

Washoku

form and style

Washoku is clearly multifaceted. But regardless of whether your meal comes in one dish or many, or whether the chef or someone else serves you and where, underlying the experience is the single unifying spirit of *omotenashi*, or hospitality that stems from a sense of communion. Its ultimate expression is seen in *cha-kaiseki*, the formal meal served prior to the tea ceremony.

A bowl of simmered autumn delicacies features fragrant matsutake mushrooms, green beans, and plump, late-season *hamo* pike conger garnished with a puree of *umeboshi* pickled apricot. *Yuzu* citron zest adds a fragrant grace note. The lid of the bowl is adorned inside with a chrysanthemum bloom gorgeously rendered in gold *makie* lacquer.





Cha-kaiseki

Autumn bounty: pomegranates, persimmons, matsutake mushrooms, chestnuts, akebi chocolate vine. Even the medley of leaves conveys a lush sense of the season.

Sharing the pleasures of the table

Hailed for its healthy, low-calorie, nutritionally balanced qualities, Japanese cuisine, known as *washoku* in its homeland, gained popularity abroad from the 1980s onward first in the United States and then elsewhere. In recent years interest in *washoku* has redoubled; an estimated 55,000 Japanese restaurants now operate overseas. While it was sushi that first entered the collective consciousness outside of Japan, other specialty foods—tempura (lightly battered deep-fried fish and vegetables), yakitori (bite-sized chicken and vegetables grilled on skewers), and ramen (egg noodles in a hearty soup), for example—have since emigrated as well, becoming regular choices for diners in cities across the world.

And now *kaiseki*, the traditional multicourse meal associated with banquets and other special occasions, has also garnered a following outside of Japan. With its emphasis not only on finely prepared and artfully presented dishes but also on the selection of tableware and a sense of the season, *kaiseki* offers the total Japanese dining experience in a way that sushi and other one-off foods do not. But what is *kaiseki*, exactly? In order to examine that, let's first address *cha-kaiseki*, the meal served as part of the formal tea ceremony, and from which *kaiseki* evolved.

Cha-kaiseki begins with a tray of rice and soup and concludes a few courses later with a freshly whisked serving of *matcha* green tea. The legendary tea master Sen no Rikyu (1522–1591) perfected this style of meal, taking his inspiration from *shojin* cuisine, a form of vegetarian cooking derived from the dietary customs of Buddhist monks. Rikyu's rustic *wabicha* style of tea ceremony carries on today in *cha-kaiseki* gatherings and is the foundation of the basic “one broth, three dishes” approach to serving a complete meal with rice that is the very heart of *washoku* itself.

Kaiseki differs from its forerunner in several ways. First, the sequencing of courses is more flexible, open to the interpretation of the chef in charge. Second, the *hassun* course is much more sumptuous than that served in the tea ceremony. Third, rice is offered only at the end of the meal. Moreover, the enjoyment of tea is not central to a *kaiseki* feast.

Yet both styles of meal share in common the practice of reflecting a rich sense of the season—in the choice of ingredients as well as in their presentation—and both embody *omotenashi*, a spirit of hospitality driven by fine attention to context and detail.

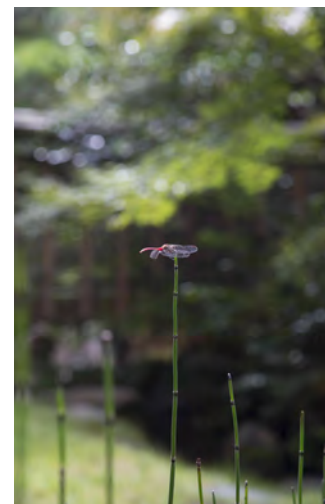
Kunio Tokuoka, the third-generation owner and executive chef of the renowned Kitcho flagship in

Arashiyama, just outside of Kyoto, explains the nature of the two styles this way: “In the tea ceremony, host and guests join together to create a sense of unity known as *ichiza konryu*. Gathering in a small tatami room, they sit closely together on their heels, their knees almost touching. The host prepares the tea in front of his guests, who take turns sipping from the same bowl and passing each fresh serving to the next in line. They also share a tray of sweets, carefully selected by the host for the occasion, in the same way. These rituals serve as a kind of template for connecting with others, a way to deepen your relationship with them.”

“Within the structured framework of *cha-kaiseki*, the preparation and enjoyment of tea are vehicles for creating that sense of unity. Modern-day *kaiseki* shifts the focus of the gathering to a more relaxed enjoyment of the dishes served.”

Selection of fresh ingredients symbolic of the season is one of the most important principles in *washoku*. With today's advanced distribution networks, ingredients from all corners of Japan arrive at the kitchen almost as fresh as when they were harvested. Moreover, ingredients are appreciated according to their different stages of seasonality: in addition to “right in season” flavors, there are “late in season” ones that can be used to evoke the passing of the season, and “first in season” tastes to herald the arrival of the next.

With imagination as his or her guide, a master chef translates this bounty into sumptuous presentations for the mind, eyes, and palate. In summer, a single bloom or petal might be used as a serving dish; in autumn, colored leaves provide a decorative flourish. In winter, bamboo leaves or a sprig of nandina brushed with snow become poetry on the plate. All of these nuances reveal the care taken to craft not just the meal, but your experience of it. Such is the real delight of *kaiseki*, and of *washoku* itself.



Top: A dragonfly heralds the arrival of autumn in the garden of the flagship Kitcho restaurant in Kyoto.

Middle: Yuan, the tea house at Kyoto Kitcho, was built to mark the 88th birthday of Kitcho founder Teiichi Yuki.

Bottom: All meals at Kyoto Kitcho end with *usucha*, the less formal of the two forms of *matcha* green tea served in the tea ceremony.

Ichiza konryu—communion of host and guests



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Served exclusively as part of the formal tea ceremony, *cha-kaiseki* is not to be found at any restaurant. Nonetheless, its essence remains at the heart of today's multicourse kaiseki cuisine, and of washoku in general. Let's take a closer look at what it's all about.

Some 400 years ago, the tea master Sen no Rikyu perfected the minimalist *wabicha* style of tea ceremony in response to the elaborate *honzen ryori* banquets of his time. His approach addressed not only the design of the tea room and implements used, but the style of meal served as well. Whereas the highly ritualized banquets for auspicious occasions typically involved three separate courses, each consisting of multiple dishes, Rikyu moved away from this extravagance toward a more intimate communion of host and guest, devising a simplified meal served on a single tray. His *ichiju sansai* solution of one soup and three dishes offered rice and soup followed by *mukozuke* (a dish to accompany sake), a stewed dish, and a grilled dish. One or two of these are served on a large platter, a practice that enables the food to be brought to the table at the peak of readiness, and facilitates service as well. As each guest takes his or her portion before passing the fare to the next individual, the host is spared trouble and all convened contribute to the fellowship of the table—a perfect embodiment of Rikyu's vision.

Whatever the number of courses served, the utmost care is taken in a *cha-kaiseki* meal to evoke a sense of the season. This is accomplished through the strict use of fresh ingredients, the selection of tableware, and poetic gestures and contextual references reflected in the menu and its presentation.

1. Placed before a guest sitting on the tatami mat, a legged lacquer tray holds bowls of freshly steamed rice and miso soup (left and right, respectively) in the front, and a *mukozuke* dish at rear. Only a mouthful of rice is served; likewise, the soup bowl is filled halfway. The choice of miso used to prepare the soup—red, white, or a blend—is made according to the season. Guests first partake of the rice and soup, sip some sake, and finish with the *mukozuke*, a name that refers to its placement on the tray “beyond” (*muko*) the other two servings. The first of the three *sansai* dishes in the *ichiju sansai* formula, *mukozuke* is typically a vinegared dish to whet the appetite. Shown here is crab and other ingredients served on chrysanthemum-shaped Raku ware.

2. Just as the guests are about to finish the rice and soup, warm sake and a stack of cups are brought in. The guest of honor takes the cup on the top and passes the rest to the next person, who follows suit. After taking a sip of sake, each guest sets his or her cup down on the tray and enjoys the *mukozuke*.



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3. This simmered dish, also called *wanmori*, is the second of the three *sansai* components of *ichiju sansai*. As it is a main course of the tea ceremony, extra care is taken to select ingredients that reference the season. These are served with a clear broth ladled to just barely cover them. Here, redspotted grouper and fragrant matsutake mushrooms topped with *yuzu* citron zest are presented in a lacquer bowl embellished with an ornate design of gold *makie*. Following this dish, a second serving of sake is offered.

4. A grilled item is typically the third and final dish of the *ichiju sansai* presentation. From this course onward, the food is plated large, to be shared among the guests, who each transfer a serving onto his or her now-empty *mukozuke* dish. The main guest takes a portion first and passes the food to the next; care is taken to be swift so that the freshly grilled fare remains hot for all. A boned fillet of fish is often featured in this course, as it is easy to eat. Here, tilefish lightly sprinkled with salt and garnished with chrysanthemum petals is served in an Oribe bowl crafted around the late 16th century.

5. Next comes the *azuke-bachi* course, named for its style of serving: the host “entrusts” (*azukeru*) his guests with the bowl, from which they serve themselves. As this part of the meal is enjoyed with steamed white rice, flavor-rich fare such as deep-fried *agemono*, vinegared *sunomono*, or a *takiawase* medley of separately cooked items is typically served. Shown here is a *takiawase* of deep-fried tofu balls, simmered pumpkin, Manganji green peppers, small yams, and julienned ginger. This course and the next are especially suited to the enjoyment of sake.

6. In a ritualized exchange, the host offers to serve rice, but the guests decline, offering instead to help themselves. Such mindful gestures of communion embody the time-honored spirit of *cha-kaiseki*.

7. The host presents the last round of sake along with delicacies arranged on an immaculate unvarnished cedar tray. This course takes its name, *bassun*, from a traditional measurement referring to the tray’s size, approximately 24 centimeters. At this relaxed juncture, the host may now move around the room as he or she and each of the guests pour sake for one another. These congenial exchanges are a shared moment of merriment before the subsequent rituals of the tea ceremony are conducted in hushed reverence.

The *bassun* course shown here features soft ginkgo-nut dumplings and prawns flavored with a touch of pickled bonito tripe. In *cha-kaiseki*, this course typically features two foods—together representing the bounty of land and sea, as here, or juxtaposing meat or fish and a vegetable. The contrast between such duos is further expressed in the style of cooking and their arrangement on the tray.

8. A pitcher of *yuto* and pickles are served to conclude the meal. *Yuto* is hot water, lightly salted, that has been poured over the crisp, slightly charred rice left at the bottom of the kitchen pot. (Today, parched rice is sometimes used instead.) Following the teachings of Zen, the point is to leave nothing to waste, so this flavored water and pickles are used to clean up even the last remaining grains of rice in one’s bowl. Normally two or three kinds of seasonal pickled vegetables are served, such as *mizunasu* eggplants, leafy greens, and kombu kelp. Having wiped their bowls clean, the guests conclude the meal by placing their chopsticks on the tray in unison, a gesture of thanks that also indicates to their host that they have finished eating.

At this point, all guests will leave the room in order that it may be prepared for the tea ceremony.

Presentation



With fall flowers in green bamboo vases and lanterns fashioned from the thin shavings of daikon radish, this *bassun* platter, prepared in October, speaks to the season.

The *omotenashi* spirit—what to convey, and how

At once spectacular and refined, the *hassun* course never fails to elicit murmurs of delight when it is revealed. Delicacies prepared for the number of guests in attendance are arranged on the tray, with care given to ensure that the presentation is equally pleasing from any seat or angle. Stunning in its embodiment of the season, *hassun* served at Kyoto Kitcho is truly a jewel in the crown of Japanese haute cuisine.

The name *hassun*, meaning 24 centimeters, derives from the size of an unvarnished square cedar tray commonly used in *cha-kaiseki*. When served as part of modern *kaiseki*, the *hassun* platter is designed in balance with the rest of the meal's courses, and reflects the hospitality of the host by bringing the essence of the season to the table dynamically, in a highly entertaining way.

"The five flavors of sweet, sour, spicy, bitter, and salty; the five colors of red, green, yellow, black, and white; and the five preparation methods of grilling, stewing, deep-frying, steaming, and serving raw—these are the basic principles of *washoku*, modeled on the doctrine of yin-yang and the five elements of Chinese cosmology. At Kitcho we add another set—the five senses of sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell," says executive chef Tokuoka. In Japanese cuisine there must be a considered balance among all of the five flavors, colors, and cooking methods; no one element in a set should overwhelm the others. This thinking applies to all courses, but is most evident in the *hassun* platter.

"How a mixed variety of foods is arranged on the plate is an area where *washoku* differs greatly from Western cuisine," Tokuoka observes. "One basic approach is to compose a series of three-dimensional triangular forms. This creates a kind of aesthetic visual stability. But too much stability is boring, so asymmetry is introduced. A little deviation from the rules is fun, exciting. Of course, there are limits as to how far one should go. You have to know where to rein in, so as not to disrupt the overall balance."

For Tokuoka, color is key to achieving balance in presentation. "Plate composition is all about taking control of color. Colors provide visual stimulation, which creates energy. *Santen-mori*, a display of three kinds of appetizers, has the visual stability of a triangle. To this, you can add a splash of color with your choice of serving



plate, for example. It's all about creating interest, some element of intrigue on the plate. For inspiration, I turn to nature. I think about how I'd like our customers to feel, and what I'd like to convey. I think a great deal about what each will take away from the experience. Nothing matters more."

The sumptuous *hassun* platter on the opposite page is brought to the table before the guests have finished the previous course, enabling them to feast their eyes on its mesmerizing display. This timing whets the appetite and heightens anticipation for the moment when the waitress returns to portion out individual servings, as shown above. The five delicacies of soy-marinated trout roe, *tamagoyaki* omelet, simmered prawn, stewed beef tongue, and ginkgo dumplings are then arranged on each guest's plate with care given once again to spatial balance.

The right tool makes all the difference



Knives

Thinly sliced flounder sashimi is garnished with julienned leeks. Drawing the single-ground *yanagiba* knife toward you diagonally as you cut renders slices with a smooth, clear surface, enhancing their texture and flavor.

With its temperate climate year-round, Japan is blessed with a great variety of fresh produce in every season. An amazing diversity of fish and other seafood resides in its waters. In addition, rice and other types of grains, edible wild plants, and plentiful sea vegetables are all essential ingredients to Japanese cuisine. Yet without expertise and the right tools, this bounty would never come to the table.

In the washoku kitchen, the knife is undoubtedly the most important tool. When honed to perfection and used properly, the right knife brings out and enhances the flavor of all that it meets. There are more than 20 types of Japanese kitchen knives made for different foods and purposes, ranging from the *deba* blade for gutting and filleting fish, the *usuba* for cutting vegetables, and the *yanagiba* for slicing sashimi, to special-purpose blades such as those used to prepare *hamo* pike conger, eel, or noodles. Most Japanese knives are single-ground, their blade honed to a bevel only on one side. When cutting fish, the basic technique is to pull the knife toward you.

Proper cutting technique, as well as careful honing of the blade, is critical to the flavor of sashimi. A dull knife crushes the fibers of the slices, bruising the flesh and spoiling its texture. In this way, sashimi, an iconic dish in Japanese cuisine, is a real showcase of the chef's prowess, the superior quality of the knife, and its proper care.

To any chef, knives are stock-in-trade; in the professional washoku kitchen, no chef is without his or her personal arsenal. Some may be passed down or given by a mentor; others are purchased independently. It is not uncommon for chefs to use their knives for as many as 20 or 30 years.

It goes without saying that the sharpening of knives is a daily task for the dedicated washoku chef. Proper maintenance of each one of these handcrafted instruments acquaints the cook with its unique features, enhancing ownership as well as one's ability to bring out the best flavors of whatever ingredients may be at hand. That's kitchen wisdom with an edge to serve all creative endeavors well.



Far right: The *usuba* blade is used for rotary peeling of paper-thin sheets. Held in the left hand, a vegetable such as daikon is rotated toward the beveled side slowly, while the eyes follow the line where the cutting edge rests.

Right: The paper-thin sheets may be rolled into cylinders and sliced cross-wise to produce *ken*, or needle-thin slivers. Translucent slices can be used to adorn sashimi and *hassun* platters, for an attractively limpid effect.



1. *Hamo-kiri*: a hefty blade, for scoring the flesh of filleted pike conger in order to break up its many fine bones.

2. *Yanagiba*: long-bladed, for yielding smooth, clean sashimi slices as the blade is pulled toward you through the flesh.

3. All-purpose chef's knife: double-ground, for cutting meat and vegetables.

4. *Usuba*: for vegetables, as when julienning or rotary peeling.

5. *Deba*: thick-bladed, for gutting and filleting fish and cutting meat.

6. Small-sized chef's knife: also called "petit knife."



Clockwise from front:

Lacquer bowl decorated with cherry-blossom-shaped mother-of-pearl inlays, copied after Oda Urakusai's "Meigetsuwan" (Meigetsuin Temple Bowl).

Ceramic pieces by Shirai Hanshichi in the shape of a paper lantern and a plover, both symbols of spring.

Serving dish for *mukozuke*, painted with cherry blossoms and red Japanese maple leaves and shaped like a knot, copied after an incense container by Nonomura Ninsei.

Spring

often arranged with earthenware pieces that exude warmth. Poetic references to the season are revealed not only in painted patterns such as flowers, birds, and snowscapes, but by the very shapes of dishes as well. Our sense of touch also speaks to us of the season—the cool, crisp feel of sparkling glass, for example, versus the warm, earthy impression yielded by the textured surface of an unglazed piece of pottery.

"In Western dining traditions it is customary to acquire a set of dishware and cutlery from the same line of the same brand," comments Tokuoka. "The

Tableware

Eclectic designs for interest and play

The celebration of each season is an integral part of the *omotenashi* spirit of hospitality, and one of the greatest delights of the washoku tradition. A sense of the season is conveyed not only through masterful preparations of choice ingredients, but also by the careful selection of dishes and other serving vessels. Bowls adorned with a design of cherry blossoms might grace the table in spring; in summer, glassware and dishes that impart a cool, refreshing feel, such as blue-and-white china, prevail. In autumn, dishes depicting colored foliage set the mood, while in winter the table is more

Summer



Clockwise from front:

Blue-and-white medium-sized plate, said to have been custom-made in China in the 17th century for a Japanese client.

Boat-shaped *mukozuke* dish, custom-made by Baccarat in the Taisho period (1912–1926) for a Japanese client.

Lacquer bowl painted with *makei* gourd flowers.

Shallow Shigaraki-ware bowl with a reddish tint, evocative of summer, by Sugimoto Sadamitsu.



Autumn

Clockwise from front:

Raft-shaped plate, by Rosanjin.

Lacquer bowl with *makie* design of autumn night.

Cylindrical *mukozuke* vessel, by Rosanjin.

Mukozuke bowl painted with autumn plants, by Eiraku Shozen.

In the tea ceremony, October is a month of *nagori*, or parting—a time to savor the last remaining tea of the previous year's harvest and mark nature's descent into winter. Rustic vessels, or those showing signs of repair, are favored, as they reflect the somber mood in their imperfect state of beauty. Come November, the *kuchikiri* or seal-breaking ceremony is held, marking the beginning of a new season of tea with the first opening of jars of tea leaves that were plucked in the spring.

Not having one formal or casual dinner set to rely on, a washoku host selects for each table setting a mix of dishware that speaks to the occasion. A sense of *mitate*, a tea-ceremony aesthetic, also applies. *Mitate* refers to the substitution of some unexpected article in place of a formal utensil. It is about making do, in the frugal sense that tea masters such as Rikyu espoused, but also about engaging one's imagination with a sense of play meant to please those who partake of the meal. "The choice of tableware," says Tokuoka, "is a statement of the season as well as of your own personal creativity."

set may be monogrammed or painted with the owner's family crest, and passed down through the generations—this unity of design on the table is valued. By contrast, in the washoku tradition we mix and match an eclectic range of tableware at every meal. On the table may be pieces made of different materials—earthenware, porcelain, lacquerware, glassware, metalwork, and so on—as well as those made in different periods and regions, and sometimes even different countries. There are no rules, other than the overarching principles to mark the season and entertain others with a sense of delight.

Clockwise from front:

Rectangular plate exuding warmth, by Raku Tannyu.

Mukozuke bowl with design of snow on bamboo, by Shirai Hanshichi.

Mukozuke dish shaped like a Japanese pepper cone cracked open, which is a symbol of winter, by Rosanjin.

Lacquer bowl with *makie* decoration depicting a boat transporting firewood, copied after a design by Tawarayama Sotatsu.



Winter