

Casual washoku around town

Mori-soba arrives on a bamboo tray with a *tokuri* flask for the dipping sauce and a *choko* cup with which to eat the noodles.

On these pages we take you on a culinary tour of everyday washoku favorites, from traditional fare dating back to the Edo period (1603–1867), to adaptations of Western cuisine that caught on after Meiji (1868–1912), when Japan opened

its ports. Even with these casual offerings, a dedicated washoku chef never rests in the quest for excellence. These foods may be fast, but their production is anything but—a spirit that’s been upheld through the centuries.

Soba

A soba maker’s talents determine the flavor, texture, and color of these popular noodles

Soba, or buckwheat, belongs to the knotweed family. The starchy endosperm of the kernel, rich in B vitamins, is ground into a fine powder that is then mixed with water, kneaded, shaped into a flat dough, and cut into long noodles.

Cultivation of soba began in Japan in the 700s. As buckwheat can be harvested within two months of planting even in cold climates, the crops were a valuable source of nutrition in hard times. In the 1600s the noodle-making technique was devised; by the 1800s, as many as 3,700 soba noodle shops were in business in Edo, the castle town that is present-day Tokyo. A beloved fast food of Edoites, soba was also an auspicious dish enjoyed at seasonal and ceremonial gatherings, as the strands of noodles were said to ensure a long life of good fortune.

There are two main ways of eating soba noodles: *mori-soba* is eaten cold, dipping the strands lightly in a strong, soy-based sauce. *Kake-soba* is served hot, with the noodles immersed in a savory broth. The former is simpler, and the better choice for savoring the delicate flavor of the buckwheat itself.

Edo-soba Hosokawa, a soba specialty restaurant in Tokyo, prepares some of the finest soba noodles in the capital. In his quest for flavorful buckwheat grown in mineral-rich soil, owner-chef Takashi Hosokawa visited more than 200 farms to source this main ingredient. He runs his soba grains through a hulling machine and grinds them with a millstone in a corner of his restaurant. He uses no other flour than that

which he mills himself on the spot.

“Soba counts among the very simplest of dishes in the washoku tradition. The quality of the main ingredient directly affects its taste,” he comments. Hosokawa makes soba noodles by hand from scratch, drawing on years of practice. “Soba noodles are difficult to make because the flour does not contain enough gluten for the dough to hold together. That’s why I carefully grind buckwheat seeds to a fine powder. This makes the dough easier to gather and roll out. How much water to add depends on the season, the weather, and the ambient humidity?”

Once the water is stirred into the soba flour and until the noodles are cut, it takes approximately 20 minutes to prepare one batch. Speed and precision are key, in order to preserve the delicate flavor and fragrance of the buckwheat. Once ready, the freshly cut noodles are boiled for 20 seconds, plunged into cold water to firm them up, and arranged on a *seiro* bamboo tray for *mori-soba*.

When your tray of *mori-soba* is served, pour some dipping sauce from the provided flask into your *choko* cup, adding chopped scallions and wasabi to taste. Next, take up a few noodle strands with your chopsticks, dipping only their ends in the sauce, and slurp them up without chewing too much, enjoying their delicate fragrance and the smooth way they glide down the throat. With each mouthful, the complex flavor of dipping sauce carefully prepared from dashi stock comes through, another facet to this simple and ever-popular dish.



1. Water is added gradually to finely milled buckwheat flour and the dough evenly kneaded with the fingertips and palms. The amount of water required is about half of the weight of the flour.

2. The dough is rolled out into a thin round sheet about 50 centimeters long, and folded multiple times into layers.

3. To make noodles of even consistency, a special ruler is placed on the layered dough, which is then cut into strips of 1 millimeter in width.



Takashi Hosokawa, who has worked in kitchens since his teens, spares no effort in obtaining the best buckwheat for his soba noodles.

Edo-soba Hosokawa
1-6-5 Kamezawa,
Sumida-ku, Tokyo
Tel. 03-3626-1125



Shokudo eateries

Authentic home-style cooking

Sugamo Tokiwa serves freshly steamed rice and piping-hot miso soup along with 50 kinds of mouthwatering home-

style dishes. You can assemble your own meal by selecting a main entrée such as sashimi, grilled fish, stewed fish, or a breaded deep-fried item, and a side dish like blanched greens dressed with soy sauce, potato salad, or grated daikon with dried baby anchovies. With rice, miso soup, and pickles added to your tray, you now have a fully balanced washoku meal. The homey atmosphere of the restaurant belies its discerning approach to sourcing only the best ingredients. Seafood is purchased daily at the fish market; the rice is grown by independent farmers in Akita prefecture. But

Tokiwa's greatest appeal is that you can enjoy these delights at reasonable prices, and never tire of their abundant offerings even if you were to eat there every day.

1. Tokiwa opens early to serve breakfast.
2. A *teishoku* set meal with grilled whole rockfish.
3. The no-frills shop is sparse, clean, and comfortable inside.
4. Jumbo-sized shrimp, breaded and deep-fried, are a bestselling item.

Sugamo Tokiwa
3-14-20 Sugamo, Toshima-ku, Tokyo
Tel. 03-3917-7617
www.kousinnduka.co.jp



Udon

Noodles boiled to just-right firmness for each customer

Rather than aim for consistency, owner-chef Yoshihiro Hiraoka goes one better with his udon noodles: he fine-tunes their size and softness to each customer. He serves thinner noodles to his female customers, for example, and thicker ones to the hungry lunchtime crowd. To those on the run, he offers noodles cooked to "just right" firmness; to diners sitting in at a more leisurely pace, perhaps enjoying

sake with their meal, he serves the noodles cooked al dente, so they'll hold up longer. "After the dough is kneaded from wheat flour and water, it's left to stand for a day. But once it's rolled out and cut it has to be cooked immediately," he says, explaining the timing behind the care he invests in each serving. Like soba, udon is eaten warm or cold. Of the former, *kama-age* udon is served in the water in which the noodles cooked, with a dipping sauce on the side; *kake-udon* presents the noodles in a soy-based stock with a variety of toppings such as tempura, vegetables, and eggs.

1. Hiraoka opened his udon shop in his twenties. He offers other dishes and a fine selection of sake.
2. He boils the noodles with meticulous care, pinching to check for firmness four or five times for every batch.
3. *Kama-age* udon, ¥850. The dipping sauce is made with a classic kombu and bonito stock. Customers add chopped scallions and crunchy bits of deep-fried tempura batter to taste.

Kamachiku
2-14-18 Nezu, Bunkyo-ku, Tokyo
Tel. 03-5815-4675
www.kamachiku.com





1

Unagi

Plump fillets of grilled eel,
soft on the tongue

Served *kabayaki*-style, long slender eels, called *unagi* in Japanese, are filleted, grilled, and basted with a sweet and savory soy-based sauce. Most commonly, *unagi* prepared this way is served over a bed of steaming white rice in a lacquer box or a bowl. Considered the ideal energy boost, the dish is especially popular in the hot sultry summer. In the Kansai region of western Japan (primarily Osaka and Kyoto), eel fillets are dipped in sauce and grilled, while in the eastern Kanto region (Tokyo and its environs) the eel is steamed first and then basted for grilling.

“At Nodaiwa,” says Masayoshi Ichikawa, who has been working in the kitchens of this Edo-style establishment for more than 40 years, “before steaming we grill the fillets without sauce in a preliminary step known as *shirayaki*. Then we steam them thoroughly for an hour to 90 minutes to remove excess fat.”

After steaming comes the main grilling process. The fillets are dipped in a basting sauce made of soy and mirin, and grilled over a charcoal fire. These steps are repeated four times, allowing the sauce to permeate the fillets and deepen the flavor. Each tender morsel will literally melt in your mouth.

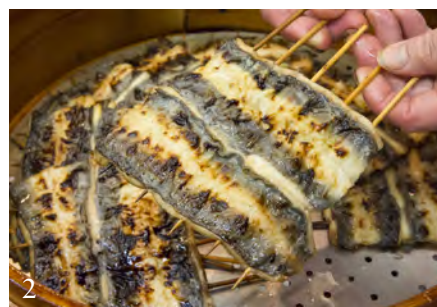
1. *Unagi* is grilled eel served in a lacquer box over steamed rice. At Nodaiwa it arrives with eel liver in a bowl of clear soup.

2. Skewered fillets are placed in a large bamboo basket to be steamed.

3. It takes practiced skill and deft hands to monitor and constantly adjust the strength of the fire.

4. Having joined Nodaiwa as an apprentice 40 years ago, Masayoshi Ichikawa now manages the kitchens of the main and branch restaurants.

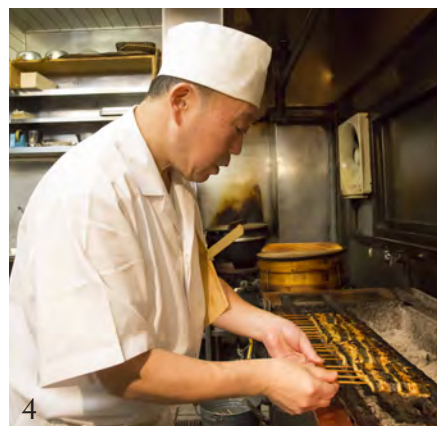
Nodaiwa
1-5-4 Higashi-Azabu, Minato-ku, Tokyo
Tel. 03-3583-7852
nodaiwa.co.jp



2



3



4

Yakitori

Wielding charcoal fire to cook each part to perfection

Yakitori, or grilled morsels of chicken on skewers, is one of the most popular poultry dishes in Japan. Torikashin, in Tokyo, tempts customers with a vast menu featuring nearly every edible part of the bird, from the fleshy uropygium at the tail, to the neck meat and diaphragm in addition to more common offerings like thighs, wings, and offal.

Owner-chef Tadakazu Yasuda says, “We source birds that are 70 to 120 days old, as their meat has the best balance of flavor and tenderness.” Before grilling, the meat is cut into uniform pieces and atomized with sake, a step that enhances both luster and flavor. Salt is the main seasoning. Parts that lack flavor, such as gizzards, are lightly grilled and then dipped in a marinade of soy sauce, mirin, and red wine. High-quality Bincho charcoal is preferred, for its strong dry heat.

“The meat is ready when the outside is crispy and the center just done. And judging that is something that takes a lifetime to master,” says Yasuda intently. As you bite each glistening piece off the skewer, its fragrant juices fill your mouth. As if by magic, white meat and liver are left sublimely rare in the center.

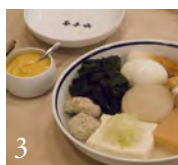


1. An assortment of yakitori: each part has its distinct flavor. Grilled vegetables complement the servings. Torikashin uses premium Bincho charcoal. As it neither gives off smoke nor imparts a smoky taste, the delicate flavor of the chicken comes through.

2. Before grilling, salt is sprinkled from a height of 30 centimeters, for even seasoning.
3. Tadakazu Yasuda honed his skills at six different yakitori restaurants before opening his own.



Torikashin
Netsu Building B1F
3-14-1 Kita-Aoyama, Minato-ku, Tokyo
Tel. 03-3499-0810



1. Simmering in the partitioned pot is an array of such savory morsels as deep-fried *ganmodoki* tofu balls with minced vegetables, steamed *hanpen* and tubular *chikuwa* fish cakes, shell-fish, eggs, and potatoes.
2. Cabbage rolls stuffed with ground meat bring added flavor to the soup.

3. The must condiment for *oden* is *karashi* yellow mustard. Sharp and

hot, it enlivens each morsel while highlighting their distinct flavors.

4. Owner-chef Hisashi Ishihara, at right, still presides over the *oden* pot at age 84. With him is his successor in waiting, Toshiki Matsui.

Ginza Yasuko
7-8-14 Ginza, Chuo-ku, Tokyo
Tel. 03-3571-3467
www.ginzayasuko.com

Oden

The humble hodgepodge, brought to new heights with select ingredients

Asavory dish of many different kinds of fish cakes and vegetables simmered in dashi stock, *oden* is enjoyed piping hot. When prepared Kanto-style the stock is seasoned with soy sauce; in Kansai, salt is used. Ginza Yasuko in Tokyo serves *oden* cooked in a rich broth that goes particularly well with sake. In addition to customary *oden* morsels, Yasuko offers such original items as *konnyaku* jelly seasoned with hot pepper, and *kiritanpo*, a savory tidbit of mashed rice pressed on cedar skewers and toasted. Dai-kon radish is a particularly popular item; Yasuko sources theirs from different regions each season to get the best ones on the market. Greasy or strongly flavored ingredients are eschewed, so as not to disturb the subtle balance in the soup. Hisashi Ishihara, the second-generation owner-chef, suggests that “a good balance is struck by having some 30 kinds of offerings in the pot, each absorbing the flavors of the others. *Oden* is really like a Japanese-style bouillabaisse—a mixture of seafoods and vegetables cooked together.”

Donburi

Rice and a side dish,
all in one

Donburi are hearty single-dish meals of rice served in a deep bowl and topped with richly flavored fare such as tempura or seasoned sashimi or roe. Moderately priced *oyako-don* is a highly popular lunchtime choice. In a special one-portion pan, chicken and eggs are cooked in dashi stock seasoned with soy and mirin; the whole is then slid over its bed of rice. At the restaurant Sawacho, once the chicken has cooked in its seasoned broth, the chef pours in one beaten egg to cook until it bubbles, then adds another, careful to keep the mixture light, airy, and velvety on the tongue. Eating the freshly steamed rice in the same mouthfuls as the savory topping is the great appeal of *donburi*.



1. The umami flavor of chicken and eggs seeped into warm rice explains the mouthwatering appeal of *oyako-don*.
2. Each individual serving of *oyako-don* is made fresh, upon receiving an order.
3. Two beaten eggs are used per serving, but they are poured in two batches to ensure that they remain soft and creamy.



Sawacho
5-15-11 Minami-Azabu, Minato-ku, Tokyo
Tel. 03-3447-0557



Tonkatsu

Borrowed from Western cuisine,
and reconceived to complement
rice with full-flavored pork

Breaded pork is deep-fried and served with thinly chopped cabbage in *tonkatsu*, a dish that the specialty restaurant Ponta in Tokyo calls *katsuretsu*, after the term cutlet. While some shops serve both pork fillets and loins, Ponta chef Yoshihiko Shimada offers only the latter, carefully preparing them to his family recipe. Trimming the fat, which he uses as oil, Shimada slowly fries each breaded loin at the low temperature of 120°C. The slow fry imparts a light golden color to the jacket, and sends aromatic juices flowing as you slice through the thick yet tender bite that arrives. Despite the pale look and tender bite, thanks to its frying in lard the cutlet has a depth of flavor that particularly suits its rice and miso soup accompaniments.

1. A 3-centimeter cut of pork loin is pounded and shaped.
2. The breaded loin is slid into a pan of bubbling lard.
3. Yoshihiko Shimada is the fourth-generation owner-chef of the century-old Ponta in Tokyo's Ueno district. His great-grandfather was a chef in the Imperial Household kitchens.
4. Finely shredded cabbage, a standard garnish of *tonkatsu*, sets off the full flavor of the meat and aids digestion. The sauce has a sharp kick.

Ponta Honke
3-23-3 Ueno, Taito-ku, Tokyo
Tel. 03-3831-2351





Sapporo



Hakodate



Yamagata



Kitakata



Tokyo

Ramen

Multiple ingredients yield its complex savory flavor

Japanese ramen, a classic trinity of soup, noodles, and toppings, has its roots in China. Whereas the Chinese version is served with an all-purpose broth that also flavors stir-fried foods and other dishes, ramen soup in Japan is prepared especially for this dish.

Until the 1950s or 60s, ramen in Japan, too, had been served in a Chinese-style, all-purpose soup. Gradually, ramen chefs began to work on their recipes to refine and distinguish their shop's own flavor profile. Those efforts have spawned today's diverse range of soups that sport plenty of local and individual flair. Japan's ramen chefs went on to finesse the dish as a

whole—even the noodles now vary greatly from north to south across the country.

Among the locale-specific recipes that have gone mainstream are Sapporo ramen from the northernmost main island of Hokkaido, and Kyushu ramen from the south. The latter is renowned for its stock based on pork bones, and there are many different versions, notably those made in Hakata, Kurume, and Kagoshima.

In general ramen stocks take as their base chicken or pork bones, seafood, or combinations of the same, seasoned with soy, miso, or salt. Whatever the recipe, the soup invariably has plen-

ty of umami flavor and body. The noodles may be extra-thick, thick, thin, or frizzled. Toppings such as *chashu* roast pork and pickled bamboo shoots also vary from place to place. In Sapporo ramen, vegetables are stir-fried and mixed with the soup in a wok; this mixture is then poured over the noodles. A typical bowl of ramen holds seven to eight ingredients, but there are those made with over 30 of them.

These many factors combine to produce not only the concentrated taste experience we know and love as ramen, but the delight of discovering original versions in every region and locale where it is made.



Yokohama



Kyoto



Wakayama



Tokushima



Onomichi



Hakata



Tsuke-men dipping noodles



Nabe-yaki hotpot ramen



1



2

1. *Chashu* roast pork is an indispensable ramen topping. Wet-cured and cooked over long hours, the soft, flavor-rich meat is thinly sliced and placed over the noodles.

2. A ramen chef keeps a close eye on a vat of boiling noodles. Competition over the past two decades has yielded countless more varieties and better-tasting ramen.

This page and opposite were created with cooperation from Shin-Yokohama Raumen Museum. www.raumen.co.jp



1. Brought to the table automatically, the *tsukidashi* appetizer is a sort of cover charge; shown here are potatoes and carrots cooked with soy sauce and sugar. Behind it are items from Shinsuke's regular menu: tuna and scallions dressed with miso and vinegar; and roasted wheat gluten with seasoned miso.
2. Regulars relax into their drinks and food. Don't be shy to ask the chef about his recommendations as you choose from the menu items posted on the wall.
3. Sake is warmed in 180-millimeter flasks to customers' preference—tepid or hot. Of course, some prefer it cold.

Shinsuke
3-31-5 Yushima, Bunkyo-ku, Tokyo
Tel. 03-3832-0469

Izakaya

A Japanese-style pub for relaxed bites and brews

People gather at *izakaya* to enjoy sake or beer over good conversation. At Shinsuke, the fourth-generation owner-chef offers beer and the one brand of sake that has been a fixture on the menu since the pub was first opened. Here, food plays a supporting role to the drink: all dishes are served singly, without sides, but the vast array—over 40 kinds—more than makes up for it.

Sitting at the counter, where you can engage in conversation with the owner or chef in charge as well as fellow diners, is another highlight of an evening out at an *izakaya*. You can order what you like at your own pace, and the congenial atmosphere makes it as easy to go alone as it is with a group of friends.

Okonomiyaki

Savory griddle cakes—crispy on the outside, warm and fluffy inside

The *okonomiyaki* pancake is made with a wheat-flour batter that holds together such hearty ingredients as eggs, meat, and shredded cabbage. There are two types: a thicker one originating from Osaka, and a thinner style, hailing from Hiroshima and filled out with soba noodles. Since its early days as a street food following World War II, Hiroshima-style *okonomiyaki* has risen to attain national fame as that city's specialty. In Tokyo, the restaurant Bon serves Hiroshima-style pancakes cooked on a custom-made steel *teppan* grill. Owner-chef Mitsuru Ishimatsu considers this food “one of the best ways to enjoy cabbage, period.” The shredded leaves fill each crisp griddle cake along

with soba noodles and meat; the whole is capped with a thin egg omelet and brushed with a special sauce. Adding to its depth of flavor are such condiments as dried fish powder, white sesame seeds, and deep-fried tempura crumbs.

1. A whisked batter of wheat flour, eggs, and water is thinly spread in a circle on the skillet. Shredded cabbage and other ingredients are piled on top of the pancake while soba noodles cook separately alongside. Topped with a thin egg omelet, the pancake is then placed on top of the fried noodles.
2. The treat is brushed with a spicy-sweet sauce.
3. Sprinkled with dried bonito shavings and powdered nori, your *okonomiyaki* is now ready to cut and enjoy.

Bon
Shibata Building B1F
8-33 San'ei-cho, Shinjuku-ku, Tokyo
Tel. 03-3357-9129



It takes 20 or so minutes for the shredded cabbage that fills an *okonomiyaki* griddle cake to cook. At Bon in Tokyo's Shinjuku ward, Mitsuru Ishimatsu relies on years of practice to judge the best timing to turn each one.

