

Culinary journeys around Japan

Despite its limited land area, the Japanese archipelago stretches across climate zones from the cool temperate to the subtropical. That diversity gives rise to a vast array of foods, seasonings, and cooking styles from region to region—a real boon for travelers and food lovers alike.

Bento lunch boxes

Whole histories of style and regional flair

Bento boxed lunches have gained a fast following overseas, especially in France. Prompted by the limitless array of accessories in designs ranging from the cute to the refined, more and more people are taking on to this creative way of styling a movable meal.

An invention of convenience, the boxed lunch originated in Song-dynasty (960–1279) China and arrived in Kyoto in the late 1300s. It soon spread throughout Japan; today, every corner of the country boasts its own bento made with local fare.

Initially, three-tiered *jikiro* baskets of woven bamboo were used by the Japanese for spring blossom-viewing picnics and autumn excursions to enjoy the foliage or gather mushrooms. Toward the late 1500s, the *sageju* set of wooden boxes, serving plates, and sake

flasks and cups evolved, later flourishing during the Edo period (1603–1867), when it spawned many new bento styles. Around the late 1600s, theatergoers packed their own bento to have at kabuki performances; by the mid-1800s, the theaters themselves began selling *makunouchi* bento for their patrons to enjoy at intervals between the plays.

With the arrival of steam engines in the Meiji era (1868–1912), *eki-ben* boxed meals started selling at station platforms. Today there are innumerable varieties of such takeaway lunches throughout Japan, and travelers from near and far seek them out for the tasty local specialties they feature. In 1937, a high-end Japanese restaurant in Osaka launched the famous Shokado bento. Presented in a quartered square box, it

was named after the early Edo-period painter, priest, and tea master Shokado Shoji (1584–1639), who had appropriated just such a box, commonly used by farmers to store seeds, as his paint kit.

In its four compartments the Shokado bento neatly holds such basic categories of washoku as rice, sashimi, a *namasu* dish of vinegar-dressed fish and vegetables, a simmered dish like *takiawase*, a *yakimono* grilled item, or an *aemono* cooked salad—all of which can be prepared to taste good when cool or at room temperature. The freshest in-season ingredients are arranged with care to achieve a balance of harmony using the five colors red, yellow, green, white, and black in this quintessentially Japanese culinary art form, one that food lovers everywhere now claim as their own.

Hassun

Milt dressed with vinegar, *komatsuna* mustard spinach, salmon roe, rolled omelet, prawn, beef tongue simmered in sweetened soy sauce, and others.

Takiawase

A simmered medley of bamboo shoots, butterbur stalks, broad beans, wakame seaweed, and young *sansho* pepper leaves.



Sashimi

Sea bream, *iwatake* lichen with gold leaf, squid, Chinese yam, *mizuna* pot-herb mustard, pumpkin, and wasabi.

Rice

Steamed white rice sprinkled with white sesame seeds.

Shokado bento by Kyoto Kitcho



The Edo-style *makunouchi* bento began as a meal to have between kabuki plays, but has since become a standard type for any occasion.



Wrapped in fragrant bamboo leaves, pressed *masu-zushi* trout sushi from Toyama prefecture is a classic *eki-ben* meal from that locale.



Arranged on a bed of rice, shredded scrambled eggs and *soboro* minced chicken cooked in sweetened soy sauce are a colorful and filling duo.

Local fare

Across the country, a wealth of flavors on the daily table

Lying in the Pacific Ocean off the northeastern coast of Eurasia, the Japanese archipelago stretches from the cool temperate zone in the north to the subtropical in the south. A unique feature of this arc of islands is the collision of warm and cold currents swirling off its long eastern seaboard.

Thanks to that geographical placement as well as its mountainous terrain, Japan is blessed with four distinct seasons, and its different regions boast diverse climates. Its ocean waters are in turn nurtured by the soil of natural woodlands that cover 67 percent of the country's land mass. These factors support a wealth of edible plant and animal life from sea and land; within that rich setting, each region has its locally grown foods and styles of cooking that have evolved apace.

As varied as their tastes and cooking styles are, all regions of this island country share one dish in common that appears without fail in celebratory menus for festivals and other auspicious occasions: sashimi. For such a prevalent dish, the body of collective wisdom on proper handling for freshness is, naturally, extensive. Only the finest catch is filleted, expertly sliced, and aesthetically arranged for eating. A well-established system of distribution ensures that fish gets to market, and to each home or restaurant table, in the best condition. While sashimi is the simplest dish imaginable, the

remarkable range of fish caught in different areas and available at different times throughout the year make it one that's hard to tire of.

Sushi is another favorite dish made in homes throughout Japan to mark such special occasions as the New Year holiday, spring Girls' Festival, and autumn harvest celebrations. Its forms vary widely from region to region: one finds tossed *chirashi-zushi*, rolled *maki-zushi*, pressed *oshi-zushi*, layered *kiri-zushi*, fermented *nare-zushi*, *tsutsumi-zushi* wrapped in persimmon or bamboo leaves, and *inro-zushi* stuffed in fried tofu, *konnyaku* jelly, or bamboo shoots. As these many examples suggest, sushi is the unquestionable star of regional fare.

Rice steamed together with other ingredients to make *takikomi gohan*, or, as it is called in some areas, *ajimeshi*, is another dish that lends itself well to distinct local styles. Most often it is seasoned with soy sauce.

Another shared feature of Japan's regional cuisines is balance. Again, *ichiju sansai* is the rule of thumb for a well-composed meal: rice is accompanied by a bowl of soup and a number of sides, also called *okazu*. These might be fish; *nimono* simmered dishes made with leafy and root vegetables, dried foods, and soybean products like deep-fried and freeze-dried tofu; and *aemono* cooked salads featuring vegetables or seaweeds dressed in sesame, walnuts, tofu, miso, or vinegar.

Locally harvested pickled vegetables are also favored.

Simmered *nimono*, the mainstay of *okazu* side dishes, are cooked in dashi stock made from dried foods that are rich in umami savoriness—cured bonito shavings, dried kombu kelp, or dried anchovies, for example—and are seasoned with such flavorings as soy sauce, miso, mirin, and sugar. Root and sea vegetables feature prominently in most regional recipes.

Hotpots are a popular dish cooked in all parts of Japan in the colder months. Typically seasoned with miso or soy sauce, they are a particularly well-balanced and nutritious way to enjoy local produce, and the experience of gathering with others around a simmering pot to share not only the meal but good conversation as well makes this style of food all the more inviting.

Some regions have traditionally eaten noodles as their staple rather than rice. Types and cooking methods vary from place to place, but representative are wheat-flour noodles such as *kenchin* udon, flat *boto*, and the wider *okirikomi*, all of which are cooked in flavored soups with vegetables; and *kate-soba* buckwheat noodles, cooked with vegetables and served cold with a dipping sauce.

Such mineral-rich, nutritionally balanced foods and the “slow” approach to preparing and enjoying them are the very heart of washoku.



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1. Tossed *chirashi-zushi*, a favorite home-style celebratory dish. 2. *Chikuzenni* braised chicken and vegetables. 3. *Kiritanpo* toasted rice dumplings. 4. *Saba-zushi* vinegared mackerel on rice. 5. Flat *hoto* noodles. 6. Mushrooms grilled *hoba-miso* style on a magnolia leaf.

1. Plate and rice scoop courtesy of Kurashi no Utsuwa Hanada
2. Bowl courtesy of Kurashi no Utsuwa Hanada
3. Earthen pot courtesy of Kurashi no Utsuwa Hanada
4. *Saba-zushi* made by Izuu of Kyoto
5. Bowl courtesy of Kurashi no Utsuwa Hanada

Dashi stock

The savory base of washoku, rich in glutamates

The defining flavor element in washoku, dashi stock is made from such dried foods as kombu kelp, *katsuobushi* cured bonito, and shiitake mushrooms. Dashi is indispensable to all soups, simmered or braised dishes, and noodles; it even flavors *aemono* cooked salads. Its distinct savoriness is called umami, well known in culinary circles abroad and widely considered the sixth taste after sweet, sour, bitter, spicy, and salty.

Umami derives from certain amino acids and nucleotides naturally contained in marine and agricultural products. When these raw materials are dry-cured, umami becomes condensed. *Katsuobushi* has the most concentrated umami savoriness, and is probably the most frequently used dashi ingredient. Not surprisingly, a

long artisanal process of many weeks is involved in its creation: the fish is filleted, simmered, deboned, dry-smoked, cured with mold spores, and sun-dried to yield its rock-hard form and complex umami taste.

Anchovies, kombu, and shiitake mushrooms in their dried forms are other ingredients commonly used to make dashi. These may be used singly or in combination, depending on the dish. Regional traditions and family preferences also come into play in determining how dashi is made. Animal-based and plant-based ingredients work well together, enhancing the other's flavors and yielding depth—this synergistic effect is why cured bonito and kombu are often combined. In contrast to the vaunted *fonds* of French cooking, dashi is fast and easy

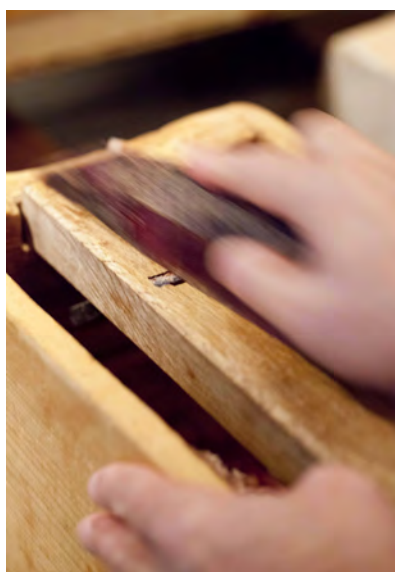
to make, requiring nothing but these dried ingredients, water, and a few minutes of time.

The key to making a proper full-bodied dashi is temperature control. To draw a pure-tasting stock without bitter off-flavors, you should begin with cold water and slowly heat the ingredients to no higher than 80°C, or barely boiling.

The water-soluble glutamates in a well-made dashi stock have an intense umami and a tantalizing aroma that are enhanced by such principal washoku seasonings as soy sauce and miso. The fact that such flavor can be extracted in a flash in any home kitchen, even by a novice cook, is owed to the labor-intensive steps involved in each ingredient's production, whether curing or sun-drying or both.



Place pieces of kombu in a saucepan of cold water, allowing them to soak for 30 minutes. On medium heat bring to about 80°C, when tiny bubbles form just before the boiling point. Add bonito shavings to the pan, let sit for a minute, and then strain through a cloth or paper filter.



A special tool not unlike a carpenter's plane is used to shave a block of *katsuobushi*. With its water content greatly reduced over the long curing process, *katsuobushi* is rock-hard and difficult to shave, but the intense flavor released when those shavings meet hot water is well worth the effort.

Dried shiitake

With a rich aroma that tickles the nose, shiitake dashi is indispensable to *shojin* cuisine, the vegetarian cooking of Buddhist temples. Soak dried shiitake mushrooms overnight to rehydrate.

Dried kombu kelp

Thick dried kombu makes a clean and understated dashi. It is often combined with cured bonito shavings for a classic washoku stock. Soak the fronds in plenty of water for half an hour and cook at 80°C for a minute.

Katsuobushi cured bonito shavings

A central ingredient of dashi, shaved bonito can be used alone or in tandem. For the best flavor, shave just before using.

Niboshi

Dried anchovies produce an aromatic dashi rich in taste. Remove the heads and guts, and soak in plenty of water for 3 hours.

