



# 10 Great Tastes of Japan



日本食十選



10 Great taste of Japan features 10 popular dishes that have been selected to convey the rich variety of Japanese cuisine to people in other parts of the world.



# Japanese Food Culture

Influenced by the natural environment and by the cultures of various countries, Japanese cuisine has acquired a distinct identity. Japan has a temperate climate with four seasons. Summer is hot and humid but the abundant rainfall throughout the year is well suited to the cultivation of various agricultural products. Many products have been introduced from other parts of the world and cultivated in Japan: grains such as rice and wheat; a wide selection of vegetables and beans, including **daikon** radish, eggplants and turnips; and a variety of potatoes and fruits. Surrounded by the sea, Japan also enjoys an abundance of fresh seafood throughout the year, which is eaten not only as **sashimi** or sushi but also in a variety of simmered or grilled dishes. A wide range of fermented food products have been developed from rice or soybeans, including **miso** paste, soy sauce, **sake**, rice vinegar and **mirin**, sweet cooking alcohol. These form the basis of the flavor of Japanese cuisine, which places special emphasis on **dashi**\* and a savory taste called **umami**.

\***dashi** : soup and cooking stocks



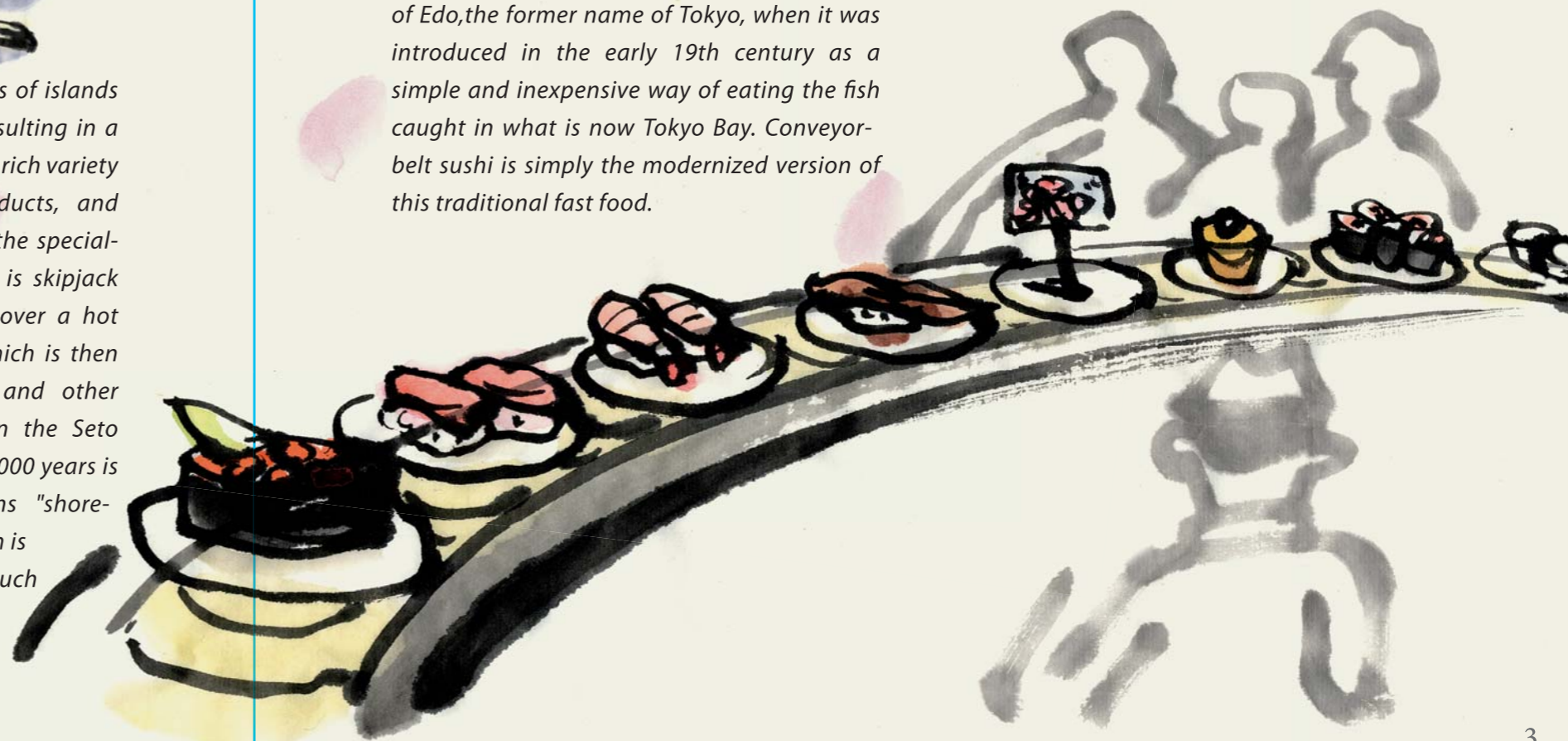
A traditional Japanese meal is comprised of rice, which is the staple food, a bowl of **miso** or clear soup and several side dishes, as well as pickled vegetables. Traditionally, a standard meal consists of one bowl of soup and three side dishes, and this is called **Ichiju-Sansai**. Low in fat but rich in fiber, Japanese cuisine offers a nutritious balance of carbohydrates, protein, vitamins and minerals. This is one reason for its increasing international appeal.



Japan is comprised of a long series of islands stretching from north to south, resulting in a diverse natural environment with a rich variety of agricultural and marine products, and countless regional dishes. One of the specialties of the Pacific coast of Japan is skipjack **tataki**. The fish is filleted, seared over a hot flame and sliced into **sashimi**, which is then eaten with vinegar, soy sauce and other seasonings. A traditional dish on the Seto Inland Sea with a history of over 1,000 years is **hamayaki**, which literally means "shore-cooked." Freshly caught sea bream is packed in salt and broiled whole. Such ancient cities as Kamakura and the former capital Kyoto are famous

for a style of vegetarian cuisine called **shojin-ryori** featuring **tofu** and vegetable products developed at Buddhist temples. These are just a few examples of the culinary delights found throughout Japan. Each region has its own specialties, with so much variety that it's possible to spend a whole lifetime eating one's way around Japan without having the same dish twice. Japan's many different local dishes represent a great way to appreciate the changing seasons and nature's bounty.

Japanese food is continuing to evolve. Conveyor-belt sushi restaurants have become quite popular in recent years, both in Japan and elsewhere, as an inexpensive way of enjoying sushi. Plates of **nigiri** or hand-formed sushi are placed on a conveyor belt that moves past the counter seats, enabling customers to pick their selections. **Nigiri-zushi** originally became popular as a form of "fast food" for the people of Edo, the former name of Tokyo, when it was introduced in the early 19th century as a simple and inexpensive way of eating the fish caught in what is now Tokyo Bay. Conveyor-belt sushi is simply the modernized version of this traditional fast food.



**Nigiri-zushi** now enjoys international popularity as a health food, and some of the more unconventional creations these days include sushi featuring avocado, pineapple and other fruits.

10 Great taste of Japan features 10 popular dishes that have been selected to convey the rich variety of Japanese cuisine to people in other parts of the world.

Do try out the recipes! We think they'll enhance your understanding and appreciation of Japanese cuisine.



## Sushi and Sashimi

### Sashimi and Soy Sauce

**Sashimi** is a Japanese food that consists of thinly sliced fresh raw fish served with a dipping sauce. Initially, such sauces were typically tart in flavor, made of rice vinegar mixed with **wasabi** or ginger. But once soy sauce became widely available in the 18th century, it was adopted as the main condiment for sushi and **sashimi**. Today, **sashimi** is eaten by first garnishing the fish with a small amount of **wasabi**, then using chopsticks to give it a quick dip in soy sauce. Because the fish used is so fresh, there is no "fishy" odor, but instead a rich, satisfying flavor.

**Sashimi** is most often served accompanied

by thinly sliced vegetables, like **daikon** radish, perilla sprouts or leaves, and chrysanthemum. Sushi, on the other hand, is served with thinly sliced sweet pickled ginger. Garnishes like these, which enhance the flavor and appearance of the dish, are a hallmark of Japanese cuisine, serving both to evoke a sense of the seasons and to accentuate the delicious taste of **sashimi** and sushi.

### Kinds of Sushi

Originally, sushi was a means of preserving fish by fermenting it with rice and salt. However by the 17th century sushi was being made with vinegar-seasoned rice. In the early 19th century, **nigirizushi** was invented,



Sashimi



Nigirizushi

with tuna becoming a mainstay ingredient. Today, there are many kinds of sushi besides **nigiri**. **Barazushi** is rice flavored with vinegar, salt and sugar mixed with other ingredients including fish, egg and sliced cooked vegetables such as **shiitake** mushroom, carrot and **kampyo**, dried gourd strips. **Norimakizushi** is made by using sheets of **nori** seaweed to roll up ingredients inside rice. Sushi is a healthy, low-calorie food prepared with little or no oil.

### Types of Seafood Used in Sushi and Sashimi

Today, while the seafood ingredients used in **nigirizushi** vary by season and area, staple species include tuna, yellowtail, red sea bream and squid. The growth of farmed red sea bream and yellowtail has made them a tasty and affordable ingredient. Shrimp, octopus and scallops are also widely used.

In addition to these, sea urchin and **ikura**, or salmon roe, are used as ingredients in **nigirizushi**. While tuna is the most common type of **sashimi** today, it was once considered a low-grade fish. It was not until the 19th century, near the end of the shogunate, that tuna gradually came to be eaten in Japan. At first, it was mainly popular in Edo, today's Tokyo. In the Kansai area of western Japan, where the custom of eating white-flesh fish like sea bream and flounder remains strong, consumption of tuna is less prevalent than in eastern Japan. Fresh seafood contains healthy proteins, and the omega 3 fatty acids DHA (docosahexaenoic acid) and EPA (eicosapentaenoic acid) found in tuna, red sea bream, yellowtail and mackerel are said to help prevent thrombosis and reduce blood fat.



鉄板焼肉

しゃぶしゃぶ

## Sukiyaki, Shabu-shabu and Teppanyaki

### Sukiyaki

The main ingredients in **teppanyaki**, **sukiyaki** and **shabu-shabu** are red meat and seafood. Among the three, **sukiyaki** has the longest history. **Sukiyaki** gets its name from an old-fashioned method of cooking (**yaki**) seafood and poultry on top of a farmer's spade (**suki**). Early 19th-century Japanese cookbooks describe a similar dish of grilled poultry and seafood such as yellowtail flavored with grated **daikon** radish and green onions, eaten with **yuzu\*** soy sauce or **wasabi** soy sauce. However, after Japan opened the country in 1854, more and more Western food

was introduced, and around 1870, the name **sukiyaki** came to be used to describe thinly sliced beef and green onions simmered in a thick broth of soy sauce, **miso**, **mirin** and other ingredients. In the next era, **sukiyaki** evolved from a stewed meal-for-one into a meal shared from a single pot among family members or close friends. It is nutritionally balanced by the inclusion of green onions, napa cabbage, edible chrysanthemum, mushrooms and **tofu**.

\*yuzu : a Japanese citrus fruit



Sukiyaki



Shabu-shabu



Teppanyaki



In the Kansai region, **sukiyaki** is prepared by first grilling the beef in the pot, then adding soy sauce, sugar and broth stock in which to boil the vegetable ingredients. In the Kanto region, after a broth made of stock, soy sauce, sugar and **mirin** has been heated in the pot, the meat and vegetable ingredients are added at the same time. In some regions, hot-from-the-pot morsels are dipped into raw beaten egg to cool them before eating.

### Shabu-shabu

While its history in Japan is relatively short, **shabu-shabu** is said to have originated from Chinese lamb hot-pot dishes. **Shabu-shabu** starts with a broth in which napa, **shiitake** mushrooms and **tofu** are simmered. Thin slices of beef or pork are swished around in the broth to cook them, and then immediately dipped in a sauce, usually a citrus-infused soy sauce using the juice of the **yuzu** or **kabosu\***, or a sesame-based sauce blending numerous ingredients including ground sesame, **miso**, soy sauce, sugar, sake, **mirin**, rice vinegar, soup stock, chili pepper and garlic. Each region of Japan has its own variant of this kind of stew, usually eaten during the winter. These include stews based on fish sauce that contain boiled fish, red meat and vegetables. There are also stews made from a

\*kabosu : a Japanese citrus fruit

**konbu** seaweed broth stock that contain boiled blowfish and vegetables. These are eaten with a dipping sauce mixture of citrus-infused vinegar and grated **daikon** and chili pepper.

### Teppanyaki

**Teppanyaki** is said to have originated as meat cooked on an iron griddle made from scrap metal. It has evolved into a cuisine that friends or family members might gather to eat while out camping and typically consists of meat, vegetables and potatoes. In recent years, a popular type of **teppanyaki** restaurant consists of an iron griddle installed in front of counter seating, allowing customers to watch the chef cook steaks, seafood and vegetables right in front of them.



## Tempura

**Tempura** is said to have been brought to Japan by the Portuguese in the form of fried ground fish or other deep fried foods. **Tempura** in the form of white-flesh fish and shrimp lightly fried in batter developed in the late 18th century when people began frying seafood caught in today's Tokyo Bay and nearby waters. Creating **tempura**'s thin coating of fried batter demands skillful control of the temperature of the egg, water and flour, as well as a careful frying technique. Nowadays, seafood such as shrimp, whiting, squid and scallops are commonly used, complemented by batter-fried vegetables such as sweet potatoes, green beans, Japanese ginger and pumpkin. In Japanese, **tempura** consisting of only vegetables

is referred to by a separate term: **shojin-age**.

**Tempura** is usually eaten by either dipping it into a sauce called **tentsuyu**, made from broth stock, soy sauce and **mirin**, with a garnish of grated **daikon** radish and ginger, or by seasoning it with salt alone or a mix of salt and either powdered Japanese pepper or powdered Japanese green tea. In Japan, grated **daikon** radish and ginger was historically used as an antidote for poison, while the use of Japanese pepper and powdered green tea for their pungent taste, smell and color is a hallmark of Japanese cuisine.

Fried in vegetable oil, **tempura** greatly enriches the natural flavors of its ingredients yet is also remarkably healthy.



Tempura



## Vegetarian Cuisine



Sesame tofu

Ganmodoki

Steamed vegetables

**Shojin-ryori**, a form of vegetarian cuisine in Japan, was originally brought back to Buddhist temples by priests who studied in China from the 12th century onward. Influenced by Buddhist teachings that prohibit the killing of living creatures, **shojin-ryori** developed as a cuisine that does not use animal products. The featured ingredients are vegetables, beans and potatoes. In order to supplement the protein content, soy and soy products as well as wheat gluten are also used. In the quest to add zest to the otherwise bland flavor of a vegetable-based diet, cooks turned to sesame and sesame oil, which contains large amounts of fatty oils, and created dishes that mimic traditional meat-based foods. One example is **ganmodoki**, a dish of fried **tofu** and vegetables that mimics goose

meat. One signature **shojin-ryori** foodstuff is sesame **tofu**, similar to kneaded **tofu**. This is made from ground sesame and arrowroot starch. Broths based on seaweed and dried **shiitake** mushrooms are flavored with **miso**, soy sauce, **sake** and **mirin**.

During the 18th century, taking advantage of Japan's abundant and high-quality water, the firmer **tofu** that had originally come to Japan from China was improved to create a softer type that spread in popularity among the masses. **Tofu** contains less fatty oils than meat but is high in proteins, leading to its nickname, "meat from the fields." **Koyadofu**, freeze-dried **tofu**, and **yuba**, a **tofu** product made by skimming heated soy milk, are essential ingredients in Japanese vegetarian cuisine.



## Rice and Seasoned Rice

ごはん  
おにぎり  
炊込み  
はんみ



White rice and pickles

Japan's staple rice is japonica, a short-grain variety of rice, valued for its soft, plump texture that is consistent right through the grain. Even among modern Japanese it is a favorite daily staple food. White rice is eaten with all sorts of dishes. It goes well not only with Japanese dishes but also Western food such as steak and Salisbury steak. **Onigiri** is made by placing grilled salmon, pickled plum or other ingredients inside a lump of rice and then shaping it by hand into a firm ball, with a small amount of salt.

This conveniently portable, easy-to-make and tasty food has been enjoyed for a long time. Today, **onigiri** are made with many new kinds of ingredients and they're a popular food all over Japan. Young people tend to be especially fond of **onigiri** made with tuna mixed with mayonnaise.

Seasoned rice, **takikomi-gohan**, is a colorful and seasonal treat made from vegetables, seafood and meat all mixed into rice. Recipes vary by region, though in general it starts with rice seasoned with salt, soy sauce and **sake**. To this are often added ingredients such as carrot, **shiitake** or **shimeji** mushrooms and chicken. In spring, bamboo shoots and peas are typical, and in the autumn, chestnuts and ginkgo nuts. Local delicacies such as oysters, salmon and sea bream can also be used as ingredients.



Seasoned rice



## Noodles

めん類

Among the many types of noodles introduced to Japan from China, **udon** has become the favorite noodle of western Japan. Hand-pulled **somen** noodles, made by stretching a dough of flour mixed with salt, water and oil until it becomes thin, are a classic summertime treat. In western Japan's Kansai region, the clear broth used with **udon** is made from a soup stock seasoned with salt and a light soy sauce. While in the Kanto region of eastern Japan, sugar, **mirin** and dark soy sauce are added to the stock. **Soba** noodles, which are made from buckwheat, became widely eaten among Japan's population in the mid-17th century. Both **soba** and **udon** are boiled and served in a bowl with broth, then topped with **kamaboko** fish sausage, chicken, **shiitake** mushroom or egg, along with condiments such as sliced green onion or ground chili pepper. Cooked **soba** and **udon** can also be served "dry" on a bamboo sieve and dipped in a deeply-flavored broth, with spices such as **wasabi**, ginger and chili peppers.

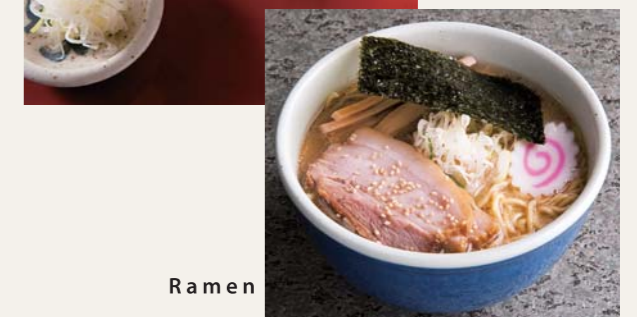
**Ramen** noodles in modern Japan differ from the Chinese version and feature a range of soup flavors based on soy sauce, salt, **miso**, butter and pork stock. In order to create a complex flavor that cannot be reproduced at home, **ramen** restaurants make their soups from a combination of chicken and pork bones, dried bonito, dried sardines and seafood. Restaurants compete fiercely to innovate in offering an abundance of **ramen** flavors and varieties. The most popular ones often attract long lines of customers.



Soba(buckwheat noodles)



Udon(wheat noodles)



Ramen



## Miso Soup and Clear Soup

味噌汁  
だし

Japanese soups can be divided into two major categories—**miso** soup and clear soup. Both are made with **dashi**, soup stock. **Miso** is mixed into the **dashi** to make **miso** soup, while clear soups use salt, soy sauce and **sake** to add flavor to the **dashi**. Most people tend to have **miso** soup with everyday meals, especially breakfast. This is closely connected to the fact that in the old days, many people made **miso** at home. **Miso** is made by adding salt and malted rice or malted barley to soybeans that have been steamed and mashed. This mixture is then fermented and allowed to mature. There's also a type of **miso** that is made entirely from soybeans, using malted soybeans instead of malted rice or malted barley. There are many other regional varieties, each with a characteristic flavor.

The all-important **dashi** soup stock can be made from **katsuobushi**, dried bonito flakes, **konbu** seaweed, kelp, or **niboshi**, a type of small dried fish. A combination kelp and bonito stock is made by first soaking a piece of **konbu** in water. You heat the water and then remove the **konbu** just before the water starts to boil. Add a handful of dried bonito shavings and remove from heat. Allow the shavings to sink, and then strain immediately. This gives you a delicious stock. **Konbu** contains glutamic acid, while bonito flakes are full of inosinic acid. The synergy of these two "umami" ingredients results in a fragrant stock full of **umami** flavor. This is by far the tastiest stock in Japan and is used for clear soups. Common ingredients in clear soups are shrimp, fish, **tofu** and seasonal vegetables. A sliver of **yuzu**, **kinome**\* or mustard adds zest to the soup and enhances the **umami** flavor. Some of the popular ingredients in **miso** soup include thinly sliced and fried **tofu**, raw **tofu**, **daikon** radish, potatoes and other seasonal vegetables. These ingredients are added to enhance the combined **umami** of **dashi** and **miso**. The key to a good Japanese soup is the care with which the **dashi** is prepared.

\***kinome** : Japanese pepper shoots



Clear soup



Ingredients for dashi stock



Miso



Miso soup



## Japanese Sake and Shochu

日本酒  
焼酎

**Sake** is a unique Japanese alcoholic beverage, boasting over one thousand years of history. It is brewed primarily from rice. **Sake** production requires sophisticated techniques to induce **koji** mold to convert starch to sugar and ferment the rice malt. **Sake** brewing developed in connection with religious rituals and official ceremonies. Varieties of **Sake** from different areas of Japan have distinct flavors due to local variation in the quality of rice and water. Water makes up 80 percent of **sake** and has the biggest effect on quality. Water from the Nada area of Hyogo Prefecture is said to be the hardest of all Japanese waters. **Sake** made from Nada water is highly valued and was shipped from Osaka to Edo (present day Tokyo) as far back as the 17th century. Since then, **sake** has come to be made with softer waters as well. One unique aspect of Japanese **sake** is that it can be enjoyed both cold and warm. Many Japanese foods such as **sashimi**, soups, **aemono**\*, stews and fried food developed as foods suitable to accompany **sake**. Japanese **sake** is most often enjoyed in a small ceramic or glass cup, but you can also enjoy it in a wine glass.

**Shochu** is a type of liquor that's brought to a high level of purity through repeated distillation. While **shochu** like this is used in cocktails, recently there has been a revival of so called "genuine **shochu**," or **shochu** that is distilled only once in order to bring out the unique flavors of its raw ingredients, such as rice, barley, sweet potatoes or buckwheat.

\***aemono** : vegetables, seaweed or fish in a dressing



Warm sake



Shochu

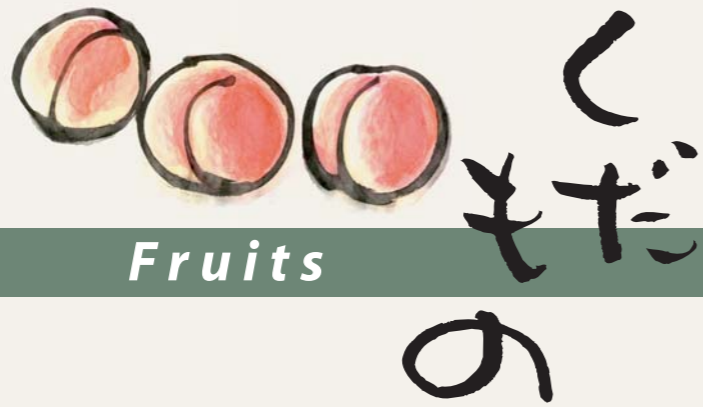
Shochu on the rocks (also served with water)



Sake in a wine glass



Cold sake



## Fruits



Dried persimmon



A wide variety of fruits are cultivated and enjoyed in Japan. Peaches and persimmons have a particularly long history. They were introduced from China way back in the 3rd century. There are two main types of persimmons: **amagaki**, or sweet persimmons, and **shibugaki**, or astringent persimmons. The astringent ones are inedible until they are dried or soaked in alcohol or hot water. Dried persimmons are very sweet and are often served with tea. Persimmons are rich in both vitamin C and carotene, which is converted to vitamin A in the body. Persimmon leaves contain antiseptic properties and are used for **kaki-no-ha** sushi, which is sushi wrapped in persimmon leaves. They can also be eaten fried, as **tempura**, or made into tea. **Nashi**, or Japanese pears, also have a long history, as do grapes. Grape cultivation began over 800 years ago in the Kamakura period. In addition to a rich variety of table grapes, many grapes are grown to make juice and wine.

The **unshu mikan**, or satsuma mandarin orange, as it's known in the West, is cultivated in regions with a relatively mild climate. Cultivation began in the mid-18th century, first as a luxury gift item.

As production increased, it became a popular winter fruit, rich in vitamin C. The cultivation of apples began in the mid-19th century in northern Japan and other regions with colder climates. Apples are widely eaten. Not only for their sweet taste but also for the benefits they offer the digestive system. These are just some of the many fragrant and delicious fruits that are cultivated in Japan, each with a different historical background. Thanks to continuous fruit development over many years, Japan has some of the highest quality fruits in the world.



日本茶  
和菓子

## Japanese Green Tea & Sweets



Sencha and fresh sweets

Tea was first introduced to Japan from China in the form of compressed or brick tea. By the 12th century the drinking of **matcha**, a powdered tea brewed in hot water, became popular among Buddhist priests and the aristocracy, giving rise to the highly aesthetic and philosophical tea ceremony: the way of tea. The mid-18th century saw the development of **sencha**, a loose tea made by steaming, rolling and drying tea leaves. Ever since then **sencha** has been at the heart of Japanese green tea.

Japanese tea refers to **sencha** and other forms of green tea in which the leaves are heat-treated before drying to prevent oxidation and fermentation. There are various types of green tea, depending on the production process, which part of the tea leaf is used and the production area. Some are best drunk after meals, while others go very well



Dorayaki

with sweets. Green tea is rich in vitamin C and is believed to have other health benefits that include regulating blood cholesterol and preventing hypertension.

The development of **wagashi**, Japanese sweets, went hand in hand with the cultivation of tea in Japan. Just as there are different types of Japanese tea, Japanese sweets can be classified into three categories according to moisture content: fresh sweets, semi-moist sweets and dry sweets. From plain rice crackers to delicately colored sweets with seasonal design motifs, the variety is endless. Many sweets are associated with seasonal events and annual customs. Most traditional Japanese sweets are made from non-animal products (apart from eggs) such as **azuki** beans, sweet Japanese beans and rice flour. Traditional Japanese sweets are thus free of fat and tend to have fewer calories than Western sweets, such as pies or chocolate, which are often rich in butter and cream.



Matcha

Fresh sweets





**MAFF**

Ministry of Agriculture,  
Forestry and Fisheries

農林水産省

<http://www.maff.go.jp/e/foj/>