



Vegetables

What is washoku?

Referring not only to Japanese cuisine both traditional and modern, but to the larger realm of Japan's food culture itself, the term “washoku” is written with the characters *wa*, meaning harmony, and *shoku*, or food. Intrinsic to the concept is the notion of balance, an idea that plays out in nutritive terms as well as contextual ones relating to the ways foods are prepared, presented, and enjoyed. Let's begin our exploration of washoku with a look at the vast array of fresh produce and other ingredients it draws upon, as well as the most fundamental components of a washoku meal.

Selective cultivation behind Japan's rich variety of produce

While at base washoku refers to the traditional Japanese meal consisting of rice, miso soup, side dishes, and pickles, in the context of food culture the term extends to special celebratory meals such as those made for annual events, as well as to issues of etiquette in preparation, in service, and at the table.

Whatever the context, washoku wouldn't be washoku without the rich variety of produce made possible by Japan's climate and its terrain that stretches long distances from north to south. Four distinct seasons—or five if the early-summer monsoon is counted—

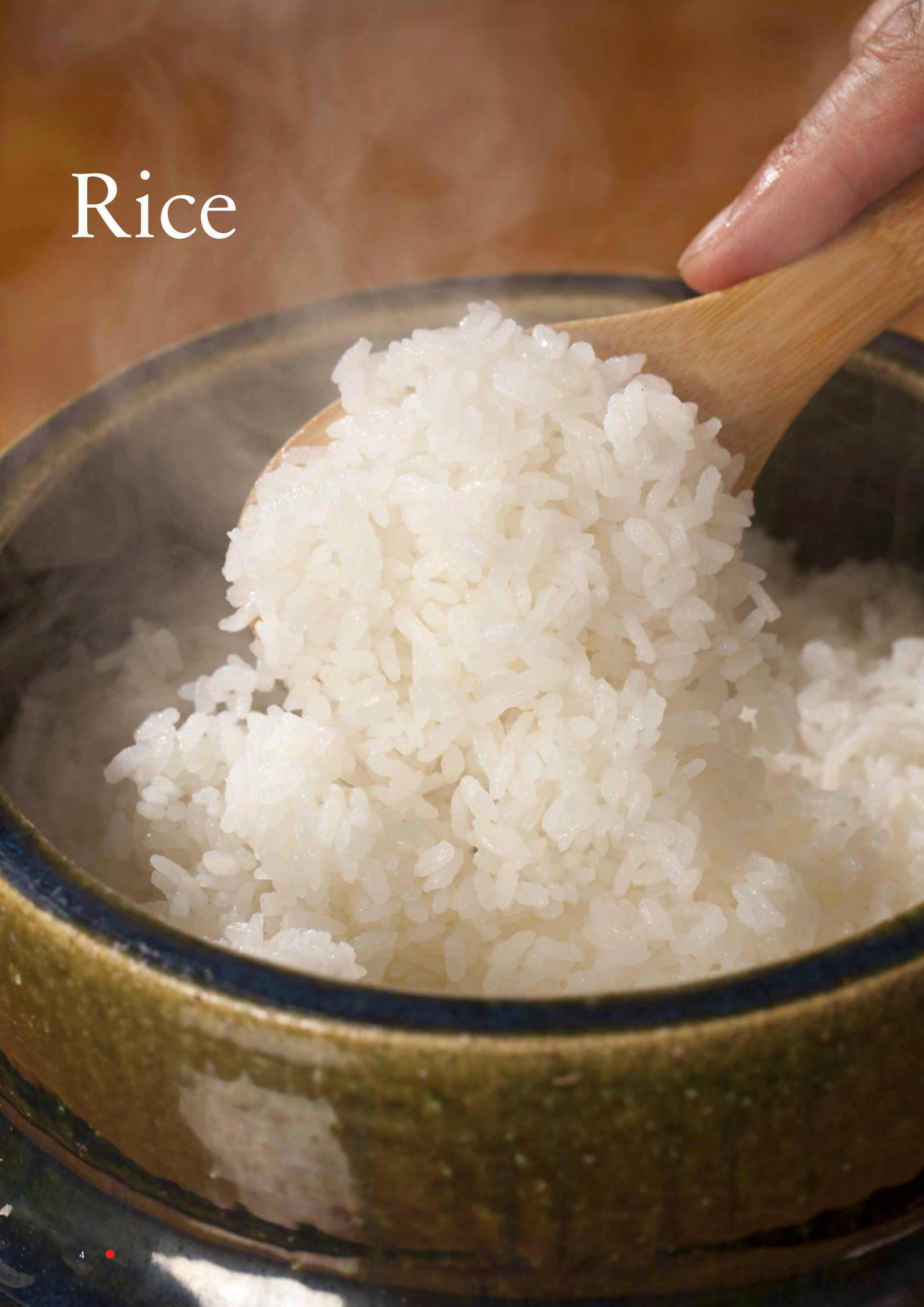
yield produce unique to each, a diversity that is reflected in the cuisine. The varying climates and elevations encountered from one end of the country to another offer chefs a vast range of regional produce from which to choose. Moreover, vegetables grown in Japanese soil owe their excellent flavor firstly to a naturally abundant supply of high-quality soft water, and secondly to selective cultivation that has stepped up taste as it has increased yield.

As many as 150 types of vegetables are sold in Japan, including imported varieties that have taken root here. Heirloom varieties, such as the iconic ones

from Kyoto, Kaga (Ishikawa prefecture), and Edo (Tokyo), have been grown long since before selective cultivation took on, and interest in their unique qualities continues to rise. Defined as produce grown in the same region by more than three generations of farmers using cultivation methods unique to the area, these native strains heighten the appeal of Japanese produce.

Throughout the country, more and more initiatives are underway to preserve heirloom varieties for subsequent generations, a movement that will only gather momentum as more chefs come to taste the difference.

Rice



Steamed, pounded, or brewed, it's central to the washoku diet

Rice is a staple for populations across the globe, and especially in Asia. Of the two subspecies of Asian rice, Indica and Japonica, the former represents 80 percent of world consumption. The latter, however, is the variety most commonly eaten in Japan. Lustrous, luscious, and sticky when cooked, Japonica rice delights the palate with its subtle, sweet taste. With its outer layer of bran removed, polished rice is almost wholly starch and therefore easy to digest.

The basis of the washoku diet, rice at one time served as currency in Japan, and still today it is accorded the respect deserved of a staff of life. Cooking it well is an involved process that demands presoaking, measuring the right amount of water, and adjusting the flame, but today's kitchens luckily benefit from the full-automatic rice cooker, which simplifies everything.



In Japan, freshly steamed rice is most favored, but the Japonica variety is tasty even when cold—and that's why rice balls fill countless lunch boxes every day. A highly versatile ingredient, rice can be steamed together with seafood and vegetables, dressed in vinegar as is done when making sushi, and transformed also into sake and Japanese *wagashi* sweets.

Mochi rice cakes are made with a glutinous strain of Japonica rice that's steamed, pounded, and formed into round or square shapes that store well and keep for a long time. Believed to possess divine powers, *mochi* is served in *zoni* soup on New Year's Day in homes across Japan in recipes that vary from region to region and indeed, from family to family, to honor and welcome that spirit. An enormous variety of sweets are made of glutinous rice as well.



Hard *mochi* cakes soften with heat; they are often eaten with soy sauce and toasted nori seaweed—a filling and healthy snack.

Mochi and onigiri samples by Waketokuyama



About 70 grams, or one handful, of freshly steamed, piping-hot rice is shaped into a triangle (most commonly) for the tasty bites known as *omusubi* or *onigiri*, but shapes and sizes do vary.

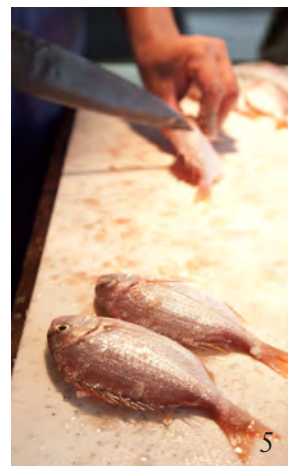
What makes rice grown in Japan so good?

Good water makes good rice—and that's as true in the paddy as it is in the kitchen. Blessed with plentiful rainfall, Japan is ideal terrain for growing rice. Long decades of select cultivation based on close observation and backed by research have produced high-yielding, better-tasting varieties. Advanced milling technologies play a part as well. Masaaki Funakubo of the Tokyo-based rice shop Funakubo Shoten says, "Fine adjustments can be made to achieve the best mill rate for each strain of rice. When polishing off the bran, we take great care not to remove the umami part of the grain. And we keep our rice in a humidity- and temperature-controlled granary." Proper storage of the rice prior to milling affects its ultimate taste when served on the table. Lastly, today's electric cookers with state-of-the-art functions steam this precious grain for us perfectly.

At Funakubo Shoten, raw grains are taste-tested during milling and kept carefully in climate-controlled storage.
okomemo-funakubo.com

Fish





1. A fresh haul from Toyama Bay on the Sea of Japan, which teems with a vast variety of fish. 2 & 3. Seafood brought to port at Kurobe in Toyama is sold to *nakaoroshi* middlemen at the morning auction and sent on to destinations around the country and abroad; demand for Japan's top-quality catch is particularly high in Hong Kong. 4 & 5. Seafood dispatched by air from Tokyo's Tsukiji Fish Market in the morning reaches Hong Kong by the afternoon and arrives at dinner tables on the same day.

Tricks of the trade for keeping it fresh

Some 4,200 varieties of fish swim the waters of the Japanese archipelago, where long coastlines stretching northeast to southwest cover climate zones from the cool temperate to the subtropical. Because of that sheer abundance the Japanese love fish, and not only the saltwater varieties. Freshwater denizens like *ayu* sweetfish and carp are cherished delicacies of inland regions.

Advanced storage, transport, and quality-control systems aside, delicious seafood is widely available throughout Japan firstly because of the highly developed techniques and tools used to handle fresh catch. Tsukiji, the central wholesale fish market in Tokyo, handles tons of fish from all ports of Japan, yet visitors are often amazed that there are no fishy off-odors. Maximum freshness of fish is in fact maintained by the *ikejime* spiking technique, which destroys the brain and spinal cord instantly. This humane, stress-free method both paralyzes muscular reflex, preventing the buildup of lactic acid that sours the flesh, and retracts the blood to the gut cavity, resulting in a better-colored and more flavorful fillet.

The Tsukiji market is fitted with both seawater and freshwater taps, and workers are adept at using ice shaped and cut to all sizes to accommodate different species. Masaru Harada, head of the *nakaoroshi* intermediate wholesaler Dairiki Shoten, comments, "Fishermen's hauls are first sorted by cargo shippers at each port according to the size of the fish, then they are transported to Tsukiji to intermediate wholesalers like us, who prepare the catch to order for contract clientele, delivering to retailers and restaurants. This division of labor has evolved over several decades of fine-tuning, and is unique to Japan."

Tsukiji receives fish caught in Japanese waters within a day; hauls landed at ports close to Tokyo at dawn reach the market that same morning. And when the fish arrives on the chef's butcher block, it's not merely cut up to become sashimi. A single-ground knife of the highest quality, honed to razor-edged sharpness, is used to slice the fillet swiftly without dulling its umami savoriness. From ship to port to market to table, every care is taken in this nation of fish-lovers to ensure that each morsel is as tasty as it can be.