

niponica

Discovering  
Japan

# にほにか

no. 34



• Special Feature •

## Healthy Eating in Japan



• Special Feature •

# Healthy Eating in Japan

*Shojin ryori* made with no meat or fish, ancient and new techniques of fermentation, creative food innovations... Japanese cuisine can not only support health, but also help to build a sustainable world.

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| 04 Japan's Evolving Vegetarian Culture                | 16 A Virtual Journey through Japan<br>Edible Landscapes |
| 08 Japanese Soy-Based Foods—Yesterday<br>and Today    | 18 Tasty Japan: Time to Eat!<br>Amazake Sweets          |
| 10 A Soybean Bounty in Japanese Food                  | 20 Strolling Japan<br>Nagahama                          |
| 12 Specialists Creating the Future of<br>Fermentation | 24 Souvenirs of Japan<br>Miso Soup Monaka               |
| 14 Food Innovations Born in Japan                     |   |



Cover:  
Set meal featuring rows of small vegetable dishes, served  
at Demachi Rororo in Kyoto  
Photo: Naito Sadaho

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

no.34 R-050317

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

Regions across Japan are home  
to heirloom vegetables that have  
been grown locally for centuries.  
Pictured here are *kyoyasai*, heir-  
loom vegetables grown in Kyoto  
since ancient times.

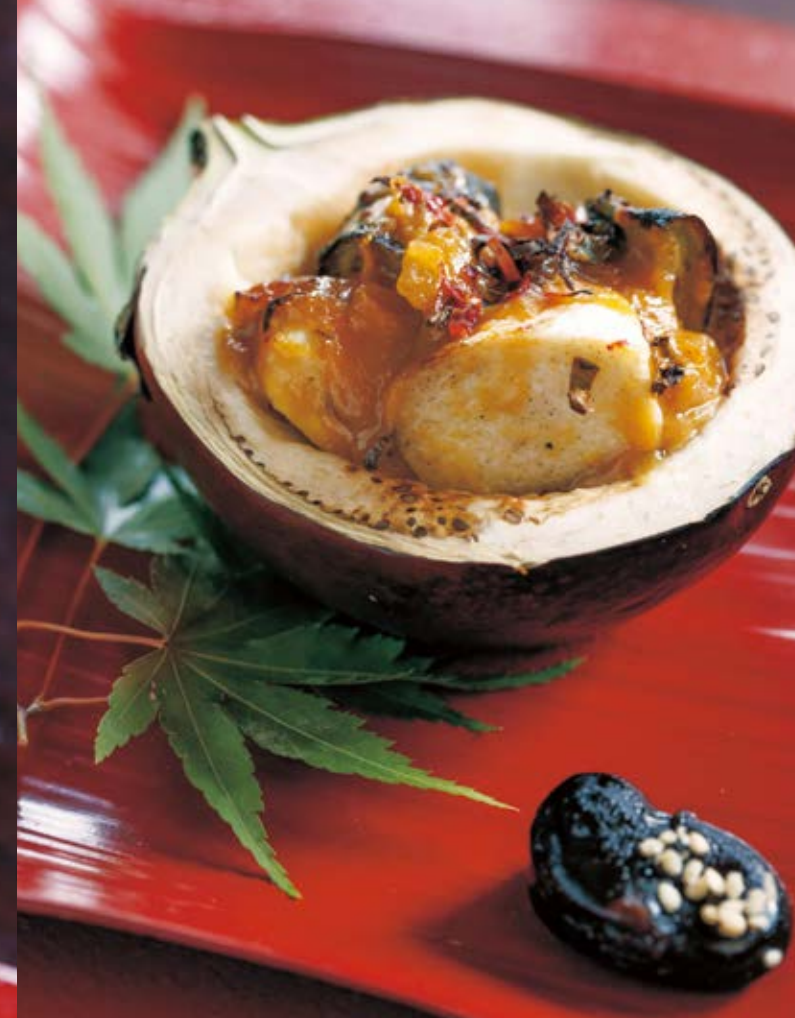




# Japan's Evolving Vegetarian Culture

As health consciousness grows around the world, people are taking another look at plant-based foods and vegetarian cuisine. Here, we look at the appeal of the flavorful, environmentally friendly vegetarian food that has been a part of Japanese culinary culture since ancient times.

Photos: Kurihara Osamu



Left page: *Hassun* plate of seasonal vegetables and dishes featuring Chinese lantern plant, water chestnut, and deep-fried *fu* (wheat gluten) with *nori*.  
Above left: Appetizer of grilled eggplant and Manchurian wild rice stem coated in miso with chopped *daikon* radish and pickled *takana* mustard greens.  
Above right: Japanese clear broth soup called *sumashijiru* with sesame tofu, *matsutake* mushroom, and wax gourd. The *dashi* is a blend of *kombu* kelp broth and vegetable broth.  
Bottom left: *Hiryuzu* is a fritter made with mashed tofu and Japanese yam mixed with minced burdock root, carrots, and *kikurage* mushrooms.  
Bottom right: Meaty abalone mushroom steak served with sesame sauce and wasabi.







Vinegared rice is topped with boiled chrysanthemum flowers for sushi that resembles the traditional Japanese handball called *temari*.

*Shojin ryori*, a type of vegetarian cuisine made with vegetables, seaweed, mushrooms and other plant-based foods, was originally the diet of Zen Buddhist monks. These dishes do not contain either animal-based ingredients or the “five pungent roots” (garlic, onions, leeks, chives, and shallots), out of respect for Buddhist teachings. Once only served at temples and specialty restaurants, it is now easy to order this vegetarian fare at more and more restaurants and cafes in Japan, with the increasing interest in vegetarian cuisine.

One restaurant serving vegetarian meals is SOUGO in Tokyo’s Roppongi neighborhood. Owner-chef Nomura Daisuke is listed as one of the world’s 50 pioneering chefs in plant-based cuisine.

“Chefs from other countries are surprised by the variety of cooking methods we use,” says Nomura of his truly diverse 12-course meals. The restaurant’s menu features a steamed *kabocha* winter squash dish called Shojin Pudding, steaks made of abalone mushrooms, and other contemporary dishes unknown in traditional Japanese vegetarian cuisine. These dishes are prepared various ways—grilled, steamed, boiled, and deep-fried—upending the image of vegetarian dishes as simple and healthy but bland.

SOUGO does, of course, serve traditional dishes such as *goma tofu*, which is made from white sesame seeds, and fritters made with tofu and vegetables called *hiryuzu*.



Above: Rice mixed with salted *kombu* kelp and topped with lotus root tempura (left) accompanied by *akadashi* (miso soup made from soybeans).  
Bottom: A special pudding made by steaming strained pumpkin with *dashi* stock.

Based on the wisdom of Japan’s traditional vegetarian culture, these dishes, too, offer more of the proteins and fats that vegetarian diets tend to lack.

The restaurant’s *dashi* broth, a basic to Japanese cuisine, is also unique, made from *kombu* (kelp) and vegetables and not from the typical animal-based ingredients like bonito flakes. Bringing kelp to the boil produces an astringent, bitter flavor, while slow-boiling vegetables releases the umami. Accordingly, the restaurant makes its *dashi* by preparing the kelp and vegetable broths separately and then mixing the two together. Paying close attention to each of the ingredients to bring out their individual characteristics results in rich, full-bodied flavors. There is no waste in



Above: Owner-chef Nomura Daisuke. His masterful culinary skills are evident in the depth of his *dashi* broth flavors.  
Center: Preparing the water chestnuts for the *hassun* plate. The hard shell is removed to reveal the edible white flesh inside.  
Bottom: The modern ambience of the SOUGO interior design

making of the dishes too, as the vegetable broth is made with the peels and scraps left from preparing other dishes.

As Nomura points out, “Buddhist teachings tell us that plants are living beings, too. Since the plants are giving their lives for us, we put our whole heart into cooking them and make sure nothing goes to waste.” Food loss in the kitchen here is virtually zero. *Shojin ryori* is also a cuisine that suits the current era of sustainability.

Gorgeous presentation, delicious flavor, healthy, and environmentally friendly — Japan’s storied vegetarian culture may be the richest of diets, even today.



# Japanese Soy-Based Foods—Yesterday and Today

Soy sauce, made from soybeans, is a key seasoning in all types of Japanese foods — from sushi and tempura to soba noodles. The traditional method of making soy sauce, still used today, offers an insight into the deep ties between soybeans and Japanese food culture.



Above: Soybeans, the main ingredient in soy sauce  
Left: Yuasa Soy Sauce is sold in glass bottles.

1. *Kaiire* is the process of stirring the *moromi*. Evenly stirring the sticky mash requires masterful technique.
2. After fermenting for over a year and a half, the *moromi* is poured into a straining cloth.
3. The cloth has 80 layers, and the *moromi* is gradually squeezed through it with increasing pressure to yield the soy sauce.
4. These cedar barrels have been in use for 80-100 years. Yeast and lactic acid bacteria live in the barrels, encouraging proper fermentation.
5. Kinzanji Miso is said to have inspired the creation of soy sauce. A sweet miso made from soybeans, barley, and rice, it is still made today in the town of Yuasa-cho.
6. Factory Manager Yukawa Fukuo (second from right) and other master craftsmen carry on the tradition of making Yuasa Soy Sauce.

Photos: Sasaki Takanori

Soybeans are rich in high-quality protein and fat. They also contain a good balance of carbohydrates, vitamins, minerals, and other nutrients. A favorite “super food” of health-conscious eaters, soybeans are increasingly popular as an ingredient in meat substitutes around the world.

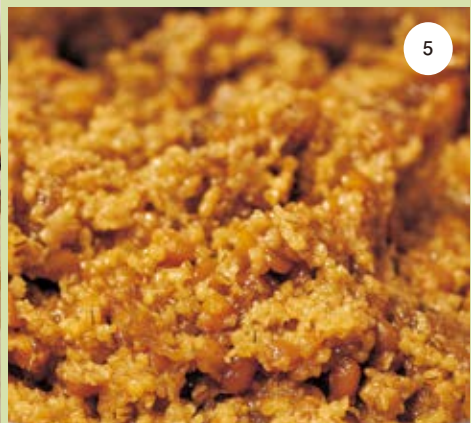
The now trendy soybean has long been commonplace in Japan. With their plenteous protein, soybeans were a good fit for Japan’s vegetable-based diet, which could have easily fallen short on this essential nutrient. In addition to boiled and roasted soybeans, the Japanese dinner table is filled with soybean-based foods processed in a variety of different ways. Miso, tofu, and *natto* fermented soybeans are all typical examples. The most important of all, however, is soy sauce. It is no exaggeration to say that Japanese food without the flavors of soy sauce is impossible to imagine.

Soy sauce is thought to have originated in the miso-making process introduced by Zen monks in the 13th century. Repeated innovation and improvements have perfected soy sauce into the reddish-black, aromatic liquid we know today. To this day, soy sauce is still made using traditional methods in its birthplace of Yuasa-cho in Wakayama Prefecture.

A mixture of boiled soybeans and roasted, crushed wheat is inoculated with malted rice, then kept at a constant temperature to allow the *koji* mold to ferment the mixture for three days. Salt and the liquid from the boiled soybeans are added to this mixture to make the base for soy sauce, a thick mixture called *moromi*. The *moromi* is placed in wooden barrels to further ferment for more than a year and a half. During this fermentation, a key process called *kaiire* is employed to encourage fermentation. This involves stirring the viscous mixture with a long-handled paddle called a *kai*. With no air conditioning in traditional soy sauce breweries, the frequency and timing of the *kaiire* is adjusted according to the condition of the *moromi*, as temperatures fluctuate day to day.

Once the *moromi* has matured, it is poured into a straining cloth and squeezed; the sauce comes out and leaves oil, lees, and other impurities behind. Then, after a final heating, the soy sauce is ready. This heating process stops the fermentation and releases the distinctive aroma of the sauce.

Soy sauce made with high-quality soybeans using this time-consuming method is rich, mellow, and bursting with unmistakable umami flavor. Everyone should try the real deal at least once!







### Soymilk Yoghurt

This yoghurt is made from soymilk fermented with the plant-derived lactic acid bacteria discovered in *sunki-zuke*, a simple no-salt pickled red turnip.  
(Photo: MARUSAN-AI Co., Ltd.)



### Tofu

Tofu is set in a firm block by adding a coagulant like *nigari* to the liquid squeezed from boiled soybeans (soy milk). The simplest way to enjoy it is as *hiyayakko*, topped with just a few garnishes and soy sauce (see photo) or served warm with *kombu* kelp broth.



### Edamame

Young, green soybeans harvested in summer before they mature are called edamame. They are simply boiled in salted water. Aromatic, tasty, and healthy, these are an undeniably popular snack to pair with an alcoholic beverage.



### Soy Noodles

Noodles made with 50% soybeans contain less than 40% of the carbohydrates and more than three times the protein than regular wheat flour noodles. They can be used for both pasta and ramen dishes.  
(Photo: KIKKOMAN CORPORATION)



### Natto

*Natto* is a fermented health food made by inoculating cooked soybeans with *bacillus subtilis natto*. Known for its strong aroma and sticky sliminess, *natto* is a classic Japanese breakfast dish.

## A Soybean Bounty in Japanese Food

The Japanese dinner table features soybeans in many different forms. Since ancient times, a great variety of traditional dishes have featured low-calorie, healthy soy. Today, soy is also used in many contemporary “imitations” to replicate the taste, appearance, and texture of other foods.



### Cheese-Style Tofu

This healthy cheese-like product is 100% soymilk. It not only has the same texture and feel as cheese, but also melts in the same way when heated.  
(Photo: Sagamiya Foods, Co., Ltd.)



### Yuba

*Yuba* is the thin film that is skimmed off the surface of boiled soymilk. It can be eaten fresh with wasabi and soy sauce or dried for longer storage.



### Kinako

*Kinako* is roasted soybean flour to which sugar is added. It is used in sweets. Sticky rice cakes topped with sweet soybean flour, *kinako-mochi*, are one of the most popular flavors of mochi.

### Aburaage

These pouches of thinly sliced, deep-fried tofu are often simmered in a salty sweet broth of soy sauce, sake, and sugar, and filled with vinegared rice to make *inarizushi* (pictured).



### Soy Patty

Vegetable burger patties made from plant-based proteins derived from soybeans are sandwiched between two hamburger buns. Shiitake mushroom extract is added to the patties to soften the distinctive soy flavor.  
(Photo: MOS FOOD SERVICES, INC.)

### Soy Kalbi

This soy-based meat substitute tastes and looks like *kalbi* barbecued short ribs, but with about an eighth of the fat content of regular ribs.  
(Photo: Next Meats Co., Ltd.)



### Soybean Rice

This processed soybean food is made to look just like rice. It is delicious as is and can be used to make fried rice, as well.  
(Photo: FUJICCO Co., Ltd.)



# Specialists Creating the Future of Fermentation

Young fermenters are building on tradition to nurture a new future of fermentation.

Photos: Osaka Satoshi, Fukuda Yoriko  
Photos courtesy of Hakko Department, Ishizaki Takahito, Yakult Honsha Co., Ltd.



Above: Hakko Department, located in Shimokitazawa, Tokyo, regularly stocks more than 500 different fermented items.  
Middle: Easy to eat on the go, Outdoor Natto is perfect for camping.  
Lower right: Nigori-su Vinegar, an original Hakko Department product

## Fermentation Designer Highlights the Appeal of the Art

Ogura Hiraku became enthralled with the power of fermentation when he saw how quickly his physical strength improved once he got into the habit of eating fermented foods. He then began traveling to brewers and producers of fermented foods all over Japan.

“My work is about redesigning the large variety of fermented foods still produced around Japan to suit modern life and promoting them to younger people today,” he says.

Toward this end, he is involved in everything from designing product packaging to creating picture books and anime and organizing events. He recently opened Hakko Department (Fermentation Department) in Tokyo. The store touts the appeal of fermentation, offering traditional fermented foods, as well as original products to be enjoyed

anywhere at any time, like Outdoor Natto, a slimy, sticky food made of fermented soybeans that is ordinarily quite messy to eat, but not in this package.

Ogura advocates what he calls “fermentation tourism,” a different sort of way to visit a special area. While touring production sites and sampling fermented foods, visitors can check out traditional storehouses, ports once used to transport goods, and other fermentation-related sights. Tourists begin with an exhibit introducing local fermentation culture and then experience the area as part of a tour that follows the content of the exhibit.

He points out, “There are amazing landscapes and culture in neighborhoods not visited as part of a typical trip to Japan. I want visitors to discover this still relatively unknown aspect of Japan.”



Ogura visits production sites, speaking passionately with fermenters about their products.



## Lactobacilli Researcher Seeks Out Healthy Bacteria

In Japan, more and more attention is being paid to regulating gut health as people seek to improve their overall health by balancing bacteria in the intestines. Along with a well-balanced diet and moderate exercise, probiotic drinks that contain beneficial lactobacilli are another effective way to improve gut health. One of these drinks, Yakult, is made from the proprietary strain *Lactocaseibacillus casei Shirota*. This long-selling probiotic drink was first produced in 1935, and sales of the sweet, easy-to-drink beverage are still going strong. The recently launched Yakult 1000, containing a great deal of the *Shirota* strain, is said to relieve stress caused by temporary emotionally stressful situations and to help enhance sleep quality. The new product was so explosively popular that for a while it was hard to find on store shelves.

Kakiyama Sayaka is a researcher engaged in functional food development at the Yakult Central Institute. She spends her days referencing the library of bacteria that the institute has built over its long history, seeking out bacteria that are beneficial to health. She explains, “The effects of lactobacilli vary depending on the type and amount consumed.” Kakiyama was involved in developing a fruit drink made by fermenting fruit juice with lactic acid bacteria taken from pickles in the Tohoku region. The lactic acid bacteria in the drink reportedly reduce nasal irritation caused by pollen and other irritants.

“There is so much about the world of bacteria that we do not understand yet,” she says. “I believe there are still more lactobacilli beneficial to human health remaining for us to find.”



Left: The classic New Yakult  
Center: Yakult 1000 contains 100 billion *Shirota* bacteria.  
Right: Kakiyama was involved in developing Yakult Oishii Fermented Fruit Juice.



Lactobacilli are living organisms. Kakiyama says she wants to continue creating products that support health.



The *Lactocaseibacillus casei Shirota* strain of bacteria in Yakult drink



# Delicious treats reduce food loss

## ♣️VEGHEET

VEGHEET are made using an innovative method of transforming vegetables that are misshapen, damaged, or would otherwise be disposed of for not meeting market standards. As the name implies, they are made from vegetable paste mixed with agar, then stretched and dried into paper-thin sheets. Containing no chemical or food additives, they are processed without losing any of flavor or nutrition of the original vegetables, and they have a long shelf life. These highly versatile vegetable sheets can be used to create wraps for fillings or dissolved to create the base for soups.



Above: VEGHEET sheets in the flavors and colors of the original vegetable.  
Above right: Wrap around vegetables, meat, or other fillings to serve at parties.  
Bottom right: Manufacturing involves forming vegetables into sheets that are then dried.  
(All three photos: ISLE CO., LTD.)

# New frontiers in insect-based food

## ♣️Cricket Ramen

As rich in protein as the equivalent weight of beef or pork and easy to raise, crickets as a food are expected to help alleviate the global food crisis. Snacks containing cricket powder and other products have been a hot topic. Now, ramen, the Japanese comfort food, made with crickets is finally on the market. The noodle dough is made with cricket powder. The broth is also made with crickets. The ramen noodles are served in a broth made with crickets and seasoned with cricket-flavored oil and soy sauce made of crickets fermented with malted rice. This savory ramen is packed with umami flavor and tastes similar to shrimp. For those who are reluctant to eat insects, a sip of cricket ramen can lower the hurdle and boost recognition of crickets as a powerful food source.



Top left: The ramen at ANTCICADA, a restaurant serving food made from insects, has 160 crickets per serving. (Photo: Kurihara Osamu)  
Top: Soy sauce made by fermenting crickets and rice malt. (Photo: ANTCICADA)  
Bottom right: Two species of crickets, *Gryllus bimaculatus* and *Acheta domestica*, are used to create the broth. (Photo: ANTCICADA)

# Food Innovations Born in Japan

# Microorganism that may save the world

## ♣️Euglena

Displaying the characteristics of both flora and fauna, with chloroplasts as well as flagella used for locomotion, Euglena is a mysterious microorganism that is increasingly popular as a super food containing 59 different nutrients. Euglena can be cultivated through photosynthesis with just light and water and has the potential to help solve environmental problems by absorbing carbon dioxide in the process. It has extremely promising and diverse applications, including in food products such as health supplements and beverages, as well as cosmetics, biofuels, feed, and fertilizers.



Top: Fruit-flavored beverage made with Euglena.  
Bottom left: Euglena dried and then processed.  
Bottom: Euglena are tiny, at only 0.05 to 0.1mm long.  
(All three photos: euglena Co., Ltd.)

# Nutritious and delicious

## ♣️Kanzenshoku All-in-One Meals

*Kanzenshoku* is a food product containing a balanced amount of the nutrients\* needed in one meal of a healthy diet. These products are helpful resources for dieters and busy people in the modern world who get their meals efficiently. In the past, the only Japanese *kanzenshoku* products available were powders that were dissolved in liquid and drunk as a beverage. However, in recent years, a wide variety of these products have been developed to meet the need for something closer to solid food. Shoppers can now choose *kanzenshoku* in bread, curry, pasta, or a number of other forms they desire.

\* Estimated value based on the *Dietary Reference Intakes for Japanese* from the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare of Japan



Left: Whole wheat flour, low-carb *kanzenshoku* bread. (Photo: BASE FOOD Inc.)

Simply add hot water to prepare instant curry and microwavable frozen pasta. (Photo: NISSIN FOOD PRODUCTS CO., LTD.)





A Virtual Journey  
through Japan

# Edible Landscape

Across Japan, each local area boasts a unique cuisine shaped by the blessings of the nearby natural environment. The special seasonal processing of local ingredients creates some delectable landscape scenes.

Saga

## Ariake nori seaweed nets

*Nori* seaweed (pictured below right) is indispensable to Japanese dishes like sushi. Seaweed cultivation in the Ariake Sea off the western shore of Kyushu region takes advantage of the local sea's abundant nutrients, which flow in on rivers large and small, as well as the six-meter difference between high and low tide. Winter evening views of rows of *hibi nori* nets stretched between poles are a classic Ariake Sea scene. (Photo: PIXTA)



Hyogo

## Dried octopus

This traditional method of drying has been used by generations of fishermen in Akashi City, Hyogo Prefecture, an area of Japan famous for its octopus. The octopus is stretched taut with bamboo skewers thread through its head and legs and hung in the sun to dry for a full day and night. A dish of rice with dried octopus, called *tako-meshi*, is customary in early summer to pray for a large catch that year. (Photo: The Kobe Shimbun)



Niigata

## Snow-exposed peppers for kanzuri

*Kanzuri*, a spicy seasoning that, in small quantities, enhances the flavors of a dish, is a specialty of Niigata Prefecture. To make *kanzuri*, a combination of spicy red pepper, rice malt, *yuzu* citrus, and salt is fermented for over three years. Before the fermentation process, the salted red peppers are left exposed in the snow for a few days before mixing them with the other ingredients. This removes their acidity, softens their pungency, and gives them even fuller flavor. (Photo: Kanzuri Co., Ltd.)



Yamagata

## Edible chrysanthemums

Chrysanthemums are grown in Japan not only for decorative purposes, but also for eating. The purple variety of chrysanthemum from Yamagata Prefecture, called *motte no hoka*, is said to be especially delicious and aromatic. Boiled and then soaked, it has a delightful crispy texture. (Photo: photolibrary)



Fukushima

## Wind-frozen tofu

*Shimi-dofu* is a preserved food made by freezing, aging, and dehydrating tofu by binding it with straw and leaving it to dry in a cold wind. The strong cold winter winds in Fukushima Prefecture are ideal for making *shimi-dofu*. This dehydrated food can be rehydrated and used in simmered dishes or salads. (Photo in left: PIXTA; photo in right: Fukushima Prefecture Tourism and Product Exchange Association)



Yamanashi

## Dried persimmons

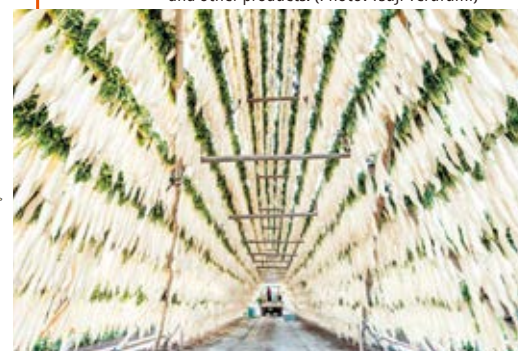
Traditional rows of persimmons hung from house eaves are still a late autumn sight in the Enzan neighborhood of Koshu City in Yamanashi Prefecture. The persimmons are peeled, then smoked or heated to keep them from spoiling. Sweet and soft dried persimmons are ready in about 20 days. (Photo: PIXTA)



Miyazaki

## Daikon yagura towers

In Miyazaki Prefecture, Japan's most prominent producer of sun-dried daikon radish employs *daikon yagura* towers, a common sight in winter. The bamboo frames from which the daikon hang are some six meters tall and 50 to 100 meters across. After 10 days or so, the daikon lose their bitterness, become sweeter, and gain a deeper umami, after which they are processed into pickles and other products. (Photo: Tsuji Terufumi)



Kagoshima

## Black vinegar pots

Black vinegar has been produced by the same traditional method for some 200 years in Fukuyama Town, City of Kirishima in Kagoshima Prefecture, where rows of giant pots in *tsubobatake* fields still provide stunning views today. Each pot holds 54 liters of a mixture of brown rice, water, and *kaji* mold, which is slowly aged for over a year. (Photo: Fukuyama Kurozu Co., Ltd., Kakuda)



Kochi

## Single-line bonito fishing

*Ipponzuri*, a traditional pole-fishing method for catching bonito, has been practiced in the town of Nakatoso in Kochi Prefecture for over 400 years. Using a special hook designed to easily dislodge the catch, the fisherman flings the hooked bonito into the air, immediately releasing the fish and returning the pole to the water to catch the next. *Ipponzuri* damages the fish less than net fishing, for fish that tastes great at the table. (Photo: Nakatoso-cho)





# Amazake Sweets

## Healthy and Mildly Sweet

Photos: Arai Akiko



Top: The *koji* specialty shop sawvi, with its in-store cafe, is nestled quietly in a lushly green Kamakura valley.  
Bottom: sawvi's handmade rice malt (left) and amazake (right)

*Koji*, a type of mold that grows when rice, barley, soybeans, and other sources are inoculated with *koji-kin* (*koji* starter), is essential to making the fermented foods that are foundational to Japanese cuisine. The scientific name for the *koji* starter is *Aspergillus oryzae*, a microorganism of such importance that it is recognized as the national fungus of Japan.

*Amazake*, a traditional fermented drink made from a rice malt that combines rice and *koji*, has recently gained new-found popularity as a health food. Surprisingly sweet despite having no added sugar, and belying its name (which translates literally to “sweet sake”), *amazake* is a non-alcoholic drink that can be enjoyed by both children and adults alike. It is so nutritious that it has even been called “a drinkable intravenous infusion.”

To make *amazake*, water is added to rice malt and stored at a constant temperature around 60 °C for six to eight hours. As the rice starch transforms

into glucose and oligosaccharides, the drink takes on a full-bodied sweetness. *Amazake* is also rich in essential amino acids, B vitamins, and other nutrients. In addition to containing oligosaccharides, which beneficial gut bacteria feed on, *amazake* also contains an amino acid called ergothioneine, which is believed to have a strong antioxidant effect that slows aging and helps prevent lifestyle-related diseases. Delicious on its own as a drink, *amazake* is recently also featured as an ingredient in sweet confections — another way to enjoy this carefully fermented, refreshing brew.

There is a *koji* specialty shop in Kamakura in Kanagawa Prefecture, a popular destination for tourists, called “sawvi,” which serves sweets made with *amazake*. The in-store cafe there serves a variety of these delicacies. Shop-owner Terasaka Hiroshi explains, “*Amazake* has a sweetness that is much milder than sugar. Not only sweet, the amino acids in it also

impart umami and a delightful depth of flavor.” Even so, *amazake* itself lacks a strong flavor or aroma, so it works well with creamy dairy ingredients and tart fruit flavors.

Popular *amazake* sweets on the sawvi menu include a roll cake with *amazake*-infused whipped cream and sweet soybean paste, as well as parfaits layered with *amazake*-infused gelato and seasonal fruit. Each spoonful of the gelato fills the mouth with gentle rice flavors, and the natural sweetness is easily absorbed and can help refresh a tired body. Funny how hearing that sweet treats are nutritious lessens the guilt that comes with enjoying them!

*Amazake* sweets are not only good for you; they are also delicious and pleasing to the eye. For those who do not like the idea of fermented foods or are just trying one for the first time, these desserts are sure to win over many new fans.



Top: Parfaits with seasonal fruits like Shine Muscat grapes (pictured). Below the fruit are layers of *amazake* gelato, cream cheese and caramelized walnuts.  
Bottom left: Gelato made with *amazake*, milk or cream, and rum-soaked raisins  
Bottom right: A combination of Japan and the West in a roll cake made of fresh cream with *amazake*, a sweet paste made of miso and soybeans, and rice flour sponge cake.



The Lake Shore Home of Fermentation

# Nagahama

Visit the banks of a vast lake to discover fermentation wisdom gained from natural, historical practices.

Photos: Osaka Satoshi, Aflo, PIXTA



Chikubushima at dusk viewed from Lake Biwa's northern shore





1. Nagahama Castle, built by Toyotomi Hideyoshi. The castle tower standing here today is a reconstruction of the original.
2. Kurokabe Square lined with black stucco buildings
3. Kabuki performances by children on parading floats are a highlight of the Nagahama Hikiyama Festival. (Photo: Nagahama Hikiyama Cultural Association)
4. *Funa-zushi* has a distinctive fermented aroma and rich umami taste. (Photo: Tokuyama Zushi)
5. 6. *Funa-zushi* served with cream cheese and fruit jelly (5), aside beautiful views of Lake Yogo, which lies to the north of Lake Biwa.

7. 8. Inside the Tomita Shuzo Brewery, with a history of over 480 years, and the brewery's gelato made from sake lees.
9. Visitors have the opportunity to observe how *koji* is fermented.
10. Miso and soy sauce produced in Shiga Prefecture are also available for purchase.
11. Cakes made with *koji* and cheese served at the shop cafe.

Located near the center of the Japanese archipelago, Lake Biwa is the largest lake in Japan. The picturesque city of Nagahama in Shiga Prefecture stretches along the lake's eastern shore and is richly blessed by nature. Bounded by the majestic Ibuki Mountains, the city offers views of the mysterious Chikubushima, a small island, said to be the home of the gods, which floats in Lake Biwa.

Nagahama initially flourished as the castle town for Nagahama Castle, which was built by Toyotomi Hideyoshi, the military commander who unified Japan in the 16th century. Starting in the Edo period (1603–1868), it grew into a town of inns welcoming travelers on the Hokoku Kaido, the main road which connected Kyoto and the Hokuriku region. Taking advantage of its strategic location on the lake shore as a shipping port, it further developed as a commercial town. The vestiges of this history can be seen in Kurokabe Square, a sightseeing destination full of historical warehouses and homes that have been turned into stores today. Visitors can walk one kilometer east from the square to the gate of Nagahama Hachimangu, an ancient shrine with a history of nearly 1,000 years. The Nagahama Hikiyama Festival, held at the shrine each year in April, is renowned for its procession of gorgeous floats featuring unique kabuki performances by children.

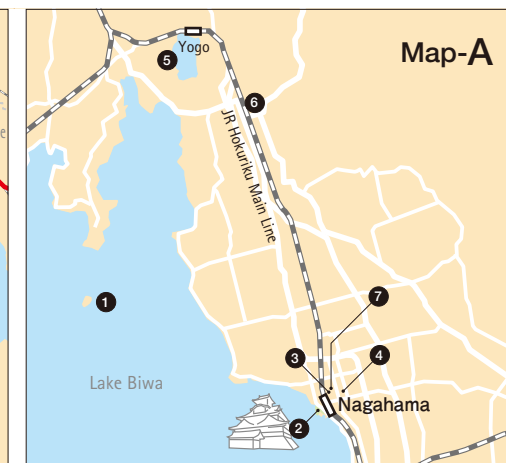
The waterfront city of Nagahama is richly blessed with the diverse animal and plant life of Lake Biwa. Seafood is particularly abundant here, and recipes for fermenting local ingredients have been passed down from ancient times to the present day. One of the most well known of these is *funa-zushi*, which is made from the round crucian carp that

is endemic to Lake Biwa. The carp are caught in spring and pickled in salt, packed in cooked rice, and fermented with lactic acid. The recipe is said to be the precursor to sushi. There are many famous *funa-zushi* restaurants throughout Nagahama, but for a unique taste experience, visit Tokuyama Zushi, an inn and restaurant about a 30-minute drive north of the city center. Also featuring other rare fermented foods made from local ingredients, the restaurant offers the opportunity to experience exceptional flavors—all while relaxing in the natural beauty of the Kohoku region on the northern bank of Lake Biwa. Nagahama is also home to many breweries that make sake from rice and *koji* mold. Making the most of the outstanding local rice and Okuibuki mountain range water that flows in a subterranean river, the Tomita Shuzo Brewery brews sake,

as well as sweets made from the sake lees that are a byproduct of the sake-making process.

Umi no Schole, a commercial and cultural fermentation-themed facility, opened in 2021. Visitors can explore the brewery and shop, take part in hands-on miso and cheese making, and bring *amazake* made on site as a souvenir. Umi no Schole offers a great deal of learning and fun, all focused on the fermentation culture that has been cultivated in Nagahama.

Spots to enjoy fermented foods are dotted throughout Nagahama, and a walk around the city is a great way to enjoy the area's natural surroundings and history. This is a highly recommended trip for those looking to experience Japanese food that is a bit different than the usual fare.



## Nagahama Area Map

- ① Chikubushima
- ② Nagahama Castle
- ③ Kurokabe Square
- ④ Nagahama Hachimangu
- ⑤ Tokuyama Zushi
- ⑥ Tomita Shuzo
- ⑦ Umi no Schole

### •Access

From Tokyo Station, about 2.5 hours to Nagahama Station on Tokaido Shinkansen and JR Hokuriku Main lines. From Osaka Station, about 1.5 hours to Nagahama Station on JR Tokaido Main Line.

### •Contact information

Travel Guide Northern Lake Biwa  
[https://kitabiwako.jp/en/travel\\_guide](https://kitabiwako.jp/en/travel_guide)





Left: Enjoy varieties of miso soup with tofu, *wakame* seaweed, taro, okra and other ingredients.

Above: Miso soup stock in shells designed to look like flowers

## Simply Add Hot Water and Serve Miso Soup Monaka

Photos: Osaka Satoshi



Slightly crack the *monaka* shell, pour hot water, stir to dissolve and voila!

Miso soup, a soup of vegetables and other ingredients simmered in a broth of dried bonito flakes and dried sardines with added miso paste, is an essential part of Japanese cuisine. Made from fermented soybeans, miso contains protein, vitamins, and amino acids and is also rich in gut-friendly lactic acid bacteria. Add ingredients like tofu and vegetables, and a single bowlful provides plenty of nutrition. Miso soup also improves blood circulation and warms the body; it frequently accompanies breakfast in Japan.

Miso soup *monaka* is a convenient alternative for today's busy people, who may not have time to make

miso soup from scratch. The term *monaka* was originally used for Japanese confections of sweet adzuki bean paste covered in a thin baked rice cake shell. Instead of sweet adzuki paste, miso soup *monaka* are filled with hardened freeze-dried miso stock and other ingredients. Simply pour hot water over the *monaka* to dissolve, and it is ready to serve. As nutritious as regular miso soup, these instant soups are also quite flavorful. The shells come in a variety of colors and shapes, so they are a treat for the eyes, as well. Why not try a bowl of quick and easy miso soup at home?

Cooperation: Hana Ichie

