



## Continuation of Washoku Culture, and Traditional Local Dishes

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### Washoku is Registered in UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage List

More than a year has passed since washoku was listed as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage, in December 2013. During this time, symposiums and lectures on washoku have been held in many places. I also had opportunities to speak with various people, after which I often felt that the registered concepts of washoku had not been well understood. So, I would like to introduce a summary of these concepts first.

The registered title is “Washoku, traditional dietary cultures of the Japanese, notably for the celebration of New Year.” In the title, “washoku” is used to express “traditional dietary cultures of the Japanese,” a meaning that is a little different from the more generally known meaning of “Japanese dishes.” Rather, it refers to the nature and historical background in which Japanese dishes have been formed, namely washoku culture. Let's look at the characteristics of washoku (traditional dietary cultures of the Japanese) as described in the proposal for registration.

The proposal says, “Washoku is a social practice based on a set of skills, knowledge, practice and traditions related to the production, processing, preparation and consumption of food. It is associated with an essential spirit of respect for nature that is closely related to the sustainable use of natural resources.” Diverse agricultural and fishery products are ingredients that arise from the nature of Japan. Yet, this wealth of ingredients cannot be harvested without human efforts. These include accumulated skills, the knowledge of breeding, improvements in farm tools, the development of fertilizers and fishery methods, and ingenuity in cooking methods and the creation of processed foods. Washoku culture can be regarded as containing all of these.

Based on a mindset of making the most of each ingredient obtained from nature by processing and cooking it in many different ways, people have exercised great ingenuity in making nutritious and tasty dishes. Many of these have been passed down as traditional local recipes.

The proposal also states that washoku has developed as a part of daily life, and with a connection to annual events, and is constantly recreated in response to changes in human relationships with their natural and social environments. Events are not necessarily the same across the nation. A variety of local events, specific to individual regions, have developed under the influence of not only the natural environment, but the social environment, history, and more. Many of these events have been recreated, adapting to changing times.

The above is a part of the proposal for nomination, all of which can be regarded as being deeply related to the development and continuation of traditional local foods.

### Traditional Local Dishes and Their Formation

It wasn't until 1940 or so when phrases such as traditional local foods and dishes came into vogue. It was during the war when a reevaluation of local ingredients, cooking and processing methods from various regions was encouraged, with an aim of addressing food shortages. Dietary practices were surveyed, and books on traditional local foods and dishes were published in many regions.

In these publications, traditional local dishes are described as “specialties that have long been prepared locally in various regions of Japan, rich in the bounty of the sea and the mountains.” Traditional local foods are referred to as “mainly fresh and fully ripened produce of each region,” and many of these traditional local foods were called “highly nutritious and flavorful.” The publications maintained that, even without rice as the main staple, these traditional local foods could provide nutrition and help maintain good health. However, no clear definitions of traditional local foods and dishes were given. In this article, ingredients specific to a region, including products made by processing these ingredients, will be referred to as traditional local foods. Dishes that have been made in a region with their recipes passed down for at least three generations will be referred to as traditional local dishes.

Traditional local dishes do not necessarily use only locally produced ingredients. A typically cited example would be *kombu* kelp dishes in Okinawa Prefecture. The history of *kombu* comes from Hokkaido, and it was carried a good distance south to form the traditional local Okinawa dishes. A similar example is a traditional local dish around Hita in Oita Prefecture, called *taraoasa*, served during the Bon festival of souls in mid-August. Dried gill and stomach of cod caught in northern Japan are immersed in water and simmered with locally produced dried bamboo shoots in a soy sauce and sugar broth. It is a characteristic of traditional local dishes that the natural and social environments intertwine. They have undergone the repeated process of: formation → establishment → succession → recreation → succession.



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Taraosa, dried gill and stomach of cod (Oita Prefecture)

Among traditional local dishes are those that were formed and established for formal or ceremonial meals served during special occasions such as annual or agricultural events, and those that were formed and established for ordinary meals in everyday life. Locally, these dishes are often not recognized by residents as being unique to their community.

When I recently visited Fukui Prefecture, the large long *aburaage* (deep-fried thin slices of tofu) and large block-shaped *atsuage* (deep-fried blocks of tofu) I saw at a supermarket looked like unique processed products to me. For the locals, however, they are ordinary products and likely not regarded as specialty foods in the area. It is not rare that a food, despite having the same name, has different features between regions. For instance, *inarizushi* (an *aburaage* pouch filled with sushi rice) is not the same throughout Japan. It is triangular in some regions, and barrel-shaped in other regions. Barrel-shaped *inarizushi* wrapped with *kanpyo* (dried gourd) strips are characteristic of Tochigi Prefecture cuisine. By surveying and studying these foods, it is hoped that we can discover the wisdom and skills of the Japanese who have respected nature and applied their ingenuity to local cuisine, and can make use of the findings in future reviews of our diet.

## Traditional Local Dishes and Regional Characteristics in the Use of Seasonings

Everyday meals use the most readily available seasonings of the time in the region. In early-modern times and modern times, the main seasoning for



Atsuage and aburaage in various shapes (Fukui Prefecture)

Inarizushi wrapped with *kanpyo* strips (Tochigi Prefecture)



ordinary dishes was commonly miso, while soy sauce was used in dishes for rather more formal occasions. This was because miso could be made easily at home. In the mountainous areas around Uenohara City in Yamanashi Prefecture, where I conducted a survey previously, udon noodles were hand-kneaded almost every day in each home, and a standard supper dish was *nigomi udon*, which is udon simmered in miso soup with seasonal vegetables and potatoes in a large pot. However, when the udon was served to guests, it was boiled and offered with a soy sauce based dipping sauce. Such differentiated use of seasonings is observed in the udon cultures remaining in dry-field farming areas in Kanto (eastern central Japan). Currently, both miso and soy sauce flavors remain, and it is thought that with the changes in times, not only miso but soy sauce has taken root as a seasoning for everyday meals. *Senbei* (rice cracker) soup is a specialty dish of Aomori Prefecture. In the early Showa era (1926–1989) it was a special treat, for which *senbei* was simmered, not in miso soup, but in a clear broth seasoned with salt and soy sauce. It will be necessary to classify traditional local dishes into ordinary everyday meals and special formal or ceremonial meals, and to look into how the dishes are seasoned.



Senbei soup seasoned with soy sauce (Hachinohe, Aomori Prefecture)

Both miso and soy sauce come in several varieties, each tasting differently. Soy sauce varieties include sweeter types, *usukuchi* (light) and *koikuchi* (dark). Miso varieties include rice miso, barley miso and soybean miso. The variety favored by locals varies between regions. With dishes that people have long been accustomed to eating, people's preferences are affected more by the seasonings used, rather than the ingredients. Flavoring with soy sauce and miso especially seems to become habitual. So, even for soup dishes and simmered dishes, preferences differ between regions depending on the variety of seasonings used. Looking into the characteristics of traditional local dishes from the aspect of seasonings will provide an opportunity to explore elements of regional differences.

It is easy to talk about these differences, but not necessarily easy to clarify them. People's preferences constantly change. Even in the same region, there are differences between generations. Also, people move in and out—carrying their preferences with them. Even so, surveying the relationship between traditional local dishes and seasonings should help us to find clues in exploring regional characteristics, and help us determine what parts of washoku culture should be preserved and passed on.