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 from many perspectives, including ingredients, marine products and dried grains. 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 dried, smoked, and dried, then repeatedly had mold applied to it, and was 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 the art of umami, which gives the ideal flavor of the space between the dishes and the food is a factor as well. The beauty of the dishes are emphasized in washoku. The exquisite ambience of the dining area—the way the meal is arranged and the beauty of the dishes are engaging to the eye. Food and the plates and dishes it is served in and the way the food is displayed is also crucial. The chef considers how large the servings should be in comparison to the size of these 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.

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 contemplate the nature of the serving dishes as well. Emphasis is placed on the seasons in washoku, so the designs and materials of these dishes must also be suited to the season. The way the food is displayed is also crucial. The chef considers how large the servings should be in comparison to the dishes they are presented on for maximum appeal. The beauty of the space between the dishes and the food is a factor as well. Even the way that garnishes (garnishes) are arranged adds color, as do decorations featuring leaves, flowers, or paper placed under the food.

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.

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.

Surrounded by the sea, the Japanese have utilized konbu kelp—considered the world’s highest fermented food product, is also an essential seasoning in washoku. Katsuobushi is created after bonito has been steved, 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 the art of umami, which gives the ideal flavor of the space between the dishes and the food is a factor as well. The beauty of the dishes are emphasized in washoku.

**Special Feature:**

**DELICIOUS JAPAN**

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 enjoy them in dishes such as hot pots warms the body.

**THE ALLURE OF INGREDIENTS**

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The exquisite ambience of the dining area—auxiliary hanging scroll and flowers decorating the alcove—is another key facet in the enjoyment of Japanese cuisine, meant to express a spirit of hospitality. When selecting items that match the meal’s theme and plan, consideration is given to how best to have guests experience the atmosphere of the season.

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