

JAPANESE FOOD CULTURE

Enjoying the old and welcoming the new



Japanese rice field
(Photo courtesy of AFLO)

The rice-centered food culture of Japan evolved following the introduction of wet rice cultivation from Asia more than 2,000 years ago. The tradition of rice served with seasonal vegetables and fish and other marine products reached a highly sophisticated form in the Edo period (1603-1868) and remains the vibrant core of native Japanese cuisine. In the century and a half since Japan reopened to the West, however, Japan has developed an incredibly rich and varied food culture that includes not only native-Japanese cuisine but also many foreign dishes, some adapted to Japanese tastes and some imported more or less unchanged.

Origins

In the centuries following the introduction of Buddhism to Japan in the 6th century, laws and imperial edicts gradually eliminated the eating of almost all flesh of animals and fowl. The vegetarian style of cooking known as *shojin ryori* was later popularized by the Zen sect, and by the 15th century many of the foods and food ingredients eaten by Japanese today had already made their debut, for example, soy sauce (*shoyu*), *miso*, tofu, and other products made from soybeans.

Japanese-inn meal

High-class Japanese inns (*ryokan*) generally serve sumptuous multiple-course *kaiseki*-style meals such as the one shown here. (Photo courtesy of AFLO)

Around the same time, a formal and elaborate style of banquet cooking developed that was derived from the cuisine of the court aristocracy. Known as *honzen ryori*, it is one of the three basic styles of Japanese cooking along with *chakaiseki ryori* (the cuisine of the tea ceremony meal) and *kaiseki ryori*.

With an emphasis on the artistic presentation of fresh, seasonal ingredients, the tea meal married the formalities of *honzen ryori* to the spirit and frugality of Zen. *Kaiseki ryori* developed in its present form in the early 19th century and is still served at first-class Japanese restaurants known as *ryotei* and at traditional Japanese inns. While retaining the fresh seasonal ingredients and artful presentation of earlier styles, *kaiseki* meals have fewer rules of etiquette and a more relaxed atmosphere. Sake is drunk during the meal, and, because the Japanese do not generally eat rice while drinking sake, rice is served at the end. Appetizers, *sashimi* (sliced raw fish), *suimono* (clear soup), *yakimono* (grilled foods), *mushimono* (steamed foods), *nimono* (simmered foods), and *aemono* (dressed salad-like foods) are served first, followed by *miso* soup, *tsukemono* (pickles), rice, Japanese sweets, and fruit. Tea concludes the meal. Although most Japanese people have few opportunities to experience full-scale *kaiseki* dinners, the types and order of foods served in *kaiseki ryori* are the basis for the contemporary full-course Japanese meal.

The sushi that most people are familiar with today—vinegared rice topped or combined with such items as raw fish and shellfish—developed in Edo (now Tokyo) in the early 19th century. The sushi of that period was sold from stalls as a snack food, and those stalls were the precursors of today's sushi restaurants.

Naturalized imports

Japan's first substantial and direct exposure to the West came with the arrival of European missionaries in the second half of the 16th century. At that time, the combination of Spanish and Portuguese game frying



techniques with a Chinese method for cooking vegetables in oil led to the development of *tempura*, the popular Japanese dish in which seafood and many different types of vegetables are coated with batter and deep fried.

With the reopening of Japan to the West in the mid-19th century, many new cooking and eating customs were introduced, the most important being the eating of meat. Although now considered a Japanese dish, *sukiyaki*—beef, vegetables, tofu, and other ingredients cooked at the table in a broth of soy sauce, *mirin* (sweet sake), and sugar—was at first served in “Western-style” restaurants. Another popular native dish developed in this period is *tonkatsu*, deep-fried breaded pork cutlets. Created in the early 20th century using Indian curry powder imported by way of England, Japanese curry rice (*kare-raisu*) became a very popular dish; it contains vegetables and meat or seafood in a thick curry sauce that is served over rice.

The contemporary dinner table

The ingredient choices available at supermarkets and other food stores in all but the most isolated rural districts of Japan are so varied that on any given day a home-cooked dinner could contain an incredible variety of dishes of various national origins. Even so, native Japanese food is still the norm, and a “Japanese meal” at home will generally have white rice, *miso* soup, and *tsukemono* pickles. The multiple dishes that accompany these three vary widely depending on the region, the season, and family preferences, but candidates include cooked vegetables, tofu, grilled fish, *sashimi*, and beef, pork, and chicken cooked in a variety of ways.

Popular alternatives to native Japanese fare include Chinese-style stir-fried meat and vegetable dishes and Korean-style grilled

Sushi

Some of the many types of *nigirizushi*, in which hand-molded portions of vinegared rice are topped with slices of raw fish, shellfish, and other ingredients. A small dab of *wasabi* (Japanese horseradish) is usually placed between the rice and the topping. (Photo courtesy of AFLO)



beef and pork. More adventurous cooks may try their hand at American, French, Italian, and other ethnic dishes. Selections particularly popular with children include spaghetti, hamburgers, and the curry rice mentioned above.

While many families continue to eat home-cooked meals every night, the greatest change taking place in eating habits in recent decades has been the replacement of home-cooked dishes with food prepared outside the home. Sushi, Chinese and Japanese noodle dishes, and Japanese-style box lunches (*bento*) have long been available via home delivery (*demae*) in towns and cities, and now pizza and many other dishes can also be ordered. In addition, supermarkets have many prepared foods such as sushi, *tempura*, and fried chicken to purchase and take home, and the spread of convenience stores into all but the most remote areas of Japan has made a wide variety of pre-cooked *bento*-type meals available to almost everyone.

Dining Out

Japan's most famous contribution to global food culture—sushi—is generally eaten at sushi restaurants where customers sit at the counter and call out their orders item by item to a sushi chef. There are also very popular chains of “conveyer-belt” sushi restaurants where you grab small plates of two sushi off the conveyer belt in front of you or call out a special order if you do not see what you want on the belt. Unlike Japanese restaurants abroad, which often serve a range of different types of Japanese food, restaurants in Japan generally specialize in a single type, such as sushi, *tempura*, *shabushabu* (thin slices of beef cooked at the table by dipping into a simmering broth), *sukiyaki*, *unagi* (grilled eel), *soba* and *udon* noodles, etc. The main exceptions to the specialization rule are the chains of family restaurants, which usually serve a range of Japanese, Western, and Chinese dishes.

Two types of restaurants which are found in large numbers all over Japan but which are not considered “native Japanese” are *ramen*

and *yakiniku* restaurants. *Ramen* restaurants serve generous helpings of Chinese-style *ramen* noodles in large bowls with broth (flavored with soy sauce, *miso*, salt, etc.), roast-pork slices, and various vegetables (bean sprouts, scallions, etc.), and many people also order *gyoza* (Chinese dumplings) to accompany their *ramen*. At *yakiniku* restaurants, which are based on Korean-style barbeque, guests cook bite-sized pieces of beef, other meats, and vegetables over a charcoal or gas grill at the table. Most large cities also have a considerable number of other foreign-food restaurants serving French, Italian, Indian, Chinese, Korean, and other cuisine, and in Tokyo an almost unlimited selection of the world's food is available.

At the opposite end of the price spectrum from elegant *kaiseki ryotei* and French restaurants are the food stalls that are still a familiar sight in some urban districts and at festivals and other outside events where many people gather. Some of the most popular stalls are those serving *yakisoba* (fried *soba* noodles), *yakitori* (grilled chicken pieces on a skewer), *okonomiyaki* (pancakes with vegetables and a variety of other ingredients), frankfurters, and buttered baked potatoes.

Culinary Cultural Exchange

As mentioned above, Japan has been actively “importing” foreign cuisines for more than 100 years, but for much of that time there was little movement in the other direction. Over the past couple decades, however, growing recognition of the importance of a healthy diet to maintaining overall good health has contributed to an unprecedented Japanese-food boom overseas, with explosive growth in the number of Japanese restaurants in major cities worldwide. The majority of Japanese restaurants abroad serve sushi, and most also offer a variety of other choices such as

Soba

Known as *zaru soba*, the cold *soba* dish shown here is eaten by first dipping the long noodles into a dipping sauce to which *wasabi* (Japanese horseradish) and green onions are often added. (Photo courtesy of AFLO)



tempura. The number of restaurants specializing in lower-cost noodle dishes such as *ramen* and *soba* are also growing. Statistics in a 2006 document prepared by Japan's Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF) estimate the number of Japanese restaurants worldwide at over 20,000, with approximately 10,000 in North America. The total number of Japanese restaurants in the United States is said to have increased by 250 percent in the past 10 years, and the number in the United Kingdom by 300 percent in the past 5 years. According to the MAFF statistics, less than 10% of all Japanese restaurant owners in America are of Japanese descent. Many of the Japanese restaurants found in malls and shopping centers across America serve sushi but their other selections generally resemble stir-fried Chinese food more than genuine Japanese food.

Responding to concerns about the quality and authenticity of dishes being marketed abroad as "Japanese," in late 2006 the MAFF began deliberating the possible introduction of a certification system for Japanese restaurants outside Japan. Italy and Thailand currently operate such systems for their own national cuisines. In a separate initiative, the Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO) is already providing support for an organization that inspects and evaluates Japanese restaurants in France.

To give young French and Japanese chefs an opportunity to learn from each other and to help the French chefs to learn and master the characteristics of Japanese cuisine as it is prepared in Japan, since 2005 the Japanese Culinary Academy has held Japanese Culinary Fellowships in Kyoto and Osaka. While studying in the kitchens of first-class Kyoto restaurants, the visiting French chefs are also able to experience many food-related aspects of traditional Japanese culture.

Cooking on TV and in Manga

In addition to exporting its cuisine to the world, Japan has also exported the very popular cooking show *Iron Chef*. In this program, which ran as a series in Japan from 1993 to 1999, chefs from Japan and abroad challenged the show's resident "Iron Chefs" to cooking "battles." *Ryori no tetsujin*, as *Iron Chef* is known in Japan, was only one in a long line of food- and cooking-themed shows on Japanese television. There have also been a very large number of food- and cooking-themed *manga* (Japanese comics), and some of those *manga* have been turned into television anime series.



Japanese food

Japanese traditional cuisine centers on the staple of rice, which is served with such items as *miso* soup, fish, *hijiki* (sea vegetables), *hiyayakko* (cold tofu), *tamagoyaki* (Japanese omelet), *natto* (fermented soybeans), and *tsukemono* (pickles).