



At Kakukyu Hatcho Miso in Okazaki, Aichi prefecture, miso makers fill giant cedar casks with 6 tons of miso, pile 3 tons of river rocks on top, and let the mash ferment for at least two years.



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Miso

Highly versatile
biotic goodness

Miso, like soy sauce, is a healthy fermented product that plays a pivotal role in seasoning washoku fare. Both condiments share roots in China, yet as early as 1,300 years ago had already evolved to suit the Japanese diet. By the late 1500s they had become authentically Japanese seasonings with a savory aroma and intense umami quite unlike those of their Chinese counterparts.

Traditionally an important source of protein, miso can be divided into three types: that made solely of soybeans, a kind made with rice, and a third made with barley. The latter two use soybeans as a secondary ingredient.

As it is produced from locally harvested ingredients, miso varies in color, flavor, and taste depending on where it is made. Likewise there are a multitude of recipes throughout Japan for its use. It is often simmered down, for example, with minced

fish or meat and vegetables to yield condensed pastes that are eaten with rice or used in dips and sauces. Partially sun-dried daikon radish or salt-cured eggplant and other vegetables are often marinated in miso. And miso is, of course, the essential seasoning for its eponymous soup—an indispensable companion to rice in the washoku diet.

Miso makes an excellent marinade for fish and meat as it aids preservation, removes unpleasant odors, and adds savory flavor. The oilier blue-backed fishes like mackerel are often stewed with miso to mitigate their briny scent. Boiled daikon, turnips, or jellied *konnyaku* are commonly served with miso-based sauces, while the dish known as *dengaku* takes miso as its main seasoning; tofu pieces are grilled, spread with the paste, and lightly roasted.

Commonly used in sauces for *aemono* cooked salads, miso also blends well with

such regular components of Western fare as oil, butter, and cream. Tremendously versatile, it is one of the greatest features of washoku.

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1. Hatcho miso is a classic deep-flavored soybean paste. 2. White Saikyo miso made with rice is a representative style of miso from the Kansai region. 3. Reddish-brown barley miso has a salty taste. 4. Kakukyu Hatcho Miso has a five-century history.

www.hatcho-miso.co.jp



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Soy sauce

The ultimate natural flavor enhancer

An indispensable, all-round seasoning for washoku, soy sauce comes in a few colors and flavors—some are dark, some light, some almost colorless, and some faintly sweet. *Koikuchi* dark soy sauce is the standard type used in all parts of Japan, but its flavor and aroma vary from region to region. *Usukuchi* light-colored soy sauce is popular in Kyoto and its surrounding areas. Colorless “white” soy sauce is used in Nagoya and its environs, and sweet-flavored soy sauce is characteristic of cooking in Kyushu.

Dark-colored soy sauce is essential in Japan as a dipping sauce for such universal favorites as *nigiri-zushi* and sashimi. This full-bodied sauce with concentrated umami and a subtle bean aroma is said to help soothe the nerves. Dark soy sauce is an excellent marinade for grilled fish and meat, and its light hint of vanilla in the nose makes it a fine match for fruity compotes and sauces or dishes featuring berries. Added to stewed fish, dark soy sauce ameliorates the smell and ups the umami factor. As the intense color of *koikuchi*

soy sauce can dull the vivid brightness of vegetables, for some dishes light *usukuchi* or colorless “white” soy sauce is combined with an umami-rich dashi instead.

Soy sauce is also used to flavor *takikomi gohan* meals of rice steamed together with other ingredients. When added to fried rice or pilaf as a finishing touch, soy sauce imparts an appetizing roasted aroma. A must seasoning for *aemono* cooked salads, soy sauce is also perfectly compatible with all kinds of oil.



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1. The makers of Yugeta soy sauce in Saitama prefecture use wooden vats to ferment the product.
2. The freshly pressed, unpasteurized liquid is bottled immediately upon filtering.
3. Owner Yoichi Yugeta.
4. Full-bodied unpasteurized soy sauce is an ideal match for sashimi.

yugeta.com



Sake

Carefully milled rice is washed to clean it of residual *nuka* powder and then soaked in water before the steaming process begins.



Preparation of cultured *koji* grain is the heart of the brewing process. Rice is steamed for two days as its temperature is closely monitored, then inoculated with *Aspergillus oryzae* spores to begin fermentation.



Stirring the *moromi* mash to release its waste gas is an important task for the brewmaster, who is responsible for the success of the fermentation and ultimately, the final flavor profile of the sake.



In sake creation, advanced techniques and traditional ways coexist. Wooden beams stretch over fermentation tanks within the Ozawa Brewery west of central Tokyo. www.sawanoi-sake.com



Over a complex process demanding great technical skill as well as seasoned intuition, what began as milky-white grains of rice is transformed into pure, crystal-clear sake.



The star of any brewery's product portfolio, *daiginjo* labels are made with highly polished rice and the most labor-intensive techniques.

An integral part of Japan's culinary tradition

Sake is liquor brewed from rice. Its most basic ingredients are 1.3 parts water to 1 part rice, as measured by weight, and the magical *Aspergillus oryzae* mold, which provides the enzymes necessary to break down the starches inherent in rice to fermentable glucose and still other sugars that shape its flavor.

The complex and subtle flavors produced by these few and simple ingredients vary from region to region and indeed, from brewery to brewery. And just as there are different grape varieties in wine, there are different rice strains in sake.

From milling the rice to pressing and filtering each precious drop of the *moromi* mash into the liquid we know and love is a labor-intensive process requiring two to three months. The many delicate steps in-

volved along the way are another factor behind the great variety of flavors found in sake produced by different breweries.

The role of the *toji* brewmaster cannot be underestimated. He is in charge of selecting the raw materials and managing the entire production process. With sharp discernment acquired through years of experience, he closely monitors the changes that occur in the temperature and composition of the *moromi* mash as it ferments. Using biotics to his advantage, he guides the natural workings of *A. oryzae* to craft a sake that befits his brewery's product profile and reputation.

As sake is brewed mostly in winter, any one batch of it is enjoyed at various stages of maturity through the one-year consumption cycle. From late winter to spring,

freshly pressed sake arrives on market. Over the next months and through the summer it ripens, acquiring a richer, more mellow taste. These natural changes in its flavor profile are part of its allure, and dovetail with the appreciation of seasonal nuance that is such a focal point of washoku. As such, the enjoyment of sake is intrinsically tied to the Japanese culinary tradition.

Combined with time-honored techniques, cutting-edge technologies have enabled a mesmerizing array of sake today. With its wide-ranging aromas and flavor profiles, sake complements not only washoku, but other world cuisines as well. As its popularity abroad continues to grow, more people are showing interest in the particular styles and distinctions of Japan's many brewing regions.

Condiments

Building blocks of good flavor



Vinegar

Japanese vinegars include the most commonly used clear or “white” vinegar made from polished rice, and a reddish-brown vinegar, known as *akazu*, which is made from the lees left over after sake is pressed from its *moromi* mash. *Akazu* undergoes three years of ripening, and consequently acquires a characteristically more intense and full-bodied flavor than the naturally mild ordinary vinegar. This mature vinegar is commonly used at fine sushi restaurants in Tokyo. Another type of vinegar is *kurozu*, or black vinegar, which also is made from rice but exposed liberally to the sun during fermentation. And there are vinegars made from other grains and fruits, though the volume of production is a mere fraction compared with that of rice vinegar.

The accepted wisdom in Japan is that one should eat a vinegared dish when fatigued or lacking appetite, so *aemono* cooked salads dressed with vinegar are regularly served in the sweltering days of summer. Undoubtedly vinegar is a great appetite stimulant; it's also effective at removing fishy odors from seafood and preventing food poisoning. Added to small fish cooked in soy sauce, vinegar takes the edge off the saltiness and makes the fish so tender that even the calcium-rich bones can be digested easily; it also helps preserve the dish longer. When small fish are grilled or deep-fried whole and then marinated in vinegar, similarly

they can be easily eaten from head to tail. White-fleshed fish, mackerel, *kohada* gizzard shad, and *mamakari* Japanese shad are often marinated in vinegar for the antibacterial effect and to gain a good balance between salty and sour tastes. A few drops of vinegar tenderize meat and enhance its flavor as well as diminish any greasy aftertaste. Vinegar-pickled turnips and ginger stimulate the appetite; the latter, known as *gari*, is the standard accompaniment to sushi. Vinegar promotes the secretion of saliva, and thus aids digestion, while it also lowers blood pressure and reduces both visceral fat and blood lipids. Its pleasantly tart savoriness and antibacterial properties have contributed as much to the development of Japan's sushi culture as have the abundance of good rice and fish.

Mirin

Made by fermenting a mixture of *shochu* distilled spirits, rice that's been cultured with the *Aspergillus oryzae* mold, and steamed rice, mirin is a sweetener unique to Japan. Less intensely sweet than sugar, it has an understated, mild flavor. A few drops of it rid egg dishes of their eggy smell and freshen a pan of stewing fish. While miso and soy sauce are the two most basic washoku seasonings, mirin is often used to enhance a dish's umami. Mixed with either of those two, it makes

an excellent basting sauce that brings a nice glaze to grilled or simmered fish. *Kabayaki*-style grilled eel basted with mirin and soy sauce is a mouthwatering Japanese classic. Mixing mirin and soy sauce with fruit nectars, berries, pureed tomatoes, or tomato paste opens a wealth of finger-licking marinade possibilities for beef, pork, and poultry.

Salt

Three types of sea salts are used in washoku: coarse-grained, fine-grained, and roasted. Less common are *moshio*, or salt extracted from seaweed, and *yamajio* mountain salt made in the Okuazui area of Fukushima prefecture. Coarse-grained salt is used to wilt vegetables for pickling and cure fish for grilling, while fine-grained salt and *moshio* are used as seasonings. In Kyoto, sake-infused salt is used to season simmered vegetables and clear soups.

Sugar

The unrefined black cane sugar of Okinawa is rich in minerals. Used to prepare braised pork belly, it not only freshens the smell of the meat, it helps reduce blood lipids as well. *Wasanbon* sugar made in Tokushima prefecture has a subtle, enticing flavor and is an essential ingredient for *wagashi* sweets.

Yakumi

Piquant, peppery, and zesty kicks

A culinary term for the herbs and other natural raw botanicals used in washoku to spice and garnish foods, *yakumi* convey a poetic sense of the season as they bring both antibacterial and flavor-enhancing properties to dishes. They also stimulate the appetite with their verve and bright scents.

Yuzu is a citrus fruit prized for its elegant fragrance. It is used throughout the year, but in different guises: in spring its young leaves, blossoms, calyxes, and baby fruits are harvested; in summer its young green fruit arrives in markets; as the days shorten its mature yellow fruit appears. *Yuzu* zest is often used in clear soups and simmered dishes, while its juice brightens sauces.

Sansho pepper also enlivens washoku across the seasons. Its buds and blossoms garnish clear soups and simmered dishes. Young *sansho* berries enhance simmered dishes, while powder made from their dried mature fruit is a must flavoring for grilled eel.

Wasabi mitigates the risk of eating raw fish, preventing food poisoning with its pungent antibacterial properties. Freshly grated, it is a classic accompaniment to sashimi, *nigiri-zushi*, and soba noodles, whose delicate bouquet is counterbalanced by its nose-tingling punch.

Shiso perilla comes in two types: red and green. Its young buds garnish sashimi and diminish its fishy smell. Its bright green leaves are used to set off the pinks and reds of sashimi to advantage.

Myoga zingiber has a subtle scent and a taste similar to ginger. It is used to flavor and garnish both sashimi and noodles. An early-summer and autumn crop, *myoga* is now cultivated throughout the year.

Ginger, or *shoga*, is grated and served with sashimi, and in pickled form, known as *gari*, it always accompanies sushi. It warms the body and also has strong germicidal powers, which is why it is often used in stews made with blue-backed fish and steamed dishes in winter.

Negi belongs to the leek family, and its green and white forms are used widely, in soups, simmered recipes, hotpots, *donburi* rice dishes, and noodles. *Negi* has a calming effect. Like all *yakumi*, it brings a mild scent and a crisp spiciness to washoku dishes.



Wagashi

Confections for every season

W*agashi* is the term used to distinguish traditional Japanese sweets from their Western counterparts, which are known as *yogashi*. *Wagashi* come in an astounding variety of shapes and styles, and are variously classified according to the cooking method used, such as steaming or baking, or by their water content, namely the uncooked and very moist *namagashi* or *omogashi*, the less moist *han-namagashi*, and dry *higashi* sugar candies. There are the high-end *jo-namagashi* served to guests, used as gifts, and presented at the tea ceremony, and the common *dagashi* loved by all children and eaten as snacks.

Wagashi sweets served at the tea ceremony are a universe unto themselves, with a vast array of designs and ingredients. *Omogashi* are served with thick *koicha* tea, while *higashi* are offered with thin *usucha*. Within *omogashi* are many varieties like *kinton*, a sweet ball typically made of bean paste and coated with colorful flakes, and soft *gyuhi* cakes made of glutinous rice powder and sugar. Both *omogashi* and *higashi* convey seasonal themes in their designs and colors, the former typically with abstract nuances of color and form, and the latter with representations of plants, flowers, and themes such as spring cherry blossoms, flowing water in summer, autumn leaves, and bright winter peonies.



Omogashi sweets (above) and *higashi* dried confections (below) by Tsuruya Hachiman



Yokan, a dense block of sweet azuki-bean paste, and *manju*, a ball of dough filled with the paste, are often presented at the tea ceremony, but they are also standard confections regularly sent as gifts or served to guests.



Teacups and saucers by Tosai

Japanese green teas

A dose of instant serenity

A cup of tea soothes when we are tired and takes the edge off when we feel restless. There are many kinds of green tea in Japan, and each has a calming and healing effect. Each type has its optimum water temperature for brewing the perfect cup. But whatever the type, Japanese green tea is meant to be enjoyed on its own without sugar, milk, lemon, or honey. Follow the steps here for brewing the perfect cup, and take a moment to relax and appreciate the subtle taste and aroma of its liquor.

Gyokuro is the finest of Japanese teas, with complex layers of sweetness and umami. The leaves of its well-fertilized bushes are shaded from sunlight before harvest, and only new

leaves are picked, to be processed immediately. As *gyokuro* is high in caffeine, brew with water well below the boiling point at about 65°C. Sip a small amount at a time, rolling it on the tongue before swallowing. For an afternoon treat, serve with sweets that do not overwhelm the tea's delicate profile, such as mild *nerigashi* confections made with rice flour and bean paste.

Sencha is the most commonly served green tea. Its bushes are grown in full sunlight, but like *gyokuro* only the new leaves are harvested. To brew, use water that is 70°C to 75°C. *Sencha* has a full-bodied umami and sweet taste, though less pronounced than *gyokuro*. With this brew as well, sip a

small amount and roll it on your tongue. Enjoy the second pot for the slight bitterness of tannin, and the third for the lingering fragrance and refreshing astringency. Sweets are best served with this final, third pot of tea. *Sencha* can be infused with cold water, too.

Bancha is made from leaves and stems left to grow on the bushes after the first *sencha* harvest. This tea is rich in catechins and vitamin C. To brew, infuse with boiling water and turn off the heat just before the water begins to boil again. *Hojicha* is a woody tea made from *sencha* or *bancha* that has been roasted. These three forms of Japanese tea are drunk daily, often with a meal. *Bancha* in particular is an excellent match for fatty foods.