



An *ichiju sansai* meal, a bowl of soup and three side dishes alongside the rice (photo by kuma).

The Japanese archipelago is surrounded by water, and the vast continental shelves ringing the country and the number of ocean currents that intersect there create rich fishing grounds that we might call “maritime ranches.” This is why Japanese have been able to enjoy abundantly available seafood since ancient times. Japanese do not just eat seafood raw, either. They use various methods for cooking and preparing it—including grilling, boiling, pickling in salt, drying, and seasoning.

In PURSUIT of UMAMI Umami and Fermented Seasonings

Surrounded by the sea, the Japanese have utilized *konbu* kelp since ancient times to create dashi, a traditional soup stock that is the base for many Japanese dishes. Japanese learned through long experience that kelp contained the elements of good flavor. And *katsuo-bushi*, considered the world’s hardest fermented food product, is also an essential seasoning in *washoku*. *Katsuo-bushi* is created after bonito has been stewed, smoked, and dried, then repeatedly had mold applied to it and been dried in the sun. Partly due to the influence of Buddhist philosophy, fish has traditionally been consumed more often than meat in Japan, where soup stock was derived from such marine products and dried *shiitake* mushrooms, giving rise to dietary customs based on subtle *umami*.

Japan’s climate can be very hot and humid. Employing microbes gave rise to the creation of fermented food products and seasonings that yielded glutamates and other elements of *umami*. Foodstuffs known as *kokubishio*—made from salt-pickled, fermented grains—were already being mentioned in documents from the Taiho Code of 701. These are believed to have been the forerunners of miso and soy sauce, Japan’s representative fermented condiments that have soybeans and wheat, respectively, as their basic ingredients.

HEALTHY and DELICIOUS WASHOKU

Washoku menus are assembled with an emphasis on the shifting seasons. Dishes in which seasonal food ingredients are central play a role in preparing the body to cope with seasonal changes. Take, for example, such typical winter vegetables as daikon radishes and turnips. The nutritional value and flavor of these root vegetables increase as the weather grows colder, and enjoying them in dishes such as hot pots warms the body.

Furthermore, since *washoku*’s ingredients are mainly grains, vegetables, and fish, they tend to be lower in fat and generally lower in calories compared to Western dishes. A bowl of soup, rice, and three side dishes form the basis for *washoku*. When seasonal vegetables are used in abundance and combined with fish in the right proportion, the combination becomes the ideal *washoku*. Eating plenty of stewed vegetables also supplies dietary fiber.

The ART of WASHOKU

You do not just taste *washoku* with your tongue. You also savor it with your eyes. Food and the plates and dishes it is served in and on boost each other’s appeal. When planning the menu, chefs



The way the meal is arranged and the beauty of the dishes are emphasized in *washoku* (photo by Ito Makoto, photo courtesy of Hyotei).

Japan is a country of lush and bountiful forests, surrounded on all sides by the sea. *Washoku* (the traditional dietary culture of the Japanese) has developed thanks to the blessings of these rich natural surroundings as well as the continuous pursuit of perfection by Japanese cooks, evolving into a cuisine now highly praised all over the world. This special feature takes up the allure of *washoku* from many perspectives, including ingredients, nutrition, and the beautiful way each dish is served.

The ALLURE of INGREDIENTS

Japanese have produced and consumed rice since the Jomon period (10,000–300 B.C.). Having rice as their staple dish led to the traditional *ichiju sansai* style featuring rice, soup, and three side dishes. An emphasis on vegetables is one reason that Japanese dietary customs are considered healthy. Along with vegetables native to Japan, of course, numerous vegetables have been introduced from other countries. Japan’s geographical characteristics make it suitable for the cultivation of vegetables that provide a sense of the season, forming the core of *washoku* such as stewed or grilled dishes and tempura.



TOP: Rice, vegetables, and fish—the staple ingredients that underpin Japan’s dietary customs (photos by kuma). ABOVE: Kelp (left) and *katsuo-bushi* (right), the basic ingredients of soup (photos by Ohashi Hiroshi).