the tea is dried to produce *aracha* crude green tea. Tea retailers blend *aracha* from different tea-growing regions and harvest seasons to create combinations of flavors and aromas to suit the tastes of their clientele. *Shincha* or first-flush tea (also called *ichiban-cha*) has an especially delicate flavor and aroma, and is marketed at high prices.

Brewing Sencha

The *kyusu* one-handled teapot is one of the most-often used utensils for the daily drinking of tea. When brewing high-grade *sencha* for two



High grade *sencha*



Fukamushi sencha



Bancha



Hojicha



Rolling tea leaves by machine

people, about two teaspoons—three or four grams, about 0.10 to 0.14 ounces—of leaves are recommended. Ideally, the water should be between 55-60°C (130-140°F) and the leaves steeped for about one minute before serving; or, in the case of *fukamushi* deep-steamed *sencha*, for about thirty seconds. Water that is too hot increases the astringency and bitterness of tea; water at lower temperatures of 70-80°C (160-180°F) produces a sweeter, more mellow tea with a higher amount of umami. *Hojicha* and *bancha* teas may be steeped in slightly hotter water of 95-100°C (200-212°F) and poured after brewing for around thirty seconds so as to appreciate their unique aromas. When serving, the

tea is carefully poured out gradually and portioned out evenly into several cups, so that each contains tea of a similar hue. Tea is poured out to the last drop, to enable steeping for delicious second servings of tea. Perhaps the most customary way in which *sencha* is enjoyed is accompanied by a sweet of some kind, in order to complement the slight astringency of the tea. Those who do not favor sweets may prefer soy sauce-flavored *sembei* or *okaki* rice crackers, or Japanese pickles.

New Ways of Sencha

Cold-brewed *sencha* made with water and ice is currently popular. This method results in a less astringent brew containing more umami and is, above all, very easy to make. Simply place about eight to ten teaspoons, fifteen or twenty grams (about 0.5 to 0.7 oz.) of tea leaves in a 750 ml (25 oz.) bottle of water, steep in the refrigerator for several hours, then pour through a tea strainer. Drinking this tea from a wine glass allows an appreciation of both its aroma and its beautiful green color. Various new types of *sencha* are also attracting attention, including hybrid teas that produce the fragrance of jasmine or cherry tree leaves, and oolong tea-like aromatic green teas. Increasingly, young people are attracted to

flavored teas concocted by adding herbs or dried fruit to a *sencha*-based tea.

In light of the busy routines of contemporary society, these days it may be more convenient to drink the bottled, ready-made teas that are sold in stores. But when time permits, enjoying *sencha* brewed in a *kyusu* has its rewards, alleviating stress and granting a moment to savor the pleasures of life. Sitting down and relaxing with a fine cup of *sencha* and a well-chosen confectionery is an indulgence everyone should experience. ●



The beautiful green color and delicate aroma of cold-brewed *sencha* can be fully appreciated when served in a wine glass.

cover

Sencha, made and served using a *kyusu* one-handed teapot

Author's profile

Mitsuru Shirai was born in 1957. After graduating from Osaka Prefecture University, he served in the Shizuoka prefectural government and has long been involved in the promotion of tea in his roles as general manager of planning in the World Green Tea Association; manager of Shizuoka Prefecture Tea and Agricultural Production Division; director of Shizuoka Prefecture Department of Economy and Industry; and vice-director of Fujinokuni Cha no Miyako Museum (Tea Museum, Shizuoka). He is a qualified Japanese tea instructor, a Chinese tea artist and Chinese tea sommelier. His authored works include *Yabukita no subete* ("All about Yabukita cultivar of tea"; 2007); *No no fukei* ("Agricultural essays"; 2010-2017); and *Ryokucha tsushin* ("World green tea bulletin"; 2007).



CLOSE-UP JAPAN

Traditions and trends
in Japanese food culture



Deep-frying chicken *karaage*

Karaage

Japanese deep-fried chicken, *tori-no-karaage*—called simply *karaage*—is said to have made its first appearance on restaurant menus in 1930s Tokyo. The word *karaage* itself, strictly speaking, refers to a general cooking method wherein seasoned or unseasoned ingredients are coated with flour or starch and deep-fried. Not only chicken, but fish, pork and vegetables can be prepared this way, but chicken *karaage* is so popular that, in Japan, people automatically think of “chicken” when they hear the word “*karaage*.”



Karaage in bento lunch box

Karaage tastes
delicious,
hot or cold

Before deep-frying, the chicken is cut up and marinated briefly in a blend of soy sauce mixed with sake, mirin, garlic, ginger and other seasonings, then coated with wheat flour or potato starch, which makes for an exceptionally crunchy outer skin and moist, tender meat. *Karaage* is not only considered a main dish at meals, it appears in bento lunch boxes and at picnics, because it tastes delicious, hot or cold, and is easy to eat. This is a dish made not only at home: in convenience stores, pre-made *karaage* is kept warm and sold right by the cash register to tempt the appetite; it is found in supermarkets and

bento shops, sometimes marketed as a snack to accompany drinks. Even frozen *karaage* is available. There are many take-out *karaage* shops in Japan, each with its own unique style. Boneless thigh or breast meat is typically used, but some shops swear by bone-in meat. Much of prepared *karaage* is made-to-order, and customers take away crispy hot chicken.

Arguably, Japan's *karaage* culture is most deeply rooted in Oita Prefecture, located on Japan's southern island of Kyushu—an area once known for its numerous chicken farms, and where people are said to eat more chicken compared to other prefectures. The city of Nakatsu in northern Oita, in particular, boasts approximately sixty take-out shops specializing in *karaage*, each with its own custom recipe—satisfying not only residents, but drawing hungry tourists who visit the region to sample delicious *karaage* variations. ◆



Asazuke

The history of *tsukemono*, Japanese pickles made through fermentation, can be traced to the eighth century. *Tsukemono* are a small but indispensable element in *washoku*, the Japanese traditional diet, and their wide variety reflects the

availability of fresh seasonal vegetables, seasonings used and pickling time. In recent years, *asazuke*, a type of *tsukemono* made without fermentation, has become popular. Often made at home, *asazuke* are lightly pickled, mild-cured vegetables marinated

briefly in seasoned liquid that combines condiments like salt, dashi, vinegar and soy sauce, all according to personal taste. *Asazuke* can be enjoyed like a salad, as they retain the freshness of raw vegetables. Markets sell various marinades for making *asazuke* that include kombu dashi, fermented rice bran, sweet vinegar and other seasonings. *Asazuke* are popular because they can be made quickly, with minimal prep time: chop up favorite vegetables, place in a container with seasoning liquid, and squeeze the ingredients a few times to allow absorption of flavor before placing in the refrigerator for 15 to 30 minutes. *Asazuke* should be eaten within a few days after being made. ◆



Asazuke, clockwise from left: Chinese cabbage, eggplant, daikon, cucumber, carrot

TASTY TRAVEL



Okayama

Okayama Mamakari-zushi

Sappa (*mamakari*), small herring found in the Seto Inland Sea, taste best when vinegared or deep-fried as *karaage*. Vinegared *sappa* atop sushi rice—*mamakari-zushi*—is an especially popular dish along the coast in Okayama Prefecture, traditionally served on special occasions. *Mamakari's* delicious reputation inspired its amusing name, implying that, because it is so good, everyone keeps eating it until the rice runs out—and then must borrow (*kari*) rice (*mama*) from neighbors. Scaled and gutted with tail left on, the fish is salted for an hour, rinsed in vinegar, then marinated overnight in vinegar mixed with sugar and salt. The next day, the *mamakari* are laid atop small hand-formed balls of sushi rice to create *mamakari-zushi*. ◆



Mamakari-zushi



DASHI JELLY WITH CUBED VEGETABLES, GAZPACHO-STYLE

This recipe takes a hint from a type of gazpacho made with diced vegetables, while the dashi jelly adds a Japanese taste. This dish is delicious as a starter or as a fresh salad. Depending on preference, the proportions of dashi jelly or the vegetables may be adjusted.



◆ Japanese cucumber

Appetizer serves 3-4

49 kcal Protein 4.6 g Fat 0.3 g
(per serving)

Dashi jelly

- 400 ml / 1 2/3 C dashi stock
- Juice from 1 thumb-size knob of ginger, grated and squeezed
- 7 g / 1 T unflavored gelatin powder
- 1 T Kikkoman Light Color Soy Sauce

- 100 g / 3.5 oz. Japanese cucumber
- Salt
- 2 medium tomatoes, 150 g / 1/3 lb.

Vinegar-soy sauce

- 1/2 T grain vinegar
- 1 T Kikkoman Light Color Soy Sauce

- 2-3 okra, total 30 g / 1 oz.

- 1 From 400 ml of dashi stock, spoon 2 T into a small bowl. Add ginger juice and microwave until edges of the stock start to bubble.* Set aside.
- 2 Place powdered gelatin in a bowl, add 3 T cold dashi stock and wait for one minute.** Heat another 3 T of dashi stock in microwave, stir into gelatin until granules are completely dissolved. Add the remaining stock, ginger mixture and light color soy sauce to the dissolved gelatin. Stir, then pour the mixture into a flat container and refrigerate until set.
- 3 Peel the cucumber and cut into cubes 6-8 mm / 0.2- 0.3 in., about 3/4 C. Put the cubed cucumber in a bowl. Sprinkle with about 1/8 t salt and leave for 15 minutes; squeeze out excess moisture from the cucumber.
- 4 Peel the tomatoes and cut into 8-10 mm / 0.3-0.4 in. cubes.
- 5 Blend vinegar and soy sauce in a small bowl.
- 6 In a separate bowl, place the cubed cucumber and tomato. Add 2 t of the vinegar-soy sauce, stir and taste; add more if needed.
- 7 Remove okra stems and boil in lightly salted water for about 2 minutes until cooked; drain and cool. Cut lengthwise into halves or quarters, depending on size, and then into 8 mm / 0.3 in. pieces, a bit smaller than the tomato cubes. Put in a small bowl, stir in a small amount of the vinegar-soy sauce. Add okra to cucumber and tomato mixture.
- 8 Spoon out the dashi jelly over the mixed vegetables; stir lightly. Scoop this mixture into serving glasses.

* Ginger has proteolytic enzymes that prevent gelatin from setting. Heating the ginger juice breaks down the enzymes to allow gelatin to harden.

** Some gelatin powder does not require this process, so follow package instructions for dissolving.



DAIZU CHA-MESHI HOJICHA SOYBEAN RICE



昆布茶

◆ Japanese kombu tea granules

Serves 4

329 kcal Protein 9.1 g Fat 3.1 g
(per serving)

- 50 g / 1.7 oz. dry soybeans
- 500 ml / 2 C hot water
- 7 g / 0.2 oz. *hojicha* tea leaves*
- 360 ml / 1 ½ C *japonica* rice

Seasoning

- 1 T sake
- 2 t Kikkoman Soy Sauce
- 1 ½ t Japanese kombu tea granules**
- 1/3 t salt

- 1 Rinse and drain soybeans. Roast the soybeans in a non-stick frying pan, stirring constantly over low-medium heat until outer skins turn light brown and blister.
- 2 Place the roasted soybeans in a bowl. Add the hot water, cover and allow to sit for about half a day.
- 3 Drain the soybeans, saving the soaking water. Remove the thin soybean skins and set the soybeans aside.
- 4 Pour the soybean soaking water into a pot and bring to a boil. Add the *hojicha* tea leaves and allow to steep over medium heat for 60-90 seconds. When the aroma of the tea becomes strong, strain the soybean-*hojicha* liquid and allow it to cool. Discard the infused tea leaves.
- 5 Wash rice, drain in colander and leave for about 15 minutes.
- 6 Place the rice in a rice cooker, together with 360 ml / 1 ½ C of the cooled soybean-*hojicha* liquid and the seasoning ingredients and top up to line 2 of the rice cooker for cooking white rice. Add more water if necessary and stir. Scatter the peeled soybeans atop rice and cook.
- 7 When the rice is cooked, gently fold in the soybeans with a rice paddle. Serve warm in individual rice bowls.

* 1 *hojicha* tea bag may be substituted for loose-leaf tea. As an alternative to *hojicha*, *sencha* green tea leaves may be used in the liquid to cook the rice. *Hojicha* provides a rich roasted aroma; *sencha* lends a light, refreshing taste to the rice.

** In Japan, kombu (kelp) tea is made using powdered kelp mixed with hot water. It is completely different to fermented teas called "kombucha" in the West. If Japanese kombu tea granules or powder are unavailable, add 1/2 t salt to the rice and place a 10-cm piece of dashi kombu (dried kelp) over the rice when cooking in Step 6.



2019 YFU Kikkoman Summer Activity Supporting international youth exchange for over four decades



From left: American students enjoy the hands-on experience of mixing processed soybeans, wheat, salt and water with *koji* mold for brewing soy sauce; Participants observe the brewing process at the Kikkoman Soy Sauce Museum.

On July 1, 2019, the YFU Kikkoman Summer Activity was held at the Kikkoman Soy Sauce Museum in Noda, Chiba Prefecture. The event was attended by 23 US high school students who participated in this year’s student exchange program hosted by YFU JAPAN, Inc., a branch of the international organization Youth for Understanding (YFU). In addition to the US students, host family members of 21 of the students, as well as five Japanese high school students attended the annual Kikkoman Summer Activity.

During the morning, students watched a video about the soy sauce brewing process and what makes soy sauce unique, then toured the museum and Kikkoman’s Goyogura brewery, where soy sauce for the Imperial household is still produced to this day. In the afternoon, they had a hands-on experience brewing

soy sauce themselves, including making *shoyu koji* (the essential base for soy sauce) and mixing and pressing *moromi*. *Moromi* is a kind of mash made by mixing *shoyu koji* and brine which is then fermented, aged and pressed to make soy sauce. To wind up the day, participants tasted soy sauce on rice crackers to appreciate its roasted aroma and flavor. One student commented: “Through this one-day activity, I enjoyed learning about soy sauce, the seasoning that represents Japan. I hope I will have more opportunities to learn about Japanese culture during my stay in Japan. I am thankful to Kikkoman for giving us such a wonderful opportunity.”

Kikkoman believes it is vital to cultivate human resources through intercultural experiences, and to enable mutual cooperation beyond cultural differences. Kikkoman

wishes to contribute both to local communities and to global society by encouraging youths to proactively seek out such opportunities, and has sponsored YFU student exchange programs since 1978. Every year through YFU, Kikkoman supports four Japanese high school students to study in the US for one year and 23 US high school students to visit Japan for one month. Among all those participating, a certain number of students are selected from Chiba Prefecture and from the states of Wisconsin and California, where Kikkoman plants are located. Since Kikkoman started supporting these YFU exchanges, over 150 Japanese students and more than 900 American students have participated. Kikkoman will continue to promote and advance these youth programs for international and cultural exchange. ●

