

niponica

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Discovering  
Japan

2014  
no.

12



Special Feature

## Another Side of Japan: Snacks and Sweets



春

Spring



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Summer



秋

Autumn



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Winter

niponica  
にぽにか  
no. 12

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No. 12  
March 14, 2014

Published by: Ministry of  
Foreign Affairs of Japan  
Kasumigaseki 2-2-1, Chiyoda-ku,  
Tokyo 100-8919, Japan  
<http://www.mofa.go.jp/>

niponica is published in Japanese and six  
other languages (Arabic, Chinese, English,  
French, Russian and Spanish), to introduce  
the world to the people and culture of Japan  
today. The title *niponica* is derived from "Nip-  
pon," the Japanese word for Japan.

Special Feature

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Special Feature

# Another Side of Japan: Snacks and Sweets

Traditional Japanese confections (*wagashi*) have subtle flavors, and are often associated with the current season. As the shelves in many shops demonstrate, sweets in Japan come in a multitude of tastes and shapes. They play an important role in the culture of giving, and their packaging can be surprisingly beautiful—so many types, so good to eat, so nice to look at and intriguing as well. This issue welcomes you to a land of wonderful snacks and sweets.

Top photos: Cherry blossom petals in layers, fresh green maple leaves, insects in a grove chirping at the harvest moon, snow resting on a holly leaf—*wagashi* sweets are designed to celebrate the season. (All by Akasaka Shiono)  
Cover photo: *Tai-yaki* cakes made from a wheat flour and egg dough. The dough is stuffed with *an* bean paste, then pressed into a fish-shaped mold to be baked. (Kotai-yaki, by Tourindou Co. Ltd.)

Photos by Takeuchi Akio



# Sweet Tooth Japan



**Kurokawa Mitsuhiro**  
Seventeenth in the line of owners of TORAYA Confectionery, which goes back more than 480 years. He carries on the same traditions while also making new creations at TORAYA CAFÉ and other shops. Chairman of the Japan Wagashi Association.

## Japanese and Western confections: How are they different?

**Kurokawa:** In Japan we categorize sweet food into two types: Japanese and Western. Uniquely Japanese ingredients such as adzuki beans and *mochi* rice dough are used for *wagashi* (traditional Japanese confections), while ingredients that came originally from the West are used for Western confections. Japan began secluding itself from the rest of the world in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, but when it opened up again in the later 19<sup>th</sup> century, Western cultural elements poured in. That's the background behind this categorization.

**Aoki:** Yes, for example, *wagashi* use a wide variety of sugars, and in different ways. Western sweets often start with wheat flour, whereas *wagashi* start with rice.

**Kurokawa:** I see *wagashi* as being in a class by themselves because they use only plant ingredients, never animal oil, milk products or gelatin.

**Aoki:** Another distinguishing feature is that *wagashi* are often steamed.

French cream puffs have cream custard filling in a soft shell. So I think they have something in common with Japan's *monaka*,<sup>1</sup> *manju*<sup>2</sup> and *daifuku*,<sup>3</sup> all of which have a unique doughy exterior and a filling made of *an*.<sup>4</sup> France's *marron glacés*

are chestnuts candied in syrup, made with a technique somewhat similar to making *an* from adzuki beans.

**Kurokawa:** *Wagashi* specialize in the art of attracting the five senses. The first of course is taste. The second is visual—they have an attractive, tempting appearance. The third is fragrance, which is more subtle than that of Western sweets, but good in bringing out the flavor of the *matcha* tea enjoyed during the tea ceremony. (So *wagashi* should not have a strong aroma.) The fourth is the sense of touch given by their texture. They must be firm enough to cut with a toothpick, soft enough to break into pieces, and somewhat chewy when you bite into them.

As for the fifth sense, hearing: something else that sets *wagashi* apart from Western confections is their ability to stimulate an imaginative response when we hear their names, which we associate with some scene in nature, or a season. One example would be cherry trees in bloom.

**Aoki:** *Wagashi* have other marvelous, even surprising, features that give them world *caché*. Their fragrances and colors are understated, and their coloring tends toward soft pastels, with highly artistic color arrangements. In contrast, most French confections choose colors that suggest the taste inside. Anyway, I personally think *wagashi* tend to be better at pleasing the senses.



Traditional *yokan* jelly sweetened with brown sugar (top), and Western-style *yokan* with pear (bottom). Just two examples showing how TORAYA Confectionery keeps coming out with one innovation after another, while carrying on ancient traditions at the same time.

## Dialogue

# Kurokawa Mitsuhiro and Aoki Sadaharu

Admiring the changing seasons, cherishing the beauty of form, appreciating the taste of individual ingredients—these practices have all contributed to Japan's fabulous culture of sweets. Both traditional and modern sweets are explored here by Kurokawa Mitsuhiro, the owner of a Japanese confectionery established more than 480 years ago, and Aoki Sadaharu, a Japanese *chef pâtissier* well known in Paris for his creations.

Photos by Natori Kazuhisa Collaboration: TORAYA Confectionery Co., Ltd. and a-sweets house inc.

## Japanese ingredients open up new possibilities

**Kurokawa:** About 10 years ago we launched shops offering fusion confections—*wagashi* containing some Western elements. For example, a blend of *an* and chocolate in a cake we call Adzuki and Cacao Fondant. Another example: *an* paste adapted by our chefs to use like regular jam. I'm convinced we'll see more crossovers, as *wagashi* and Western confections start using each other's ingredients.

**Aoki:** One of my clients in Paris told me he wanted confections with a green tea taste, so I made *éclairs* flavored with green tea powder. That's the trigger that started me on using Japanese ingredients. Now I'll add black sesame, *yuzu* citrus fruit, roasted green tea and wasabi to some of the things I make, like *macarons* and chocolate sweets. I like surprising people in Paris, taking their taste buds in new directions.

Mr. Kurokawa, maybe you remember when you came to Paris and after I gave you *macarons* flavored with green tea powder we talked about why the powder is never used in *wagashi*. What you said rang true to me—the reason is that, traditionally, *wagashi* are to eat with tea made from green tea powder, during the tea ceremony.

**Kurokawa:** Today, though, I'd say it would be OK for Japanese confections to contain green tea powder. It is now

found in confections in other countries, along with ginger and wasabi, and most likely miso<sup>5</sup> will be included too, before long. Some day, French chefs might see *an* as a perfectly ordinary ingredient for their confections.

A while back, world-class pastry chef Pierre Hermé wanted to tour our factory to see how *an* is made. Our workers were surprised and honored by his visit and gave him a big welcome. I'm hoping cross-pollination like this will expand the world of sweet food.

**Aoki:** Every year in my shops in Paris I use a total of about 500 kilograms of adzuki beans. That's a big jump from the 25 kilograms I was using before.

In Christmas cake I often include adzuki beans, green tea powder, and praline. French pastry chefs who come to Japan tell me they like adzuki beans a lot.

## Could *yokan* jelly ever become as popular as chocolate?

**Kurokawa:** It's been 33 years since we opened our Japanese confectionery shop in Paris, back in 1980.

*Yokan* jelly<sup>6</sup> is an important part of our lineup in Japan and we keep hoping Parisians will like it, too. In fact, it is actually gaining a few fans. *Yokan* comes in blocks, the color is dark, and the appearance doesn't hint at what it tastes like. Anyway, we began



**Aoki Sadaharu**  
Chef pâtissier at pâtisserie Sadaharu AOKI paris. He was presented with France's Best Pâtissier Award and the French Mayors' Award for his Western confections that include traditional Japanese ingredients. Based in Paris, he has 11 shops including ones in Tokyo and Taiwan.



Matcha green tea, black sesame, raspberry, roasted green tea, *chocolat macaron*... just a few of the new tastes chef pâtissier Aoki Sadaharu creates by combining Japanese and Western ingredients.





Rectangular shapes and vivid hues define these cakes by chef pâtissier Aoki Sadaharu. Foreground: Bambou, a cake with *matcha* green tea powder for extra flair.

including ingredients Westerners like, such as black currants, mint, pears and baked apple. And we gave our modified *yokan* nice coloring and cut it into bite-size pieces.

**Aoki:** Actually, *yokan* isn't my favorite either! If you want Europeans to like the taste you'll probably need some more changes, like, aim for a different texture, use firm, chunky bean paste, avoid agar-agar (seaweed jelly), and give it a *marron glacé* effect.

*Yokan* ends up tasting more of sugar than of adzuki beans. And the Western palate generally doesn't enjoy the texture of agar-agar.



Left: Aoki puts the finishing touches to his *matcha* green tea cake, Bambou. Below: His unparalleled *éclairs* have a rich taste, and colors that play up the ingredients. From top: tart fruit, vanilla, nutty chocolate.



**Kurokawa:** You're right about how most French people have not taken to *yokan* yet. But Asians tend to be more positive about it. People in China, South Korea and Southeast Asia are quite at home with simmered adzuki beans, a major ingredient in *yokan*. And its texture is somewhat like dates,<sup>7</sup> a favorite food in the Middle East, so probably they would like *yokan*, too.

But think about it—people found chocolate bitter when it first arrived in Spain in the 1500s, but after it was sweetened it became a big item worldwide. I'm hoping to help put *yokan* on a similar path.

## Stop hiding techniques, and let Japanese sweets spread worldwide

**Aoki:** Japanese fingers are nimble and aim for delicacy—just think of origami or chopsticks! And our sense of taste aims for it, too. Overall, the Japanese have high expectations when it comes to refinement. Japanese cuisine and *wagashi* pursue subtlety, whereas Western cuisine and confections generally favor something bolder. I would say, however, that chefs who are learning from Japan know they should keep their list of ingredients simple in order to achieve refinement.

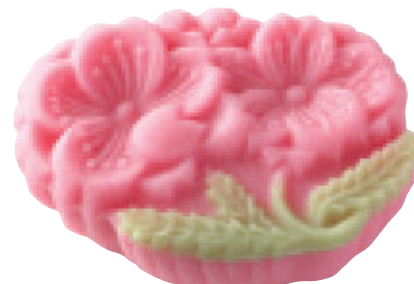


These *bonbons chocolat* call to mind a make-up artist's palette. The colors of the *matcha* green tea, *yuzu* citrus fruit and wasabi hint at the taste to come.





Touzakura ("cherry blossoms in the distance"), by TORAYA Confectionery. The name calls to mind flowering cherry trees on a far-off mountain. To make them, blend bean paste, refined rice flour, water and sugar to make the dough, wrap it around more bean paste, and then coat with strained, colored bean paste.



An uncooked Taori-Zakura formed in a wooden mold. The name tells of a wistful desire to fold cherry blossoms into one's hand and return home with them. They are sold with Touzakura confections, only when the cherry trees are in bloom.

**Kurokawa:** Someone ranked among the Meilleurs Ouvriers de France (best craftspeople of France) once gave me advice that led me to a personal breakthrough: we should be willing to explain our techniques. We Japanese have tended to pass techniques down in secret. But it's by being open that Japan will be able to make its way more effectively in the world.

**Aoki:** Yes, people in other countries tend to be forthright, not secretive about what they know.

**Kurokawa:** I know of one French woman who is in Japan studying really hard to become a *wagashi* chef, not concerned that she can't speak Japanese. I'd be happy to offer my support to people like her.

**Aoki:** Three-star restaurants in Europe have people from five, six or more countries working in their kitchens. But the best sushi bars in Japan don't have any non-Japanese prepping the ingredients.

We have to tell people from around the world more about Japan's good points. Then after they visit Japan and return home, they will hopefully give the message to others. People of our generation have to do more to show and teach the world the fine techniques we have.

**Kurokawa:** The Olympics are coming to Japan in 2020. As you've suggested, it would be good to present visitors to the Games with new Japanese confections that blend the boundaries separating Western sweets and *wagashi*.

Then, in Japan we'd see crossovers at *wagashi* stores, at Western-style confectionary shops, and maybe even at convenience stores. It would be great if people from other countries could taste them and see them as being truly representative of Japanese sweets. Mr. Aoki, let's make that happen.

- <sup>1</sup> *Monaka*: Made by inserting *an* between two thin pieces of baked *mochi* dough.
- <sup>2</sup> *Manju*: Made by kneading a shell of wheat or rice flour, inserting *an*, then steaming.
- <sup>3</sup> *Daifuku*: Soft *mochi* rice cake with *an* filling.
- <sup>4</sup> *An*: Beans (often adzuki) simmered in a syrup then crushed. Kidney beans, squash or chestnuts, etc., may be used instead of adzuki beans.
- <sup>5</sup> *Miso*: A seasoning made by steaming soybeans, adding malted rice and salt, then allowing the mixture to ferment.
- <sup>6</sup> *Yokan*: A confection made by solidifying an *an* mixture into a fairly long, jelly-like block. One type of *yokan* is made by steaming a mixture of *an* and wheat flour or arrowroot, the other by boiling down a mixture of *an* and agar-agar.
- <sup>7</sup> Dates: Fruit of the date palm



*An* paste offers new taste options, such as a spread for toast or a sweetener in coffee.

Adzuki and Cacao Fondant baked at TORAYA CAFE. Rich and moist. Features chocolate added to *an* bean paste.

Opposite page: Sweets recreated in the old style, when TORAYA Confectionery supplied confections like these to the Imperial Court in 1812. The illustrated book (below) from those days helped inspire their re-birth. The shapes, color arrangements and tastes all demonstrate the pursuit of refinement. (Photo by Tanai Fumio)





# Japanese Confections

## Tasty, Fun and Cute!

The variety is tremendous, from traditional sweet foods representing some part of the country to sweet snacks loved by kids. Japanese confections delight the taste buds, please the eye, and gratify the emotions, too.

Photos by Takahashi Hitomi, Tanai Fumio



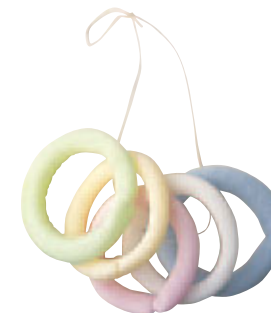
*Dango* balls made with rice flour and mugwort, coated with red bean paste. (Kusa Dango, by Chimoto)



Kumamoto Prefecture's mascot is called Kuma-mon. Inside the package with the cute bear (*kuma* in Japanese) are bite-size chocolates. (Ikinari Dango, by Tirol-Choco Co., Ltd.)



This koala bear biscuit is hiding a treat inside—chocolate! (Ko-ala no March, by Lotte Co., Ltd.)



Sugar confection calling to mind wisteria blossoms. (Todango, by Kiyome Mochi Sohonke)



A chocolate aspiring to be a space capsule. (Apollo, by Meiji Co., Ltd.)



Strawberry flavored candy with crisp milk candy inside. (Ichigo Miruku, by Sakuma Confectionery Co., Ltd.)



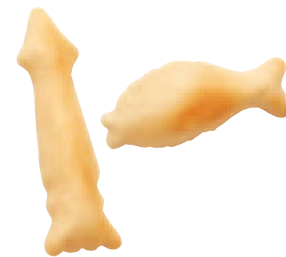
The mushroom cap is chocolate, the stalk is a biscuit. (Kinoko no Yama, by Meiji Co., Ltd.)



This cookie "blossom" is made from wheat flour and buckwheat flour, giving it a simple flavor.



Cute *monaka* in the shapes of folk handcrafts. (Kaga Hachiman Okiagari Monaka, by Kana-zawa Urata)



Small snack crackers shaped like sea creatures. (Ottotto, by Morinaga & Co., Ltd.)



A bamboo shoot appearing out of the ground? No, it is a cookie with a chocolate covered top. (Takenoko no Sato, by Meiji Co., Ltd.)



From top: *Konpeito* candies, made by crystallizing sugar around a core made of candy chips; *okoshi* snacks made from rice and other grains clumped together with candy; *kiri-ame* made from a stick of candy—no matter where you cut the stick, the image or *kanji* character looks the same. (Kintaro Ame, Kaiun Eto Ame, and Suehiro Kotobuki Ame, by Kintaro-ame Honten)



Confection made with red bean flour into the shape of a fox's face. Traditional sweet from Yamagata Prefecture. (Kitsune Men, by Umezu Kashi-ten)



Red and white, decorated with frills and flounces. Shortcake is the best loved cake in Japan.

Sweets are supposed to be fun to eat, and maybe that is why they come in so many shapes all around the world, all nice to look at. It could be, though, that Japan has more cute-looking sweets than anywhere else, with so many ways to please to the eye.

Japanese cuisine respects the importance of the visual presentation. Ingredients cut into artistic shapes, food arranged just so on plates and dishes, dinnerware chosen for its charm... Every care is taken to ensure beauty at the dinner table, and that spirit certainly carries over to confections as well. Unbaked or dried confections, shaped into works of art reminding us of plants and animals in

nature—these are well known, but there are also many everyday confections whose shapes and colors show the importance of flair.

Charming and heartwarming—this describes *dango* balls, often arranged two to a skewer. The recipe calls for rice flour to be kneaded, rolled into balls, then steamed. The serving suggestion is a coating of sweet bean paste or a drizzle flavored with soy sauce. *Dango* have been around for centuries, often as offerings at Buddhist ceremonies or a sign of festivities. Beginning in medieval times they made their appearance at stalls along the old post roads, and in tea houses within the sacred ground of shrines. When speared



onto bamboo skewers, *dango* make a great take-out snack, and even today people enjoy them while out on a walk.

*Monaka* treats, which come in so many shapes to represent all kinds of things, are bean paste sandwiched between two thin, grilled *mochi* biscuits. They are found throughout the country. In Kanazawa, Ishikawa Prefecture, they are a traditional sweet for festive times, but instead of the bean paste, a small sugar confection or clay figurine hides inside.

something fun to discover and, during the New Year holidays, perhaps a hint about your future.

*Senbei* rice crackers are made from rice or wheat flour, kneaded, rolled thin, and finally grilled. They are great as shapes representing beautiful features in nature or a special product of a particular part of the country. See if you can find Mount Fuji rendered in the cute *senbei* medium in these pages. The mountain is on the World Heritage List.



*Senbei* rice crackers representing the four seasons on Mount Fuji: matcha green tea powder (spring), black pepper (summer), red pepper (autumn), and sugar (winter). They all have the defining flavor of soy sauce. (Fuji-san Assortment, by Sen-ya)

And then there are brightly colored pop candies. Candies in Japan offer moments of visual pleasure, too, and perhaps the most notable are the ones made from multi-colored bands of sweet stuff, rolled together into sticks. No matter where you cut across the stick, the image or *kanji* character revealed by your knife will be the same. These candies are called *kiri-ame*, and they have been sold for the enjoyment of children since the 18<sup>th</sup> century at fairs and festivals. Even today they have a special warm-hearted appearance, something

impossible to achieve with today's mass production methods. Their popularity remains strong, especially as a simple gift.

Snacks shaped with a humorous touch to look like sea creatures, "mushrooms" with chocolate caps, cakes decorated with frills and flounces... Phantasies and flights of fancy come to life as confections, and the spirit that guides these transformations lives on, to the delight of children and adults alike.

*Monaka* shell formed to look like small mallets and rice straw bales. Inside are sugary confections with shapes like sea bream (a fish for festive occasions) and cute clay figurines. A big item for the New Year holidays, because they are said to bring good luck. (Futtoku Senbei, by Moroe-ya Confectionery)





# Confectionaries and the Culture of Giving

Weddings, funerals, and festive occasions are all times for gift giving. In Japan there are other times too, such as events marking the season, souvenirs to bring back after a trip, and presents to express gratitude, convey an apology or a greeting, ask a favor, or even thank someone for their gift by giving one in return. Sweet food has long been regarded as a fine gift to express appreciation on the special occasions in life.

Commentary: Kanzaki Noritake Photos by Takahashi Hitomi

## It all goes back to sharing *mochi* rice cakes

A look back in time to the origin of the custom of giving sweet food leads us to *mochi* rice cakes. Made by pounding steamed sticky rice, *mochi* were an essential part of festivals celebrating a good harvest, and were common offerings at funerals and services commemorating one's ancestors. Once the formalities were over, the *mochi* would be passed around for everyone in attendance to eat together. This played an important role in cementing the relationships of all present.

*Mochi* coated with a sweet bean paste (called *bota-mochi* or *o-hagi*) are still eaten during Buddhist *higan* festivities around the time of the spring and fall equinoxes, when people visit family graves and offer food to the spirits of their ancestors. This custom, too, evolved into another occasion to eat *mochi* together. Especially in farming villages, people would take the time and effort needed to painstakingly make plenty of *bota-mochi* by hand, then present them to relatives, neighbors and others they had some form of ties with. This custom is rarely observed today, although just 20 or 30 years ago it was common enough to be reflected in the saying of the time, "Higan no bota-mochi—ittari kitari" ("*Bota-mochi* come and go during the *higan* festivities").

## Sweetness, the very best gift of all

Sweet food would hardly be sweet without sugar. When sugar first came to Japan from China in the early part of the 8<sup>th</sup> century, people thought it had medical properties too, making it a valuable commodity. The upper classes often sent sugar itself as a gift.

In the early modern period fairly large quantities were imported through trade with Holland, although not enough to make it a common kitchen item. For many years, sugar remained

something that most Japanese could only dream about.

Sugar production began in Japan in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, around the beginning of the Edo period (1603-1867),



A box of confections wrapped in white paper, with *noshi* decoration (at the top right of the box) and red and white *mizuhiki* string. The bowknot is one kind of *kaeshi musubi* knot, where the strings come back to the same place to make a wish for more good luck and success.



*Manju* cakes with sweet bean paste inside lend themselves well to a simple written message. Foreground: The identical *kanji* characters say *kotobuki* ("Congratulations!"). Rear: *Manju* branded with the name of the place and a hot spring symbol, 湯.

a time of peace and greater prosperity. That was also a time when drinking tea became more common, and with tea came *mochi* snacks and baked sweet foods, appearing one after the other. Many survive to this day as traditional sweets.

The feudal *daimyo* lords of those days would come to the political capital of Edo and gather in a large reception hall at Edo Castle to participate in the *kajo* ceremony, when the Shogun himself would pass out large quantities of sweets. The ceremony's origins go back to a time when the Imperial Court and people in the lower classes would present sweet food to the gods on June 16 in the hope of warding off bad luck. Under the Shogunate, however, the custom changed

into an event where attractions in the form of sweet food were used when the *daimyo* lords swore their allegiance to the Shogun.

Before long, the *daimyo* too were holding ceremonies and outdoing one another with gifts of greeting, and confectionaries became a gift as acceptable as saké or silken fabrics. Giving something to a superior would promptly result in receiving a gift in return. This created a cycle of giving practically without end, which created a niche business—trade in gifts the *daimyo* had no use for.

## Sharing travel memories

Among the common folk of those days there developed the custom of

**Kanzaki Noritake**  
Kanzaki is an expert in folklore, the Director of the Institute for the Culture of Travel, a visiting professor at the Tokyo University of Agriculture, and a specialist serving on the Council for Cultural Affairs of the national government's Agency for Cultural Affairs. Among his writings are *Souvenirs: Gift Giving and Travel in Japanese Culture*, and *Etiquette in Japanese Culture*.

making pilgrimages, most notably to Ise and Konpira shrines. They would come back with souvenirs, the best being *hi-gashi* (a dry confectionery hardened with sugar), and *shoga-to* (ginger juice simmered in a syrup until hard), since fancy confectionaries made with sugar were still usually beyond their financial reach. Before long, *manju* (rice flour cakes with sweet bean paste inside) with decorative writing or an illustration branded into the top began selling well. *Manju*, with their hemispherical shape and a symbol branded into the shiny surface, created a medium so unique it has been passed down to the present day, for a message you can use to invoke a special memory or advertise something. Perhaps no other country has such a wide selection of snacks and desserts decorated with illustrations and writing.

## Wrapping to express the emotion behind the gift

When sending confectionary as a formal gift, etiquette calls for a wrapping that signals the reason for giving, whether celebration or commiseration. This is expressed in the choice of protective wrapping paper, with a *noshi* decoration to add flair and a *mizuhiki* string to fasten the wrapping. *Noshi* originated with the custom of giving a strip of dried abalone during a religious event, while *mizuhiki* are thin cords made from colored Japanese paper.

And so, formal wrapping for a gift of sweet food is more than just a protective cover—it also expresses the emotions of the giver. The art of giving that has evolved in Japan includes a subtle sensitivity that can be seen as characteristic of the culture.



# The Beauty and Tradition of Japan's Delicious Wrapped Confections

*Sasa* leaves, bamboo, fruit peel, wooden boxes, Japanese paper... Natural materials like these become traditional craft packaging that pleases the eyes and hints at what is inside: sweet delights.

Photos by Kawakami Naomi

## Natural materials for wrapping

Bamboo bark and *sasa* leaves were traditionally used to help preserve foods. Today they promise a simple but tasty experience inside.



Bamboo bark makes a sturdy cover for the *mochi* rice cakes inside. Brown sugar adds a deliciously light sweetness, and cashew nuts add crunch. (Yakumo Mochi, by Chimoto)



*Sasa* leaves have antibacterial properties. Here they are used to wrap *chimaki*, made by a shop whose heritage goes back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The selection above shows two types: the translucent one is made with arrowroot, water and sugar, while the other has the same ingredients but with an addition of bean paste kneaded into the mixture. Both types have a refreshingly delectable taste, and the fragrance of the *sasa* leaves penetrates them. (Chimaki, by Kawabata Doki)



Juice squeezed from *yuzu* (a citrus fruit) is mixed with agar-agar (seaweed jelly) and poured into the peel, where it becomes firm. A temptingly fragrant specialty for winter. (Yu-kogori, by Murasaki no Wakuden)



This *mizu-yokan* jelly, made from a mixture of bean paste, sugar and agar-agar, is chilled for a firm consistency. Slide it out of the hollow bamboo for its refreshing sweetness. (Chikuro, by Pontocho Suruga-ya)



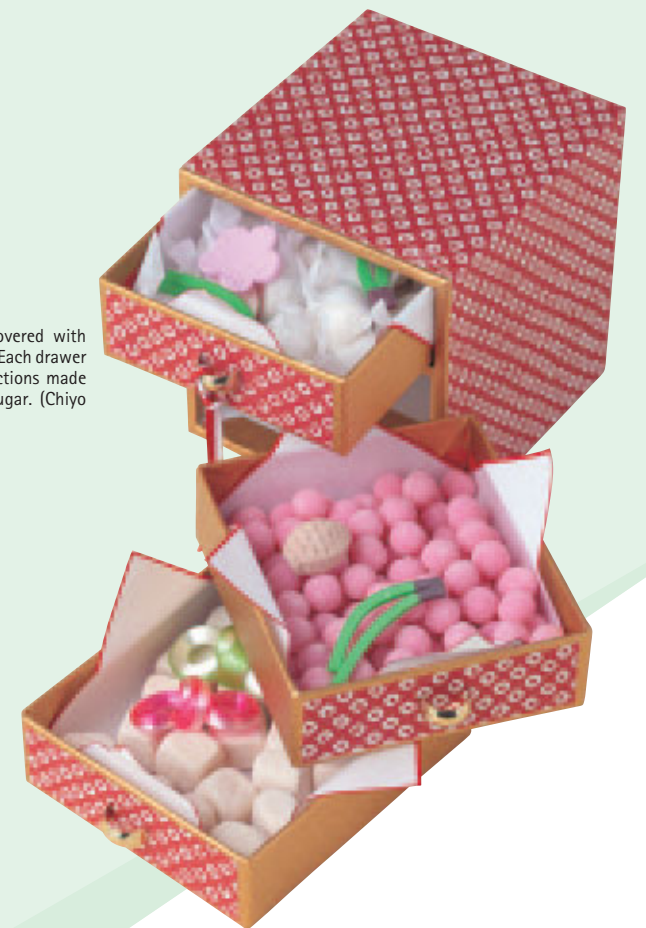
A mix of sweet agar-agar and miso-flavored beans, in clam shell containers. A confection just for summertime. Served in a bamboo basket on Japanese cypress tree leaves, they are refreshingly cool, for the eyes as well. (Hamazuto, by Kame-ya Norikatsu)



## Baskets, ceramics, Japanese paper—Containers as handicraft art

The artistic appeal of these containers will make you want to keep them long after their confections are eaten.

Small chest of drawers covered with cheerful *chiyo-gami* paper. Each drawer has brightly colored confections made with a different type of sugar. (Chiyo Tansu, by Shiroyoshi Ken)



The wooden box comes crammed with candy balls in five different colors. Rice flour is mixed with honey, formed into balls, cooked, then coated with five different colored flavorings for five different tastes: *ume* apricot, *yuzu* citrus fruit, ginger, sesame and cinnamon. (Tama Orihime, by Matsu-ya Tob'e)



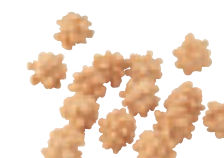
With each shake of the gourd-shaped ceramic container, out come several mellow sweet *konpeito* (round sugary confections with points on their surfaces). (Furidashi, by Murasaki no Wakuden)

The paper box with the lush pine needle design contains baked confections made of *kuzu* arrowroot starch kneaded with *yuzu* citrus fruit. Pine branches and needles are used to signify a joyful occasion. (Yuzu no Kuzu-yaki, by Murasaki no Wakuden)



Small bell-shaped *monaka* confections arranged neatly in a little box made of woven bamboo. The combination of the fragrant toasted crusts of sticky rice and the sweet bean paste is delectable. (Suzu no Monaka, by Suzukake)

Put fine-grained *wasanbonto* sugar morsels in your mouth and they melt away quickly. They come wrapped in soft Japanese paper. The small spot of scarlet on the top represents the mouth of a *maiko* dancing girl. (O-choma, by Kagi-zen Yoshifusa)



Soft-texture sugar confections shaped like plants represent the current season. The cheerful design on the paper box cover will change each season. The confections in this photo are for autumn. (Han-Nama-Gashi, by Nagato)



Crunch into one of these gently curved rectangular wafers, and your mouth will luxuriate in a cinnamon flavor and a refreshing sweetness. These thin, brown wafers are made out of steamed rice flour, sugar and cinnamon, and are baked and sold as *yatsuhashi* souvenirs representing the city of Kyoto, one of the world's best tourist destinations.

Several legends touch on the origins of *yatsuhashi*, but the most convincing one tells of a blind monk from the 1600s, called Yatsuhashi Kengyo. He composed music for the *koto*, an ancient string instrument, and played in the Sokyoku style. He is commemorated with this snack by the shape—it is like the curved surface of a *koto*.

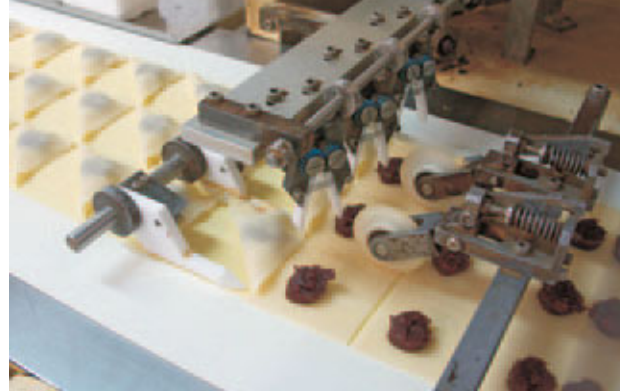
Much later, in the early 1900s, *yatsuhashi* were the first sweets to be peddled on a railway platform in Japan. That was at Shichijo Station (today's Kyoto Station). They created quite a stir, and *yatsuhashi* quickly became a souvenir favorite.

### The prestige of tradition inspires innovation

Among souvenir hunters *yatsuhashi* have long been a favorite baked confectionery, but another, softer variety, also has a respectable history, although in the past it was eaten only by locals, partly because it does not keep well. This variety is called *nama* (soft and unbaked) *yatsuhashi*. A suggestion made during a tea ceremony in 1960 prompted well-known *yatsuhashi* confectioners to come out with a new product: soft *yatsuhashi* wrapped around red bean paste. These treats, triangular in shape with sweet bean paste inside, quickly became popular and took on a major role in Kyoto's confectionery souvenir industry.

Later, the companies began offering an array of creative varieties, including soft *yatsuhashi* with different bean pastes and tastes, and baked *yatsuhashi* with a sprinkling of sugar or chocolate. The result was plenty of demand in shops and souvenir outlets throughout Kyoto.

Soft *yatsuhashi* with bean paste stuffing, being made.



Facade of the main shop of a famous confectioner established more than 320 years ago.



Yatsuhashi Kengyo has a strong connection with *yatsuhashi* sweets. He was a master of a musical instrument called the *koto* (pictured at bottom right). Tradition has it that, after his death, confectioners began making this type of sweet in the shape of the *koto*, to honor his contribution to *koto* music.

## From Tradition to a Sweet New World

Photos by Takahashi Hitomi  
Collaboration: Shogo-in Yatsuhashi Sohonten



Cannelle (thin *yatsuhashi* dough rolled into sticks then baked; "cannelle" is French for cinnamon.)



Baked *yatsuhashi* snacks. Their charm lies in the flavor of sweet rice flour, the fragrance of cinnamon, and the crunchy texture.



Popular soft *yatsuhashi* with bean paste stuffing. Right: Hijiri style with cinnamon flavoring. Left: Hijiri Matcha style with green tea powder flavoring.

Rice flour, sugar and *nikki* (cinnamon). That is basically what you need to make *yatsuhashi* snacks the traditional way. Kyoto, which remains Japan's ultimate tourist city, is well known for its traditional sweets, but *yatsuhashi* confectioners there are also developing tastes and shapes that go with the times, exploring the frontiers of delicious taste.



They have different shapes and different tastes, but they are all soft *yatsuhashi* stuffed with bean paste. From top: Hijiri Kurogoma (black sesame seeds); Hijiri Chocolat; Hijiri Ichigo (strawberry).



Nestlé KitKat Mini Shogoin Yatsuhashi with cinnamon flavored white chocolate mixed with crushed *yatsuhashi* confection (by Nestlé Japan Ltd.).



The newest evolution in soft *yatsuhashi*: cute and colorful. The style of the shop (left) where they are sold is similar to that of a Western-style confectionery store. (Store name: nikiniki)

### Trying out recipes for sweet popularity over the next 100 years

Meanwhile, the established *yatsuhashi* confectioner who had triggered the craze maintained its momentum with more innovations, while keeping the traditional taste. They pushed the evolution of their *yatsuhashi* brands to include soft *yatsuhashi* shaped like flowers (and brightly colored like them, too), and sweets featuring ingredients like caramel. The companies have begun reaching out to young people, especially Kyoto locals who grew up without eating much *yatsuhashi*, and are trying out recipes to find new products that will stand the test of taste over the next 100 years and longer.

Kyoto stands on a proud foundation of centuries of tradition, giving it confidence to be forward looking and adventurous in spirit. This is part of the Kyoto culture, and its sweet foods are no exception.





## Convenience Stores

# A Paradise of Snacks and Sweets

It would be hard to imagine life in Japan today without convenience stores (“conbini” for short). Conbini are open day and night, are located almost everywhere, and offer a wide variety of products and great tastes, including a wonder world of snacks and sweet foods.

Photos by Natori Kazuhisa Collaboration: MINISTOP Co., Ltd. and Lawson, Inc.



Convenience stores are part of everyday life in Japan. They have a wide variety of snacks and sweets, from regular products like potato chips to cakes like you might find in a specialty bakery.



Candies and chocolates are all neatly displayed. Products new to the market and popular items are placed at eye level, while sweet products or items with prizes for kids and cheap items are on lower shelves. This is the basic rule of thumb for confection displays in convenience stores.

## A huge selection, from regular products to items never seen before

Always open, standing ready even in residential districts without other stores, a part of life in Japan... Snacks and sweet foods are readily available throughout the country, but the conbini lineup probably beats them all, taking up almost half the shelf space in an average-sized store.

The snacks and sweets on display fit into three categories: regular products, limited specials, and new items. The regular products include potato chips and chocolates, all long sellers everyone knows—some have been popular for generations. The limited specials are sold only for a certain period of time, or in certain areas. Many are seasonal, or reflect local tastes as specialty foods.

It is hard for a new product to become a regular on conbini shelves. Computerized systems quickly order in products that sell well, while slower items are soon

banished. Not even 20% of all the snacks and sweets on the shelves are regular products. As for the rest, in some chains 20 to 30 types of products disappear on average every week, to be replaced by new ones.

## Taste you would expect from a specialty store, but cheaper

Over the last few years, the chilled desserts known as “Conbini sweets” have become popular. Their quality is quite close to what specialty shops offer, and yet they are relatively cheap.

“Conbini sweets” became the talk of the town around 2009. They began as desserts with a luxury appeal, at prices just a little bit higher than what one would expect at a conbini. So they succeeded in changing the impression of sweets sold in conbini, from “cheap, but you only get what you pay for” to “relatively inexpensive, and great to eat.”





"Conbini sweets" are the rage these days. No wonder—when it comes to taste, they leave nothing to be desired.



Some conbini chains have teamed up with culinary research experts and pastry chefs, developing items that will grab attention and present new tastes.

One reason "Conbini sweets" sell well is because the convenience stores have begun to attract so many different types of people. Before, the majority of customers were male, since the stores are open 24 hours and they sell ready-to-eat meals (including of course *bento* lunchboxes). But today just about everyone shops at conbini. To satisfy the preferences of female and elderly customers, too, more stores are shifting from snacks and sweets that emphasize quantity rather than quality (formerly the norm), to "Conbini sweets" that are smaller but taste better. Women tend to be more calorie-conscious, and conbini have recognized this, riding the popularity wave of traditional sweets. Except for ever-popular regular products like cream puffs, "Conbini sweets", too, end up disappearing every one to four months or so, to be replaced by new types.

Conbini closely mirror the enthusiasm Japanese people have for snacks and sweets. Every week, dozens of new snacks and sweets make their appearance on conbini shelves, all part of the unending exhibition of snacks and sweets in modern-day Japan.



1. Premium Roll Cake was instrumental in triggering the "Conbini sweets" boom. (Lawson)
2. Ankoya Dora-yaki have a soft, cake-like texture, and sweet bean paste inside. (Lawson)
3. Cream Shiratama Zenzai Kuri are chilled *dango* balls with bean paste. (MINISTOP)
4. Ankoya O-hagi: *Mochi* rice cakes covered in an bean paste (Lawson)
5. Deluxe Rare Cheese Cake Parfait (MINISTOP)

\*Some products may no longer be on the market.

## Make Some, Eat Some: Savor the Experience of Japanese Sweets and Snacks

Add this to your itinerary while traveling in Japan: making some Japanese sweets and snacks. You can try your hand at it if you visit certain long-established shops or popular places.

### Try making traditional sweets by hand

You would probably find it hard to make *wagashi* without a little instruction. Luckily, Kyoto has many old and well-respected shops with their own *wagashi* culture, and a growing number of people, many of them young women, are keen to try their hand at this traditional art.

Photos by Takahashi Hitomi Collaboration: Kanshundo



Kanshundo, a *wagashi* shop in Kyoto, has roots going back almost 150 years, and almost every day it holds classes on how to prepare traditional sweets. Make a reservation beforehand and you, too, can easily join a class. Written instructions are available in English, Korean and Chinese.

Form bean paste into a small ball, and then coat it with another type of colored, strained, and mashed bean paste. Fancy shapes like these are actually quite difficult to achieve.

These temptingly beautiful *wagashi* are shaped to remind us of nature in autumn, like a red leaf or a ripe persimmon. Now they are ready to eat.

For more information, contact Kanshundo: <http://www.kanshundo.co.jp/museum/make/annai.htm>

## A Wonderland of Snacks and Sweets Waiting To Be Discovered Under Tokyo Station

Many people from all over Japan and all over the world come to Tokyo, and the gateway to the city is Tokyo Station. Under the station is Tokyo Okashi Land, the location of a number of shops that serve as showrooms for major confectionery producers. Come to taste sweets fresh from the confectioner's hands, and buy exclusive items. Snacks loved by the Japanese are here in many different forms, all enjoyable.

Collaboration: Tokyo Station Development Co., Ltd.



Ezaki Glico's confectionery store Glicoya Kitchen is aptly named—it has its own kitchen selling just-made sweets. One regularly available treat is almonds that are coated in chocolate then transformed into something truly scrumptious with a sprinkling of cocoa powder (photo on right).

Below left: Another outlet under Tokyo Station, Calbee+, is operated by the famous snack maker CALBEE, Inc. Try their potato chips straight out of the fryer. Below right: Hi-Chew candy has a texture something like chewing gum, and during irregularly scheduled events Morinaga Candy Shop shows people how to mold it into fun shapes by stretching or squishing it.

For more information, contact Tokyo Okashi Land: <http://www.tokyoeki-1bangai.co.jp/street/okashi>



# Asakusa and Mukojima

## Snacks and Rambles in Yesteryear Tokyo

Photos by Ito Chiharu Map by Oguro Kenji

Strolling



Japan

3



A 10-minute walk from Oshiage Station brings you to Jikken-bashi Bridge over the Kita Jikken-gawa River, a great spot to see the reflected *sakasa* (upside down) Tokyo Skytree.



Above right: This *yokan* jelly highlights the fragrance of sweet potato. (By Funawa Honten Co., Ltd.)  
Left: *Ningyo-yaki* sponge cakes come in shapes such as a five-storied pagoda or pigeon. (By Kimura-ya Honten)



1. Nakamise Market is often crowded. About 90 shops line both sides of the pedestrian way.
2. The lantern under Kaminari-mon Gate weighs 700 kg. It is 3.9 meters in height and 3.3 meters in diameter.
3. The Main Hall of Senso-ji Temple is dedicated to Kanzeon Bosatsu, the bodhisattva of mercy and compassion.
4. The incense cauldron in front of the Main Hall is always an attraction. According to tradition, fanning the smoke toward a part of your body that ails will bring relief.

Tokyo Skytree is currently the world's tallest freestanding tower. It stands near Asakusa and Mukojima, two of Tokyo's best tourist destinations, which are more popular than ever since the tower opened in May 2012. The two districts face each other across the Sumida River.

The area offers the taste experiences of working-class people whose culture helped define the Edo period (1603-1867). That was when Japan's political life became centered on the metropolis now called Tokyo. Tokyo's traditional

snacks are known for being simple and unpretentious yet quite substantial.

The preeminent icon of the Asakusa district is the Kaminari-mon Gate, which guards Senso-ji Temple. Pass through it and you are in the Nakamise Market, a long walkway lined with shops leading to the temple. Busy since the Edo period, it is one of Japan's oldest shopping districts. Here you will see handcrafts and souvenirs for sale, along with many kinds of specialty snacks and sweet foods.





Far left: Hands-on experience making *kaminari-okoshi*, at Tokiwado Kaminariokoshi Honpo Co., Ltd. The business was established 250 years ago. Mix together a starchy syrup and sugar, add peanuts, then simmer. Steam rice, dry it, then mash and roast it. Next, add the rice to the simmered mixture, then place in a mold. Cut into pieces suitable for eating and serve.  
Left and below: Photos show ingredients for making *kaminari-okoshi*, and the final product.

These include *imo-yokan* (a simple treat made from steamed, solidified sweet potato paste), *ningyo-yaki* (sponge cake in shapes like the five-storied pagoda and pigeons associated with the temple nearby), and *senbei* crackers (made by rolling out rice flour and then baking it with a little soy sauce for added flavor).

Once you pass through the market you will find yourself gazing up at the pagoda on your left, before entering the inner grounds of the temple. In front of you stands the main building where people pay their respects. When this little ceremony is done, you may want to stroll to the confectionery stall behind the pagoda, which is known for



Here at Ichiban-ya, expert confectioners make *senbei* rice crackers and serve them just off the grill.



Left: When Chomei-ji Sakura-mochi first came on the market in Old Japan, cherry tree leaves were gathered from the banks of the Sumida River in the Asakusa district, pickled in salt after a good washing, and then wrapping around *mochi* rice cakes containing bean paste.  
Above: Kototoi Dango bean paste balls with three types of flavorings: red adzuki beans, white kidney beans, and brown miso.



The mood in the restaurant is relaxing, and the steamed *kuzu-mochi* rice cakes have a special taste all their own, topped off with a sprinkling of fragrant toasted soybean flour and black molasses. (By Funabashi-ya Kameido Tenjin-mae Honten)



A water bus takes tourists down the Sumida River to Tokyo's busy port, about 40 minutes away.

selling *kaminari-okoshi*. You will enjoy the crunchy texture and rich, sweet taste of these morsels of roasted, steamed rice held together with a sticky candy. You can even try to make some here, too. Take one of the specially designed cans to put them in and take with you—a great souvenir idea.

After your confectionery adventure, avoid the bustle of Nakamise Market and ramble instead toward the Sumida River, with Tokyo Skytree dominating the sky above. On the other side of the river is the Mukojima district, where many other famous sweet foods await. *Sakura-mochi* (sweet rice cakes wrapped in cherry tree leaves) and colorful *dango* (dumpling-like sweets) are just two of the delights sold here

by long-established shops. If you walk on a little further you will come to Kameido Tenjin Shrine, where you can try *kuzu-mochi* (a steamed cake made from fermented wheat). It is semi-transparent, refreshingly cool, springy in texture, and fun to bite off in small pieces.

After getting a taste of Tokyo's sweet-town, you might want to go back to the river and take a water bus downstream from Asakusa to Tokyo's busy port—a fun, 40-minute jaunt that passes under several bridges.



#### Getting there

From Narita International Airport, take the Narita Sky Access Express (about 1 hr), or a limousine bus (about 120 min)

#### For more info

"Asakusa-Sightseeing" website (about 80 languages, including Arabic, Chinese, English, French, German, Korean, Russian and Spanish):  
<http://asakusa-kankou.com/>  
"Visit Sumida" website (English, Chinese and Korean)  
<http://visit-sumida.jp/>





## Green Tea

Photo by Ito Chiharu Collaboration: Uogashi-Meicha Co., Ltd.

In Japan, green tea is a part of daily life. Tea with something sweet is such a universal experience here that the phrase *o-cha-uke* (literally “receive tea”) actually implies “bringing out the flavor of tea with a confection.” The pleasantly sharp flavor of green tea goes well with a sweet or salty snack, and it leaves the mouth feeling refreshed, too.

Place tea leaves in a teapot, pour in enough hot water for one cup, serve, then pour in the same amount of water again and again, for each person to be served. This is the basic pattern followed for serving green tea. Boil water, allow it to cool to about 80 °C, then

pour it over the tea leaves. This way, you bring out even more of the fine taste and fragrance. The first cup excels in fragrance, the second cup in taste, the third and subsequent cups in opening up the leaves to enhance the taste. These subtle changes add to the enjoyment of tea. Another option: steep the leaves in water in a large pot or bottle (photo: rear left). Chilled tea made this way will cool and refresh you on hot summer days.

Green tea bags are handy and easy to use, making them an ideal souvenir from Japan.