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Traditional Japanese Food

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ANNOTATION

The traditional Japanese diet is similar to the traditional Chinese diet. Rice, meat, and fish are their staple choices. Japanese foods have developed through centuries of political, economic, and social changes. Traditional Japanese cuisine features some of the best foods in the world from raw fish like sushi to the best beef, wagyu. Visitors to Japan now witness a huge array of food choices, ranging from traditional Japanese cooking, Chinese, Korean, and an increasing available cooking of immigrants to Japan from various parts of the world. This paper provides a primer on traditional Japanese foods so that you have a handy list for your trip to Japan or when you plan to make them at home.

KEYWORDS: food, Japanese foods, Japanese cuisines, Japanese culture.

INTRODUCTION

Japan is a group of islands; its residents usually have lots of fish when compared to other nations. They usually eat raw fish in the form of sushi and sashimi. Although Japan is a small country, each region or city has its own special dishes. In addition to revolutionizing our cars and computer systems, Japan has broadened our culinary knowledge with the introduction of its delicious and highly unique cuisine. The map of Japan is shown in Figure 1 [1].

Japan is popular known for being expensive. Japanese are meticulous in everything they do include cooking. Their staple food is white rice, which may be combined with other dishes. The favorite dishes include Sake, Ramen, Sushi, Tempura, Unagi, and Sashimi. For example, Sushi tastes best when served with wasabi, pickled ginger, and soy sauce. Ramen is a dish made of wheat noodles and served in the broth along with vegetables and meat. A lot of people are willing to learn how to use chopsticks just to enjoy Japanese cuisine. The Japanese noodle soup, ramen has grown in popularity outside of Japan in the last decade.

Japanese cuisine was heavily influenced by Buddhist beliefs which restrict the consumption of meat, which was not even common until the more recent eras in Japan. Since the introduction of Buddhism to Japan in the

sixth century until the mid-nineteenth century, food has generally been cooked without any animal meat or fats [2].

FOOD PHILOSOPHY

The Japanese still practice some cultural beliefs and traditions that other western nations may consider as weird in this digital era. For example, worshippers must wash their hands before entering a shrine. In Japan, many types of food symbolize different things with the ingredients and the way they are served. Beyond the need of just staving off one's hunger, food must be set out to please the eye. In every dish, cooks go to a painstaking length to present food of contrasting colors, texture, and shape to appeal to the eye and the palate. One can say that the Japanese people are quite sensitive to eye-appeal. Japanese food culture has four parts: eating etiquette, food quality, cooking methods, and taste.

They have maintained their indigenous culture and traditions. To eat Japanese-style meals, chopsticks are commonly used. Also, Japanese people use forks, knives, or spoons, depending on what types of food they are eating.

TRADITIONAL JAPANESE INGREDIENTS

Much of Japanese food revolves around simplicity and bringing out the best of the ingredient. Spices like pepper and garlic were only used in a minimalist amount. Bread is not native to Japan and is not considered traditional Japanese food. The three major ingredients that define Japanese cooking, emotionally, culturally, and in terms of prevalence, are rice, soybean paste, and fish stock. To understand Japanese cuisine, it is helpful to understand these and other ingredients [1,3]:

1. *Rice*: Every Japanese meal includes steamed rice. As with most Asian nations, the staple food in Japan is rice, not bread. Rice was treated as a form of currency and tax was collected in the form of rice. There are a variety of rice dishes including steamed white rice (hakumai), brown rice (genmai), or the steamed rice might also be mixed with barley (mugi). Wheat and soybeans were introduced shortly after rice.
2. *Soybeans*: This is the second major food base in Japanese cooking. It is fermented soybean paste (miso). Miso is a versatile seasoning. It adds flavor, aroma, and body as well as a distinctive character.
3. *Fish stock*: This is made largely of katsuobushi. It is for many Japanese dishes the basic and most important flavoring ingredient.
4. *Soup*: In addition to rice, every Japanese meal includes soup. The first, and most common type of soup is a miso based soup (miso shiru)
5. *Tofu*: This is a staple ingredient in Japanese cuisine and any vegetarian dish. Tofu is made from the curds of soy milk, which is pressed into molds to remove excess moisture and shape it into blocks—much like making cheese.
6. *Pickles*: These are comprised of pickled vegetables or fruit. There are countless varieties of pickles, almost always served along with rice.
7. *Fish*: A Japanese dish often involves seafood due to the nation's proximity to the sea. The fish may be grilled, fried fish, or sashimi (raw fish).
8. *Vegetables*: In addition to the predominance of seafood in Japanese cuisine, it is also dominated by vegetables.

9. *Fruits*: Each season (spring, summer, autumn, and winter) in Japan produces different types of fruit, meaning that all sorts of wonderful taste sensations can be experienced throughout the year. Common fruits include peaches, watermelons., strawberries, pears, and melons.
10. *Beverages*: Hot green tea or other Japanese tea will be served along with a meal. Alcohols such as beer are also typical beverages enjoyed with dinner.

DIFFERENT JAPANESE DISHES

Japanese dishes are seasonal and are designed to herald the arrival of the four seasons or calendar months. Influenced by Buddhism, most Japanese dishes would feature vegetables and fish. Today, the most popular Japanese dishes worldwide are sushi and ramen. Here is a list of the 50 Japanese traditional foods you must try in Japan [4]:

1. Sushi
2. Okonomiyaki
3. Miso Soup
4. Yakitori
5. Udon
6. Takoyaki
7. Soba
8. Sukiyaki
9. Sashimi
10. Unagi
11. Tofu
12. Onigiri
13. Wagashi
14. Natto
15. Oden
16. Shabu Shabu
17. Tempura
18. Ramen
19. Tonkatsu
20. Kaiseki
21. Kappo Ryori
22. Shojin Ryori

23. Osechi Ryori
24. Zenzai / Oshiruko
25. Wagyu
26. Bento
27. Omurice
28. Kiritanpo
29. Mochi
30. Gyoza
31. Shogayaki
32. Fugu
33. Gyudon
34. Karaage
35. Oyakodon
36. Robatayaki
37. Shirasu / Shirasudon
38. Somen
39. Imagawayaki
40. Melonpan
41. Warabimochi
42. Tamagoyaki
43. Tsukemono
44. Yokan
45. Gyutan
46. Chankonabe
47. Anmitsu
48. Hiyashi chuka
49. Kushiage
50. Yatsushashi

We will consider some of these dishes [4-9]:

1. *Sushi*: This is perhaps most popular, iconic Japanese dish in Japan and beyond. It used to be considered poor man's food. It was invented in Japan as a way of preserving raw fish by storing it in fermented rice. It

has its roots in the street food culture of medieval Tokyo. Sushi is essentially vinegar rice with toppings, usually raw fish. Sushi comes in various forms depending on their filling, topping, and preparation. More common types of sushi include maki sushi, nigiri sushi, chirashizushi, and inari sushi. Chirashi, also known as scattered sushi, is a bed of sushi rice with sashimi “scattered” over the top in a decorative manner. Temaki is hand roll sushi where the fish, sushi rice and toppings are served. Sushi can be eaten with chopsticks or with your hand. A typical sushi food is shown in Figure 2 [6].

2. *Ramen*: This is another popular cuisine. It is a Japanese noodle soup and is considered as Japan’s soul food. Its main ingredients are Chinese wheat noodles, meat or fish broth, with common additions and toppings such as pork, nori seaweed, menma, and scallions. Ramen is also popular in many Asian nations such as China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. There are many variations of the Japanese ramen. The noodle soup can be categorized according to the soup base: shio, shoyu, tonkotsu, and miso. Shio ramen is one of the traditional versions of ramen. Tonkotsu is one of the most famous kinds of ramen you can find.
3. *Donburi*: This literally means bowl. It a Japanese rice-bowl dish that consists of fish, meat, and vegetables that are simmered together and served over rice. The donburi is a versatile Japanese dish that can be made with pretty much anything. It has its own regional variations leading to many types of donburi. One popular type of donburi is the gyudon, or beef bowl. Oyakodon is another common donburi dish that uses simmered chicken, beef, or pork, and egg, and sliced scallions. Another popular dish is the katsudon which uses tonkatsu or deep-fried pork cutlets, and onions that are simmered together. The donburi is such a flexible and versatile dish that other countries have also adopted it and created their own.
4. *Onigiri*: This is also called the Japanese rice ball, and well-known portable, comfort food. Onigiri was first created as a way to keep rice fresh for longer by using salty ingredients as natural preservatives. It looks similar to sushi but the onigiri is made with plain white rice instead of the seasoned sushi rice. There are various types of onigiri. The most common types of onigiri is the wrapped onigiri or konbini-style onigiri which are normally found in convenience stores. A newer type of onigiri is the onigirazu that does not actually take the traditional shape of a round or triangular onigiri.
5. *Karaage*: This is a very popular dish in Japan and beyond. It is made with a marinade and served with spicy dipping sauce. It has been adapted and modified by the different regions in Japan. Outside of Japan, the karaage has been adapted to suit the taste of different nations. In Tokyo, you are surrounded by karaage, finding it in just about every restaurant.
6. *Miso soup*: This is probably one of the quickest traditional Japanese dishes one can make. Miso paste is made of fermented soybeans and is mixed with many optional ingredients like meat, vegetables, and tofu. The soup is often served with rice at breakfast time. As miso soup can be classified according to the type of paste used for the soup: white miso which requires a short fermentation period, red miso which takes much longer, and awase miso, a combination of both. The soup is illustrated in Figure 3 [7].
7. *Curry*: Curry rice is popular in Japan. Although it was introduced to Japan by the British, the Japanese have their own unique version of curry. A Japanese curry meal typically consists of curry sauce, rice, and different types of meat and vegetables like carrots, onions, and potatoes. This traditional Japanese food can easily be found at restaurants and street food stalls, enjoyed as curry rice, curry udon or curry bread. Today, Japanese curry rice is considered by many to be a national dish of Japan.

8. *Sashimi*: This is thinly sliced raw meat, usually seafood. It is perhaps the most simple of all Japanese food. Sashimi is often served with soy sauce for dipping and wasabi to enhance the taste. Like sushi, diners can enjoy dozens of varieties of sashimi.
9. *Soba*: This is a noodle dish made of buckwheat flour and it can easily be found all over Japan. It appears like the Japanese version of spaghetti and can be enjoyed in either hot or cold dishes. The most common one is enjoying it as cold noodles with Tsuyu sauce.
10. *Wagyu*: The word means “Japanese beef.” This is beef from special type of Japanese beef cattle. It is the most expensive beef or steak in Japanese menu. There are different versions of Wagyu because it is branded according to where it was raised. Hence, Kobe Beef means it came from Kobe, while Aso Beef means it came from Aso.
11. *Sukiyaki*: The word “sukiyaki” means “cook what you like.” Sukiyaki hot pots are prepared by searing beef slices in the hot pot, then adding sukiyaki broth and different vegetables, noodles, and proteins. The hot pot dish is perfect for social dining, with raw beef, noodles, and vegetables cooked at your table. It was invented during the Edo period. Figure 4 shows how sukiyaki is prepared [7].
12. *Udon Noodles*: This is made with pantry ingredients like flour, salt and water. Making udon noodles from scratch is better than store-bought. One can enjoy them cold with dipping sauce, warm in a pan-fried noodle dish or hot with a brothy soup. Figure 5 shows Udon noodles [8].
13. *Tempura*: This is a traditional Japanese cooking method. It involves deep-frying seafood or vegetables coated in a light batter made with cold water and soft cake flour. Different types of fish, seafood, and vegetables are used to make tempura. Most tempura is cooked for just a few seconds before being served. It can be sprinkled with sea salt or mixtures of powdered green tea, salt, and yuzu before eating.
14. *Yakiniku*: This means “grilled meat” and refers to Japanese barbecue.
15. *Crab*: Japan’s love for crab is legendary. The crab consumption is in the colder months. One can find crab throughout Japan.
16. *Grasshopper*: In Japan, the most popular edible insect is a grasshopper, which is rich in proteins. Mixtures of river-living insect larvae are highly esteemed as favorite foods. It is cooked with soy sauce and sugar, and are sold as canned foods [9].

APPLICATIONS

The Japanese celebrate occasions with various types of food. Figure 6 shows people eating at an occasion [10]. Here we consider how Japanese foods are used for occasions such as wedding or New Year and for healthy living.

- *Food for Wedding*: Japan has one of the best cultural heritage protection systems in the world. Although there is a decline in the number of Japanese who get married today, a significant population still cherishes marriage as an important social institution. Until the middle of the 20th century, weddings in Japan were arranged by the parents of the bride and the groom. Both traditional weddings and church weddings celebrations are equally popular in Japan. Many weddings still spot elements of Japanese wedding traditions, especially in dress, food, and gifts. Japanese traditional weddings serve many different dishes throughout the wedding celebrations. Each food and drink served has a special meaning. A Japanese wedding ceremony is displayed in Figure 7 [11].

- *Food for New Year:* In Japan, there are some customs which are performed specifically at the end of the year. The Japanese eat special dishes on New Year's Eve and Day. On December 30, the whole family get together to clean up every corner of the house. On December 31st, people go shopping for the New Year and then spend the night of the 31st with family at home. *Toshikoshi soba* is a savory noodle bowl dish which is typically eaten on New Year's Eve. Figure 8 shows different foods eaten on December 31st [12]. The foods commonly consumed for New Year's are called *osechi ryori*, which simply means "New Year's food." These foods are typically served and enjoyed with family and/or friends. They can bring everything from health and wealth to luck and academic success. Before the invention of refrigerator, most Japan's New Year's dishes are pickled or preserved to last many days [13].
- *Food for Health:* Japanese foods can change our health because there is power in the foods. What really sets Japanese cuisine apart is that it relies mainly on such foods as grains, vegetables, and fish, while limiting the use of cooking oil. Since Japanese cuisine offers a nutritionally balanced diet, it has become the focus of global attention as a healthful eating style. The traditional Japanese diet has been suggested by some researchers to be associated with a decreased risk of prostate cancer. The diet is high in soybean products, high in fish, and low in red meat. It is possible that the traditional Japanese diet may reduce the risk of prostate cancer [14].

BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES

The main characteristics of Japanese foods include [15]:

1. staple diet and supplementary diet are clearly divided;
2. there is always a nutritious balance;
3. easy to discern visually what types of ingredients are used.

Japanese cooking must also use perfectly fresh food at its prime.

Japan is well known as the country of longevity, and its traditional diet is drawing attention worldwide. Japan is virtually tied with Hong Kong in terms of average life expectancy, at 84 years. Various studies have shown that the Japanese outlive people from other parts of the world. The secret of their longevity is their diet [16].

Western food comes into Japan as many types as there are nations, with Italian and French now being very popular. Then there is fast food, offered by such outlets as McDonald's, Pizza Hut, and the like. A declining rural population has damaged Japan's agriculture industry. Consumers have begun to change their preferences to include more Western-based foods.

CONCLUSION

With its aesthetic of beautifully presented food and the use of fresh, high-quality seasonal ingredients, it is no wonder that Japan's cuisine is so delicious and loved by people around the world. Japan's most famous contribution to global food culture (sushi) is generally eaten at sushi restaurants where customers sit at the counter and call out their orders item by item to a sushi chef. Food is never served in large quantities probably to avoid waste. Like the Chinese, the Japanese are still using chopsticks. More information about traditional Japanese food can be found in the books in [1,17-32].

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Figure 1. The map of Japan [1]



Figure 2 - A typical sushi [6].



EASY 5-MINUTE
Miso Soup

Figure 3. Miso soup [7].

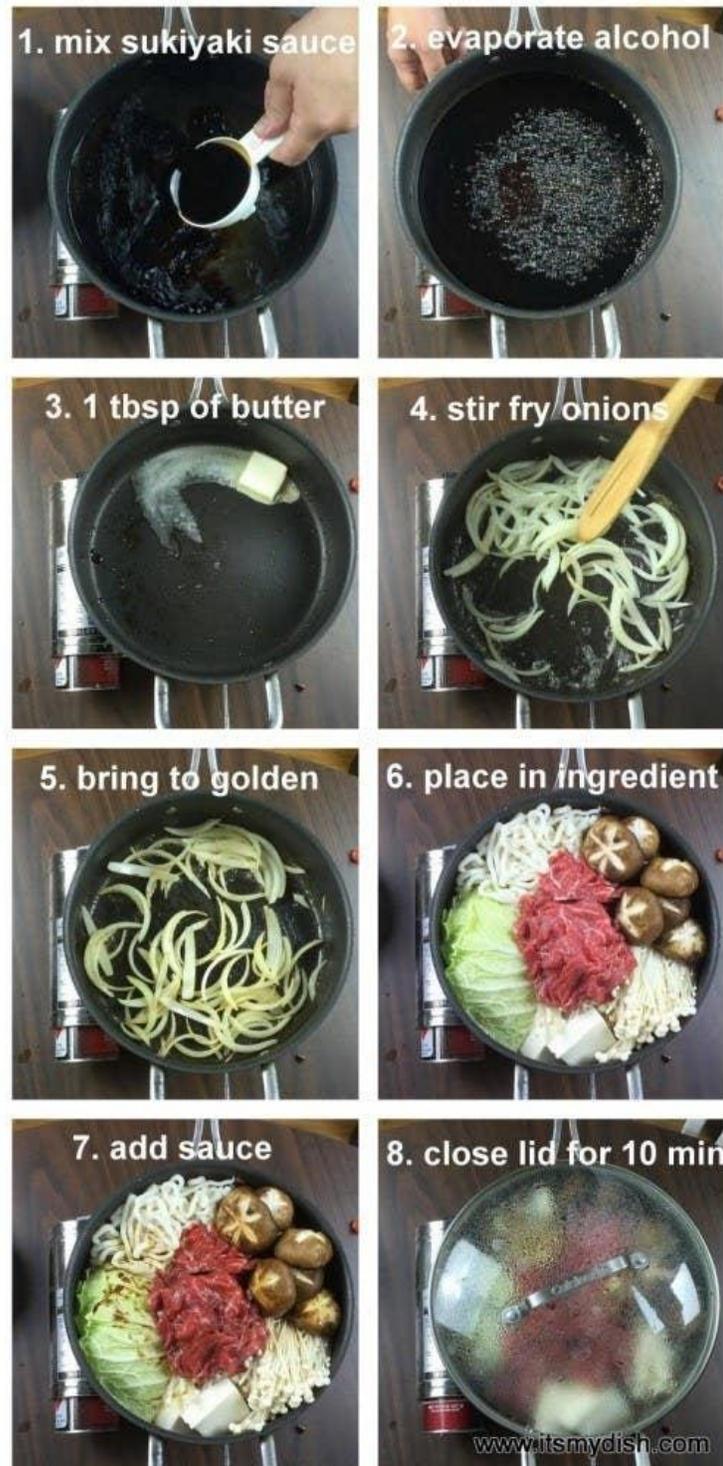


Figure 4. How sukiyaki is prepared [7].



Figure 5. Udon noodles [8].



Figure 6. People eating at an occasion [10].



Figure 7. A Japanese wedding ceremony [11].

What is the Traditional Japanese Food Eaten on December 31st?

1. Soba noodles
2. Mochi (rice cake)
3. Red Snapper

Figure 8. Different Japanese foods eaten on December 31st [12].