



Grown with care for fine marbling

Wagyu beef is hailed by chefs and diners around the world for its unparalleled tenderness and aroma when grilled. Even a thick cut of top-grade Wagyu steak is so succulent that it literally melts in the mouth. That texture is owed to well-balanced marbling, known as *sashi* in Japanese. It's a factor of not only the species but also long months of careful growing at cattle farms.

“Compared with other cattle that mature in about 24 months, Wagyu raised to yield the finely marbled cuts of meat known as *shimofuri* take about 30 months to mature,” says Atsushi Kato, owner of a Ginza restaurant that specializes in Yamagata beef. Water and feed largely determine the meat's taste. Japan has abundant high-quality water; research and constant tinkering have created superior feed. “Precise butchering and vacuum-packaging of primal cuts also ensure the quality of what reaches the table,” adds Kato.

In premium Wagyu such as that shown above, the density of marbling determines the grade of each cut. At right is Yamagata steak grilled rare and served at the Kato Gyunikuten restaurant. Its inherent umami bursts forth with just a few drops of soy sauce and freshly ground wasabi, to taste.

Kato Gyunikuten
www.katogyu.co.jp



Wild plants and sea vegetables

Bounty of woods and water

Edible wild plants, collectively known as *sansai*, and mushrooms figure big in washoku not only for their nutritive benefits and flavor, but also for their distinct seasonality. Butterbur buds arrive early in the year; bracken, angelica tree sprouts, and bamboo shoots in turn herald the advent of spring. They are commonly blanched and dressed with miso and vinegar, or deep-fried and served as tempura. While there are cultivated varieties of mushrooms in Japan, wild ones feature prominently as autumn treats, the most prized of which are fragrant matsutake served grilled or steamed in a small earthen pot.

Mineral-rich marine algae have been widely eaten since time immemorial in Japan. Most common are wakame and nori, which are used both fresh and dried. Kombu kelp is chiefly sold dried and features in many dishes, although its primary use is as an ingredient for dashi stock, addressed on pages 38–39. Because it has auspicious associations kombu is used widely in celebration foods, and in dried form it is a typical offering of Shinto rituals.



On the left is dried wakame seaweed, and on the right dried kombu kelp. Both are rich in vitamins and minerals, and feature prominently in stocks and soups.

©maruk/amanaimages

Edible wild plants such as angelica tree buds, bracken, and field horsetail shoots bring a breath of spring to the table.

©Tohru Minowa/a.collectionRF/amanaimages



Ichiju sansai
One soup and three dishes

Composing a complete washoku meal

The most common formula of washoku home cooking, the *ichiju sansai* concept maintains that in addition to rice and pickles, there should be one soup (*ichiju*) and at least three other dishes (*sansai*), ideally made by different methods, such as simmering, grilling, and so on. The main dish might be traditional fare, such as yellowtail broiled with sweetened soy sauce. Or it might be a Western-Japanese hybrid like a breaded and deep-fried *tonkatsu* pork cutlet or a hamburger patty topped with gravy—dishes introduced to the washoku diet after Japan opened its ports to the world in the Meiji period (1868–1912). But whatever form they take, the soup and other dishes play second fiddle to white rice, the assumed center of the meal.

The written record is unclear as to when exactly the *ichiju sansai* formula was established, but we do know that it is depicted in a Heian-era picture scroll dating back to the 12th century. Until the early 20th century, meals were typically served on an individual tray with legs, just big enough to hold one soup and three small dishes. When entertaining, two or more trays were used; between them they would carry *niju gosai*, or two soups and five dishes. In other words, an *ichiju sansai* meal signifies an ordinary repast.

During the Heian period (794–1185) extravagant *daikyo ryori* feasts were prepared to entertain guests in the aristocratic circle. Later, the samurai warrior class invented their own multitray *honzen ryori*, while at Buddhist temples monks prepared vegetarian *shojin ryori*. In the late 16th century, *cha-kaiseki* for the tea ceremony was established. The kaiseki cuisine we know today—sumptuous multicourse meals featuring many dishes meant to be enjoyed with sake—emerged from these many influences in the Edo era (1603–1867). In Meiji, foreign styles brought new recipes to the washoku table; hybrid dishes have long since become regular fare in home cooking. Today as in those bygone eras, freshly steamed rice and a well-balanced assortment of other dishes never fail to make happy diners.



True to the *ichiju sansai* formula, the meal on the opposite page consists of rice, miso soup with tofu and scallions, pickles, and three dishes: yellowtail broiled with sweetened soy sauce; raw turnips and carrots dressed in vinegar and topped with chrysanthemum petals; and simmered taro with sweetened ground meat. Photos 1, 2, and 3 above show other common *sansai* options: flounder stewed in soy broth, roast ginger pork, and simmered meat and potatoes seasoned with soy sauce and sugar.

The chopsticks, chopstick rest, rice bowl, square plate, half-moon plate, small bowl, and oval bowl at left are by Kurashi no Utsuwa Hanada. The soup bowl is by Jihei Murase (Kamon Kogei). The main serving vessels shown above are by Kurashi no Utsuwa Hanada.



Celebratory foods



Festive fare for special gatherings

Washoku is an integral part of traditional observances and most special occasions in Japan. The New Year holiday—the most significant of the year—and watershed events such as weddings always revolve around the feast to be shared. As in so many cultures where family members, friends, and colleagues gather to “break bread” with one another, washoku, too, is a force that deepens both family ties as well as those of the larger community.

In Japan, each year’s regular observances and celebrations are deeply connected with ancient ways in which auspicious ingredients and foods were used to expel evil spirits and invite good fortune. Glutinous rice steamed with red beans is often served on felicitous occasions today; indeed the dish was originally devised to exorcise evil spirits. *Osechi ryori*, the New Year’s feast, uses such auspicious foods prominently, from black soybeans expressing wishes for health and longevity, to syrup-glazed dried anchovies symbolizing prayers for a plentiful harvest. And *osechi* features recipes that keep longer than everyday fare, so that housewives, too, can take a break from cooking during the first three days of the year.

Toso, a kind of medicinally spiced sake, is also imbibed at New Year’s, to expel evil spirits and invite a long healthy life. Typically served with it is *zoni*, a soup cooked with various vegetables, fish cake, and *mochi* rice cake in a dashi stock seasoned with soy or miso. As the shape of the rice cake, the combination of ingredients, and the seasoning of the broth all vary by region, *zoni* is a wonderful example of regional diversity in a washoku dish that all Japanese know and associate with their fondest food memories.

Toso, shown on the opposite page in an ornate lacquer vessel, is made of equal parts of seven plant extracts, including bellflower and *sansho* Japanese pepper. The mixture is steeped in sake or mirin and drunk during the New Year holiday. Auspicious *osechi* foods from left are *kuromame* black beans, *tazukuri* dried anchovies, and *kazunoko* herring roe.

Toso serving set by Yamada Heiando
Mini-plates by Kurashi no Utsuwa Hanada



At rear is Kanto-style *zoni* with square *mochi*, chicken, *kamaboko* fish cake, *komatsuna* mustard spinach, daikon, carrots, and *yuzu* citron in a seasoned dashi broth. In the foreground is Kansai-style *zoni* with round *mochi*, *ebūmo* taro, daikon, and shavings of dry-cured bonito in a white miso soup.



Glutinous rice steamed with red beans is believed to expel evil spirits and invite happiness.

Soup bowls and tray by Jihei Murase (Kamon Kogei)
Rice bowls by Kurashi no Utsuwa Hanada