



# FRIENDSHIP AND SHABU-SHABU

Simple yet luxurious, shabu-shabu is communal dining at its finest.

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**B**UBBLING merrily away in a cast iron pot is a delicately sweet-and-savory kelp-based *dashi* (broth), into which is dipped a variety of vegetables and paper-thin cuts of beef.

Held between wooden chopsticks, the meat is briefly drawn back and forth through the broth with a “shabu-shabu (swish-swish),” the Japanese onomatopoeic equivalent of which is the name of this simple and delectable hot-pot.

“Shabu-shabu” is one of Japan’s most popular dishes whose most common English translation, “Japanese hot-pot,” seems woefully inadequate – rather like calling “sushi,” “raw fish.”

On the one hand, that’s because of a key ingredient, while on the other hand, it’s down to an important element of “shabu-shabu” culture.

The ingredients – rib-eye beef, *harusame* cellophane noodles, tofu, Japanese leeks, Chinese cabbage and other vegetables, are simple enough, so too the broth in which they are cooked, which is made from nothing more than *kombu* kelp and water.

Shabu-shabu’s main feature can be found in its dipping sauce, which is painstakingly made from ground sesame and combinations of various other ingredients,

which differ from restaurant to restaurant.

“The secret is definitely in the sauce,” says Ichiro Miyake, President of Restaurant Eiraku-cho Suehiro Honten Co. (Suehiro) in Osaka, which is widely known as the originator of shabu-shabu.

“As sesame has a high oil content it can quickly oxidize and the aroma, and taste of the *goma-dare* dipping sauce can deteriorate quickly. That’s why we make a new batch every day. It takes us 10 hours just to grind all the sesame seeds,” Miyake explains, adding that among other ingredients traditionally added to the sauce are rice vinegar and soy sauce, which add to shabu-shabu’s renown as a healthy repast.

Shabu-shabu is a relatively recent addition to Japanese cuisine. It has its roots in a hot-pot from Inner Mongolia known as *Xiao Wei Yang* that was adapted at a Kyoto eatery named Junidanya in the early part of the twentieth century by using fish instead of lamb as the key ingredient.

That dish kicked off a hot-pot culture in the Kansai region – which includes Osaka, Kyoto, Nara and Kobe – known as *mizutaki-nabe*, literally “cooked in water hot-pot.”

Shabu-shabu, too, came about from this boom

Fresh broth is added to the pot ready for heating.



At Suehiro, a variety of fresh vegetables, tofu and *harusame* are prepared for cooking alongside the beef.



The briefly cooked meat is plunged into the restaurant's distinctive *goma-dare* sauce.



when Miyake's grandfather was conjuring up innovative ways to use the high-grade beef that formed the cornerstone of the menu at Suehiro, which in those days was a popular steak house.

"He already had the concept for the dish - a mizutaki hotpot that incorporated vegetables, thin slices of Matsuzaka wagyu beef and a sesame sauce, but couldn't come up with a name," Miyake explains.

"One day he saw one of the staff washing hand towels in a large bowl and it reminded him of the beef being drawn through the broth. He was struck by the sound it made. We Osakans love onomatopoeic words and he decided this sounded like 'shabu-shabu.'"

When Miyake's grandfather subsequently explained to his staff what the dish would be called, he was met with incredulous stares and unabashed giggling, he adds.

Yet, within a relatively short time, a long line of curious customers could be seen snaking its way from the entrance of the restaurant, which was established in 1910 and is located close to Osaka Station. One of the restaurant's biggest fans was Japanese woodblock artist Shiko Munakata (1903-1975).

"Rumor quickly spread about this new dish

with a weird name," Miyake says, adding that shabu-shabu was first put on the menu at Suehiro in 1952, the same year Munakata was honored with a prize of excellence at an international print exhibition in Switzerland.

One of the endearing features of the hot-pot culture in Japan in general and shabu-shabu in particular is that it is traditionally cooked in one pot, and the contents shared by those who have gathered to dine - whether that be a group of friends, work colleagues or family members.

And as the meal progresses, relations deepen among those who are gathered, much as the flavors of the ingredients combined with the evaporation of the dashi produce a denser, more pungent broth.

"Since olden times, this has been a feature of hot-pot culture in Japan, whether it be eaten at a restaurant or in the home," Miyake explains, adding that the beef, which is chilled to facilitate ease of slicing, should be left to soften before any shabu-shabu-ing is performed, allowing valuable time to chat and drink. "This hot-pot culture serves an important function, permitting the deepening of friendships and understanding." 