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THE CHARM OF WASHOKU AND
ITS GLOBAL SPREAD

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On the cover:
A *hassun* course seasonal
dish for summer

THEME FOR **JUNE**:

**THE CHARM OF WASHOKU
AND ITS GLOBAL SPREAD**

The term “*washoku*” refers to the traditional food culture of the Japanese people. According to Fushiki Toru, Chairperson of the Washoku Association of Japan (see Interview pp. 6-9), *washoku* can be said to have four characteristics: the use of a rich variety of ingredients and a respect for their inherent flavors; meals are healthy and nutritionally balanced; *washoku* expresses the beauty of nature and the changing seasons; and it has an intimate relationship with annual celebrations such as the New Year. In this month’s issue, we look at *washoku* from a variety of angles with a focus on ways in which Japanese cuisine is now being shared and enjoyed overseas.

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ON THE COVER

A *hassun* course seasonal dish for summer

Photo: ©KYOTO KITCHO

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Japanese names in this publication are written in Japanese order: family name first, personal name last.

Example of an *otsukuri* (sashimi) dish
Photo: ©Ginza Kojyu



Ginza Kojyu master Okuda Toru (right) and Wang Junpeng
Photo: Kato Kumazo



The Charm of *Washoku* and Its Global Spread



Mealtime at Mayuko's Little Kitchen
Photo: Courtesy of Okada Mayuko



Hoba Miso with grilled beef is a specialty of the Hida region
Photo: Courtesy of Hida Meat Agricultural Cooperatives

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he term “*washoku*” refers to the traditional food culture of the Japanese people. According to Fushiki Toru, Chairperson of the Washoku Association of Japan (see Interview pp. 6-9), *washoku* can be said to have four characteristics: the use of a rich variety of ingredients and a respect for their inherent flavors; meals are healthy and nutritionally balanced; *washoku* expresses the beauty of nature and the changing seasons; and it has an intimate relationship with annual celebrations such as the New Year. In this month’s issue, we look at *washoku* from a variety of angles with a focus on ways in which Japanese cuisine is now being shared and enjoyed overseas.



The Appeal of *Washoku* Created by *Umami*



Fushiki Toru, Chairperson of the Washoku Association of Japan and Vice President of Koshien University
Photo: Sawaji Osamu

WE spoke with Fushiki Toru, Chairperson of the Washoku Association of Japan and Vice President of Koshien University, about the characteristics of *washoku* (traditional Japanese meals) and the *umami* that forms the foundation of its flavors.

In 2013, “Washoku, traditional dietary cultures of the Japanese,” was inscribed on UNESCO’s Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. What exactly is the “washoku” that made it onto this list?

The “washoku” that was inscribed as an Intangible Cultural Heritage does not represent specific dishes like sushi or tempura; it refers to the traditional dietary cultures that have been cultivated by the Japanese over many years. Now that prompts the question, what *are* those traditional dietary cultures of the Japanese? They can be described as having four characteristics. The first is using a rich variety of ingredients and showing respect for their inherent flavors. With its abundance of nature, Japan features a diverse range of ingredients. Each region has its own specialties, and the inherent flavors of those ingredients have always been utilized to produce a variety of regional cuisines across Japan. The second is the healthy variety of dishes with an excellent nutritional balance. The traditional style

of a washoku meal, known as *ichiju sansai* (one soup and three dishes)¹, has an excellent nutritional balance. The third characteristic is how washoku expresses the beauty of nature and the changing seasons. By using seasonal ingredients and garnishing dishes with flowers and leaves associated with each season, one can taste a sense of each season. The fourth trait is washoku’s intimate relationship with annual celebrations such as New Year. At New Year and many other annual events, an array of dishes are prepared in hopes of a bountiful harvest and good health.

Something that plays an important role in supporting this dietary culture is *dashi* (soup stock). Dashi is used not only in traditional Japanese cuisine but in dishes such as curry and ramen noodles. Dashi contains *umami* (see later in this article). Japanese dashi is mainly made from *konbu* (dried kelp), *katsuobushi* (skipjack tuna that has been dried, fermented and smoked), and *niboshi* (dried small fish such as sardines). There are also various forms of dashi overseas, such as French *bouillon* broth and Chinese *gao tang* stock created by simmering meats, vegetables and various ingredients for an extended time. The umami produced from dashi elevates the taste of dishes around the world.



Wakatakeni, bamboo shoots simmered in *dashi* and seasonings such as soy sauce and sake
Photo: shige hattori / PIXTA



Katsubushi, skipjack tuna that has been dried, fermented and smoked, and is shaved to make *dashi* stock
Photo: I/PIXTA

What kinds of flavors are produced by traditional Japanese cuisine utilizing dashi?

For many years I have been running culinary research sessions with chefs of Kyoto's fine dining establishments called *ryotei* which serve traditional Japanese dishes. The sense I get from these chefs after listening to them talk and tasting their food is how they aspire to create "unembellished flavors." By unembellished, I mean flavors that draw on the inherent flavors of each ingredient while achieving comfortable and harmonious flavors. You could describe them as mellow flavors without showiness or fancifulness. To bring out these flavors, traditional Japanese cuisine emphasizes the preparation of the ingredients. To preserve their inherent flavors, the ingredients are washed, sometimes boiled in *sake* (rice wine), and stripped of any flavors



Katsubushi shavings are added to a *dashi* made from *konbu* (kelp) to create *awase dashi* stock
Photo: shige hattori / PIXTA

that could disturb the harmony of the dish in the slightest way. During cooking, any scum that rises to the surface and which would produce unpleasant flavors is also thoroughly removed. Then in the final step of cooking, dashi is used to bring all of the flavors into harmony.

I am very fond of dishes that let one taste the umami of the dashi. One such example is *wakatakeni*. *Wakatakeni* is a dish of bamboo shoots simmered in dashi and seasonings



A pot of *yudofu*—tofu simmered with a strip of *konbu* (kelp)
Photo: shige hattori / PIXTA

such as soy sauce and sake. You enjoy not only the umami flavors, but the texture of the bamboo shoots. As bamboo shoots are an ingredient that represents spring, when we enjoy *wakatakeni*, we can experience spring.

I've heard that the umami produced from dashi was discovered in Japan. Can you explain some more about umami?

Umami was discovered in 1908 by Dr. Ikeda Kikunae (1864-1936), a professor at Tokyo Imperial University (now the University of Tokyo). It is said that the source for this discovery is *yudofu* (boiled tofu), which is a standard winter dish in Japan. *Yudofu* is a simple dish that is eaten after



Udon noodles
Photo: midori_chan / PIXTA

heating tofu in hot water containing konbu. One day, when Dr. Ikeda was eating yudofu, he sensed a flavor that was neither sweet nor salty, and wondered what it was. Believing it to be a flavor produced by the konbu, Dr. Ikeda purchased a large amount, and boiled it in hot water to create a konbu dashi broth. Then, he concentrated the broth to extract its ingredients. He subsequently discovered that the ingredient was monosodium glutamate (hereinafter, glutamic acid). Believing that the flavor was the fifth flavor following the four basic flavors of sweet, salty, bitter and sour that humans had known about since ancient times, he named it “umami.” Soon after, another Japanese scientist discovered that the inosinic acid contained in katsuobushi and niboshi was also an umami ingredient. While glutamic acid is found in cheese, tomato and potatoes and other foods, and inosinic acid can be found in things like pork and beef, their concentrations are small compared with the likes of konbu, katsuobushi and niboshi.

Umami underpins the flavors in a dish and makes them taste better. However, unlike sweet and salty, since umami lacks a clearly defined taste, it is hard to describe its flavor in words. The way to enable umami to be tasted clearly is to combine a dashi made from konbu and a dashi made from katsuobushi. This *awase dashi* boosts the umami flavor many times over by combining the glutamic acid and inosinic acid together. I create opportunities to try this *awase dashi* at university lectures and washoku-related events, and everyone, from adults to children, are surprised by how delicious it is.

Why are there so many dishes that utilize umami in Japan?

Two of the important elements that determine the deliciousness of a food are fat and sugar. But due to the

influences of Buddhist precepts, many Japanese did not eat meat until the Meiji period (1868–1912). That’s why little of the fat contained in meat was consumed. Until the Meiji period sugar was also considered a luxury good, and the general population had few opportunities to taste it. Under these dietary lifestyles that for the most part lacked fat and sugar, the Japanese found umami as a way to make foods taste better. Fortunately, as a nation surrounded by the sea on all sides, Japan had access to rich marine resources including konbu and skipjack tuna. In addition to the rice and vegetables cultivated in the fields, a wide range of mushrooms and wild vegetables were also collected from the mountain areas. The Japanese have constantly innovated to create umami from these various ingredients. For example, fermented foods such as *miso* and soy sauce which are made from soybeans and other ingredients are packed full of umami. By lacking opportunities to eat meat and sugar, Japan went in the other direction, leading to diversity in ingredients and the widespread development of dashi.

Although it depends on the individual, many people born and raised in Japan tend to like dishes with the umami of dashi made from konbu and katsuobushi. About twenty years ago I spent about a month in the United States for research purposes. At the time, there were almost no Japanese restaurants in the small cities I visited in the central and southern areas of the country. That’s why I always yearned to eat Japanese food during my stay. Then, when the day came to return to Japan from the US, I arrived at an airport in Seattle on the West Coast thinking that I only had to be a little more patient before I could eat Japanese food again, but to my surprise, there was a restaurant serving *udon* noodles⁴¹. With the aroma of the katsuobushi dashi used in the *tsuyu* (soup) of *udon* dishes drifting in



Zaru-soba (chilled buckwheat noodles) and tsuyu dipping sauce
Photo: Chirizu / PIXTA

the air, I noticed many Japanese people eating udon there and joined them without hesitation. The udon was really delicious, and I was left very satisfied. At the time, I conjectured that dashi has a deliciousness that makes people addicted to it. Later, when my research group conducted tests using mice, we learned that the mice exhibited a strong desire for dashi, not to the same degree as fat, but as much as that for sugar.

Fats and sugars serve as a source of energy for us and they are essential for life support. As humans we instinctively desire them, so it is extremely difficult to stop consuming them. But since fats and sugars are high in calories, excessive intake can have an adverse impact on health. Dashi, on the other hand, despite being extremely low in calories, satisfies our appetite and leaves us feeling content much like fat and sugar does. In other words, utilizing dashi, we can curb intake of fats and sugars and create dishes that are not only low in calories, but which are



Takikomi gohan, white rice steamed with a variety of ingredients, here with *matsutake* mushrooms
Photo: Nishihama / PIXTA

also very satisfying. Japanese and foreigners alike have the impression that “Japanese dishes are healthy and delicious,” and that is precisely the case.

Once the COVID-19 pandemic subsides, which kinds of Japanese cuisine do you hope that foreign visitors to Japan will enjoy?

I hope that in addition to popular genres of Japanese food like sushi and ramen, that they will try dishes that enable them to fully savor the deliciousness of umami, qualities that are not always available to the same degree outside Japan. One example is a soup-based dish known as



Oden, a winter dish of various ingredients slowly simmered in a *tsuyu* stock
Photo: Nakai Hiroyuki/ PIXTA

osuimono (clear soup). It is a simple dish with a soup made of soy sauce and salt added to dashi, with ingredients such as vegetables and *shiitake* mushrooms, but it allows one to experience the umami of dashi in powerful terms. I would also recommend *soba* (buckwheat noodles)ⁱⁱⁱ and udon. Both are popular foods with the Japanese, and there are many different restaurants serving them across Japan. As with udon, the *tsuyu* for *soba* is also primarily made from dashi and soy sauce.

Along with the *wakatakeni* I mentioned earlier, *takikomi gohan* is another big favorite of mine and something I hope visitors try. This is a dish in which white rice is steamed together with vegetables, *shiitake* mushrooms, meat, fish or other ingredients, with dashi and seasonings such as soy sauce added during the process. *Takikomi gohan* can be enjoyed at restaurants serving traditional Japanese dishes as well as at *izakaya* dining bars. A delicious option during winter is *oden*, a dish in which various ingredients such as *daikon* radish and eggs are slowly simmered in a *tsuyu* made from a mixture of dashi and seasonings such as soy sauce and sake.

Japanese cuisine may include some dishes that foreign visitors are not accustomed to eating, but I encourage everyone to try new things with an open mind. I hope diners will not only enjoy the flavors, but also the beautiful presentation and sense of seasonality in the dishes. 🍴

Interview by SAWAJI OSAMU

i See *Highlighting Japan* January 2021: Food and Dishware as Landscapes https://www.gov-online.go.jp/eng/publicity/book/hlj/html/202101/202101_02_en.html
ii *Udon* is a white noodle generally made by kneading wheat flour with salt and water, and is usually eaten in a *tsuyu* (soup). Although wheat flour is also a raw ingredient in ramen noodles, it is made by adding an alkaline *kansui* (lye water) solution.
iii *Soba* noodles are made from buckwheat flour, giving them a distinctive brownish color. *Soba* is enjoyed in two main ways, either in a bowl containing a hot soup or as *zaru-soba*, where the *soba* noodles are chilled, and served on a *zaru* (tray) with a *tsuyu* dipping sauce.

Carrying on 1,200 Years of Japanese Culinary Tradition

Shijo Takahiko carves the fish in the Culinary Knife Ceremony



The Shijo family of court nobility lineage has been passing down Japanese culinary traditions originating in the Imperial court for some 1,200 years.

YANAGISAWA MIHO

WHEN speaking about the origins of traditional Japanese cuisine, there are two important figures



Shijo Takahiko prepares to carve a fish in the Culinary Knife Ceremony

considered to be its “founders.” The first is Iwakamutsukari no Mikoto, who is believed to have made *namasu* (a dish of finely chopped fish that is the forerunner to modern *sashimi*) by going into the sea to catch skipjack tuna and clams for the Emperor Keiko, who assumed the throne in the mid-first century. The other is Fujiwara no Yamakage (hereinafter, Lord Yamakage), also called Shijo Chunagon. Lord Yamakage was a noble who served the 58th Emperor Koko¹, who acceded to the throne in the late ninth century. At the order of Emperor Koko, who had a deep knowledge of cooking, Lord Yamakage is said to have devised the basic cooking methods, manners and rituals associated with food served in the imperial court through a process of trial and error.

“During the Heian period (late eighth century to late twelfth century) when court culture flourished, a great many rituals came to be performed in the imperial court. Among them were rituals in which food was served. These practices carried the meaning of ‘offering meals to the gods.’ The cuisine that developed

in the imperial court and noble society around this time is one of the origins of the traditional Japanese cuisine we know today,” says Shijo Takahiko.

Shijo is the 41st head of the Shijo family descended from Lord Yamakage. Over generations spanning some 1,200 years, the Shijo family has passed down the culinary traditions of the imperial court and noble society.

One of these is a culinary practice known as *shiki-san-kon* (“three formal rounds”) developed during the Heian period. Originally, *shiki-san-kon* was a practice observed when a court noble would hold a banquet, in which appetizers to be served with drinks would be served to guests with sake in three parts, the *shokon* (first round), *nikon* (second round) and *sankon* (third round). The guests would only imitate eating these appetizers served to them; they were not actually eaten. It is said that the Shijo family would serve *umeboshi* (pickled plum), *surume* (dried squid) or *kurage* (jellyfish), and *awabinoshi* (dried abalone) for the first round, *namasu* of *funa*



The *shokon* (first round) of the *shiki-san-kon* (three formal rounds) featuring *umeboshi* (pickled plum, bottom left), *kurage* (jellyfish, bottom right) and *awabinoshi* (dried abalone)



The *nikon* (second round), a *namasu* (a dish of finely chopped fish) of *funa* (crucian carp) with a saucer of vinegar



The *sankon* (third round), a dish of carp *sashimi*, with saucers of salt and vinegar

(crucian carp) for the second round, and carp *sashimi* for the third round. Today, in some forms of traditional Japanese wedding ceremonies, a ceremony known as *san-san-kudo* (three-time exchange of nuptial cups) where the bride and groom each drink sake from three cups is observed, and this is modeled after *shiki-san-kon*.

The Culinary Knife Ceremony of the Shijo-Tsukasaⁱⁱ family was handed down from Lord Yamakage to the Shijo family, a family of Lord Yamakage. Emperor Koko, who was troubled by the fact that cooking for humans to live required taking the lives of other living things, ordered Lord Yamakage to arrange this ceremony as a memorial service for living creatures. Ingredients used in the ceremonial carving include three species of bird—*tsuru* (crane), *kari* (wild goose) and *kiji* (pheasant)—and fish such as *koi* (carp) and *tai* (sea bream)ⁱⁱⁱ.

Even today, Shijo performs this ceremony, mainly at shrines. In 1996, he performed in front of His Majesty the Emperor and Her Majesty the Empress of the time. Wearing formal court attire and moving in a stately fashion, Shijo proceeds to carve up the fish and bird using a cooking knife and *manabashi* (long chopsticks used in the preparation of fish or bird). At this time, the materials being handled must never be touched with the bare hands. Shijo says, “This is a ritual ceremony. The bird or fish is not being carved up to be eaten by people; the knife moves in concert with prayer as an offering to the gods. The prayer is for the wellbeing of all living creatures and longevity of humankind. The birds and fish that have been carved up while praying in this way are then arranged and offered up in the shape of the characters of, for example, 長久 (*chokyu*), which represents lasting peace. Also, due to widespread disease at the time, it was very important not to touch the ingredients from a hygiene perspective. I believe Lord Yamakage was aware of this when he incorporated it into the ritual.”

The handling of the tools used during the ceremony and how to arrange the carved up foods on the cutting board have been passed down through generations of the Shijo family.

Shijo, whose ancestors were pioneers of Japanese cuisine

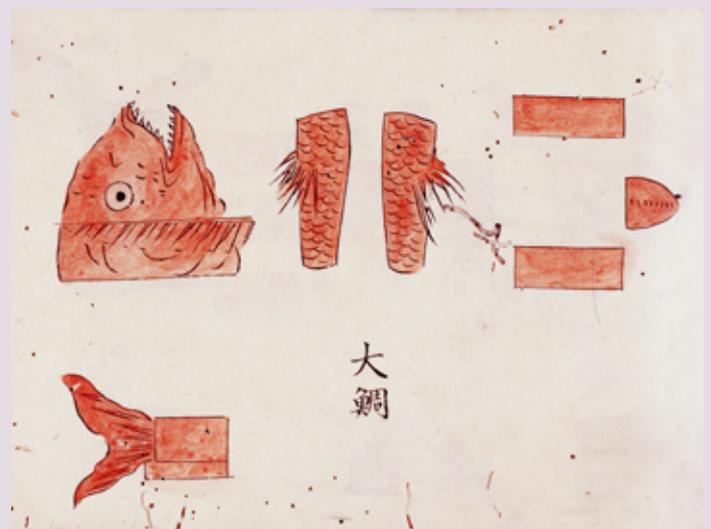
and who is involved in researching and passing down Japanese food culture, has noticed a lack of interest in traditional Japanese cuisine among the Japanese, particularly younger generations. To address this, he established the Shijo-Tsukasa Food Culture Association. The association focuses on activities such as performing the Culinary Knife Ceremony at various events, and teaching the history and traditions of Japanese cuisine at schools and cooking classes.

Shijo does not believe that only tradition and formality should be respected, because Japanese cuisine itself has continually evolved in the incorporation of new styles. But he does believe there are aspects to Japanese cuisine that “must be preserved.” He is determined to continue his involvement in the culinary world to pass on a 1,200-year tradition to future generations. ■

i The emperor reigned from 884 to 887. According to a collection of essays titled *Tsurezuregusa*, he continued to cook for himself even after ascending to the throne.

ii As the head family (*tsukasa*) of the Japanese culinary tradition, the Shijo family is also known as the “Shijo Tsukasa.”

iii Live fish are not used.



A page from the book that the Shijo family has passed down through the generations showing how to arrange the carved up foods on the carving board

Grilled salted sweetfish, with bamboo leaves representing a river



A hassun course seasonal dish for summer



Himuro Zen, a summer course dish served on a tray of ice

A summer fruit dish

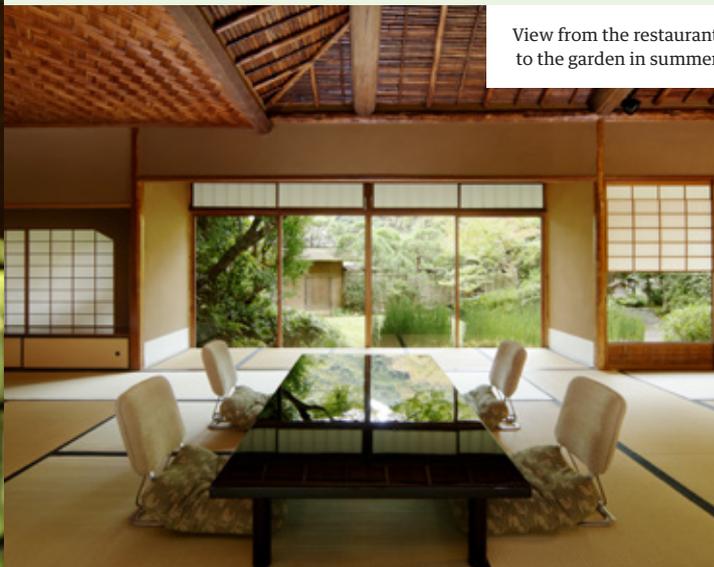


JAPANESE CUISINE SYNCHRONIZED WITH THE SEASONS

Japanese people value food that expresses a sense of the season because they are keenly aware of Japan's four distinct seasons. In particular, there are a number of long-established restaurants in Kyoto where people can enjoy such seasonal Japanese cuisine and keenly perceive the changes of the season. We introduce a famous Kyoto restaurant that seeks to express the flavors of each season with each dish.

FUJITA MAO

View from the restaurant to the garden in summer





Tokuoka Kunio, executive chef of Kyoto Kitcho Co., Ltd.

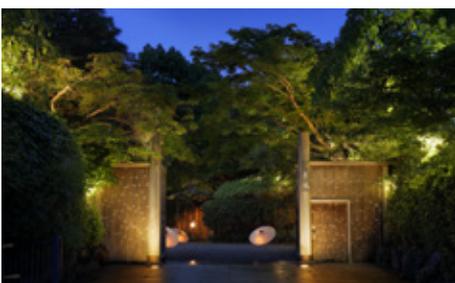
ARASHIYAMA is a picturesque district of Kyoto where the Togetsukyo bridge over the Katsura Riverⁱ provides stunning views of the mountain slopes' cherry blossoms in spring, deep greenery in summer, fall colors in autumn, and snowy scenes in winter. Yuki Teiichi (1901-1997), a master of Japanese cuisine, purchased a private villa in this district in 1948 and turned it into a restaurant—the now world-famous Kyoto Kitcho.

Yuki aimed to integrate the spirit of the traditional Japanese tea ceremony, which values seasonal senses, with Japanese cuisine, and is known for his lifelong pursuit of the ideal form of Japanese cuisine, including through the appropriate use of tableware and *shitsurai* (expressing hospitality through space and room decoration). Yuki received the Japanese government's Medal of Honor with Purple Ribbon and Person of Cultural Merit award for his achievements in turning Japanese cuisine into an art form, respecting its long history and traditions.

Yuki's grandson, Tokuoka Kunio, is the executive chef of Kyoto Kitcho Co., Ltd.

"Similar to *waka*ⁱⁱ poets, who compare the various natural phenomena of the four seasons to human emotions, chefs of

The entrance to Kyoto Kitcho

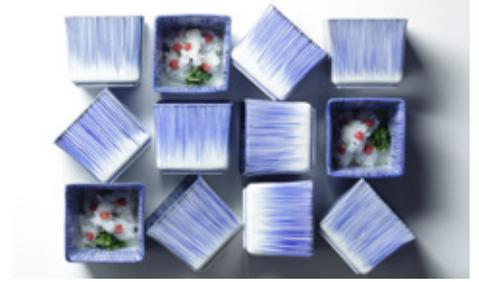


Japanese cuisine express the nuances of the seasons in each individual dish," says Tokuoka. "For example, if we are using *ayu* sweetfish, a river fish caught throughout summer, then I would serve the fish in a bamboo basket with bamboo leaves placed in such a way as to suggest the flow of the river and to make the fish appear as if they were swimming. Customers are thus invited to enjoy the unique flavors of the sweetfish while getting a sense of the flow of the river in which they swim."

Kyoto Kitcho offers a spectacular and varied course menu based on the traditional *cha-kaiseki* meal, which originated in the tea ceremony. There are around ten courses including the *mukozuke* (a vinegary dish of sliced *sashimi* [raw fish]), *owan* (soup), two kinds of *tsukuri* (sashimi), *hashiyasume* (palate-refreshing side dish), *hassun* (assorted appetizers), *yakimono* (grilled ingredients), *takiawase* (assorted simmered ingredients), *gohan* (rice), *kudamono* (fruit), and *kashi* (Japanese sweets).ⁱⁱⁱ From the mukozuke course, the very first dish, Kyoto Kitcho expresses a sense of the season. In the summer season, for example, the mukozuke might be *Himuro Zen*, using ice in the presentation of the food, while the *hassun* course, served in the middle of the meal, might feature a colorful summer flower or leave a space between the food on the plate, as though a breeze were passing through. In such ways, Tokuoka expresses the four seasons with each dish he presents while making use of the beauty of the ingredients themselves and their seasonal flavors.

The tableware Tokuoka selects for each dish adds another seasonal element to the dining experience. Yuki was known as a collector of tea ceremony tools and tableware^{iv}, and some items among the collection have been designated as important cultural properties by the Japanese government. Tokuoka hand-picks dishes from this collection based on the season or purpose of the meal and serves the food while giving his heart to the needs of each customer.

Tokuoka is also dedicated to the



Parboiled *hamo* sea eel served in small dishes with a summer-themed pattern

spatial presentation of the dining area, picking out hanging scrolls and other decorations related to the seasons or yearly events. This is an expression of the ethos he inherited from his grandfather that Japanese cuisine is more than just ingredients or cooking and requires a comprehensive presentation just like the tea ceremony, and could be said to be a practice that attempts to elevate Japanese cuisine to the level of art.

Kyoto Kitcho offers the profound pleasure of this kind of Japanese cuisine, and the restaurant's reputation is reflected in its international recognition, including the Michelin Guide's three-star rating in 2021. 

Note: Kyoto Kitcho course meals and tableware vary according to the season and customer.

- i Togetsukyo is a 155-meter-long bridge that crosses the Katsura River, which flows from Sagano to Arashiyama. The bridge is a border for the Katsura River, with waters upstream called the Oi River.
- ii See *Highlighting Japan*, October 2020 edition (The Colors of Fall Captured in *Waka* Poetry) https://www.gov-online.go.jp/eng/publicity/book/hlj/html/202010/202010_02_en.html
- iii At Kyoto Kitcho, dishes are served in the following order: *mukozuke*, *owan*, *tsukuri*. Traditional *hassun* is a dish consisting of a variety of small portions of food served on a plate measuring approximately 24 cm square ("*has*" means 8; "*sun*" is an old Japanese unit of length). *Takiawase* is a dish consisting of two or more kinds of simmered dishes served in the same bowl.
- iv Tea ceremony tools and tableware collected by Yuki Teiichi are stored and exhibited at the Yuki Museum of Art in Osaka <http://www.yuki-museum.or.jp>

Soup bowls inlaid with cherry blossom patterns made of mother-of-pearl





A Chinese Chef Training at a Japanese Restaurant

Wang Junpeng from China is studying Japanese cuisine at a prestigious restaurant in Ginza, Tokyo.

SATO KUMIKO



Wang at work in the kitchen
Photo: Kato Kumazo

IN 2013, “*washoku*” was inscribed on UNESCO’s Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Following this, the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries of the Japanese government announced the “Human Resource Development Program to Spread Japanese Food Culture Overseas,” a culinary training program launched in 2014 through which it has been supporting foreign chefs studying Japanese cuisine.

Chinese Wang Junpeng who is training at Ginza Kojyu, a highly regarded¹ and prestigious Japanese restaurant in Tokyo, is also one of the trainees in this human resource development program. Wang is presently in his third year of training. Standing in a tense kitchen together with more than ten Japanese who aspire to become first-class chefs, they are steadily becoming more skilled under the guidance of their master, Okuda Toru, a man who allows no compromise.

Wang explains, “The bossⁱⁱ is tough, but if you try to learn, he responds in kind. The trainees, working together, also teach each other things we don’t understand, working hard to improve each other. The Kojyu kitchen is an optimal learning environment.”

When Wang was staying in Japan as a language student, he



The counter at Ginza Kojyu
Photo: ©Ginza Kojyu



A dish featuring sweetfish
Photo: ©Ginza Kojyu



Daggertooth pike conger (a kind of eel) and *somen* noodles in soup served in a bowl with a hydrangea pattern (see lid upper left)
Photo: ©Ginza Kojyu



Example of an *otsukuri* (sashimi) dish
Photo: ©Ginza Kojyu

was invited by a Chinese friend attending a Japanese cuisine vocational school to experience it, and he was impressed by the Japanese cuisine he encountered there. “Japanese food is healthy, simple and very delicious, but when I saw how it was made, I was surprised at how carefully and delicately everything was done, from the extraction of broth from bonito and kelp to the processing of ingredients such as fish,” says Wang. “I really want to learn about Japanese cuisine,” so he decided to enroll in the vocational school.

At school, he learned how to handle and care for kitchen knives, of which a different type is used depending on the ingredients, and the basic technique for peeling radish and other ingredients thinly without breaking the peel, which is known as “*katsura* peeling.” At the end of the three years, Wang had achieved excellent grades and was accepted to undergo training at Ginza Kojyu, which had been his long-cherished wish.

At Ginza Kojyu, students learn not only the cooking techniques of Japanese cuisine such as boiled and flame-broiled foods, but often also acquire knowledge about Japanese tea and sake as well as approaches to customer service. In addition, Japanese cuisine is characterized by the use of “seasonal” ingredients that are only available or said to be the most delicious at certain times of year, making you feel the season with your five senses, through colors and aromas. As such, it is difficult to learn because you cannot cook the same dish for a full twelve months, all year around. However, Wang believes that this is a very important part of the spirit of Japanese cuisine.

Wang says, “I think that a heart of hospitality that wants customers to enjoy the season lies at the root of Japanese cuisine. For example, even at Kojyu, we have something called ‘*utsuwa dashi*’ where we change the tableware every month, for example using bowls with a hydrangea pattern during the season now.” Since enrolling in his vocational school classes, Wang has also studied Japanese flower arrangement and calligraphy. Even now, on holidays, he visits shops specializing in Japanese tableware and cultivates his ability to appreciate it.

After completing his five-year training period, Wang hopes to eventually open his own restaurant in Shanghai. He says, “With that restaurant, I don’t just want to focus on the food, but I also want to take care with everything else such as furnishings and implements. I want to introduce Japanese cuisine along with the Japanese culture I have learned.” Speaking of his dream, he comments, “Beyond that, I want to create dishes unique to Shanghai and convey techniques and ways of thinking in Japanese cuisine to China.”

Not limited to Japanese cuisine, any food culture that has inherited the wisdom of people in the past and has been nurtured by a long history make up a human legacy that transcends nationality. The day will come when Wang, a man from China that is home to one of the world’s greatest food cultures, will create dishes that are unique to him, based on his experience in Japan. **■**

i Obtained two Michelin stars in 2022
ii Referring to Okuda



Shizuka Anderson (left) and Ellie Fox (right) hold strings of *shimi-dofu* (freeze-dried tofu) in Chino City, Nagano Prefecture
Photo: Courtesy of Shizuka Anderson

THE Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF) of the Japanese government is implementing the “EAT! MEET! JAPAN” project (<https://eatmeetjapan.co>) in order to foster an environment in which visitors from other countries have the opportunity to partake in a wide range of food experiences during their stay in Japan and experience Japanese food again once they have returned home. A key element of the initiative is disseminating information to other countries. The project delivers various food experiences in English through social media, including eating Japanese food as well as cooking and harvesting. Four EAT! MEET! JAPAN Ambassadors (hereinafter, EMJ Ambassadors) play a key role in this initiative. Shizuka Anderson from Edmonton, Canada is one of them.

Anderson came to Japan, her mother’s home country, at the age of 18 to study at Sophia University in Tokyo. Her career in the entertainment industry began when she was chosen to host a children’s television program while still in college. Since then, she has worked in a variety of media, including television, radio, and film, as a model, actor, singer, and reporter. Including in her role as an EMJ Ambassador since 2021, Anderson has been expanding the scope of her work in the past few years to reporting on Japanese food, primarily on online video sharing platforms.

Anderson introduces a wide variety of cuisines, ranging from typical Japanese food such as sushi and tempura, to regional dishes from all over the country. One of the online channels where Anderson broadcasts her reports is “Japan by Food,” where she demonstrates her gift for expressing the qualities and appeal of the various Japanese dishes with expertise and precision. This may well be why so many people have commented on the videos, “I can’t wait to visit Japan and try it for myself!”

An Ambassador for Japanese Food

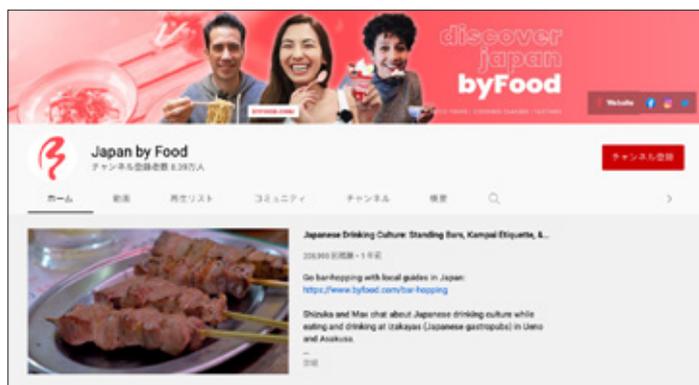
Shizuka Anderson, an “EAT! MEET! JAPAN Ambassador” from Canada, has been promoting the appeal of Japanese cuisine around the world, mainly through online video sharing platforms.

SAWAJI OSAMU

“I don’t think ahead about what I’m going to say when I’m eating. My approach is to communicate honestly and clearly about how I felt when I ate the dish,” says Anderson. “Many overseas viewers have limited experience of Japanese food, so I use examples of foods they are familiar with when describing flavors and textures.”

One food that Anderson struggled to describe was *konnyaku*. Manufactured from the bulb of the konjac plant, konnyaku itself has little flavor but a distinctive texture. It is a common ingredient in Japanese dishes such as *oden* (a one-pot dish of simmered ingredients) and miso soup, but is not widely known outside of Japan. “Jiggling like jelly, but more chewy than jelly,” is how she describes its consistency.

Japan’s regional areas in particular are a veritable treasure trove of such unique ingredients and culinary delights. One such dish that made an impression on Anderson recently is *shimi-dofu*, or freeze-dried tofu. The traditional method of making shimi-dofu involves freezing and drying tofu outside in the extreme cold of winter. In February 2022, Anderson visited Chino City, Nagano Prefecture, as an EMJ Ambassador, where she enjoyed making shimi-dofu and preparing local shimi-dofu



Home page of the “Japan by Food” online channel
<https://www.youtube.com/c/JapanbyFood?app=desktop>
Image: Courtesy of Tablecross inc.CEO

Anderson (right) at a ramen establishment in Tokyo with two fellow EMJ Ambassadors, Bunnytoko (center) and Donny Kimball (left)
 Photo: Courtesy of Shizuka Anderson



dishes. While there, she was struck by the resourcefulness of Chino City locals who take advantage of the cold, dry climate during the winter months when the agricultural harvest is scarce to make shimi-dofu.

Anderson says, “A profound love for

food permeates Japan’s regions, where many processed foods and dishes created from local specialties such as vegetables, fruits, and shellfish have been handed down through the generations. The abundance of truly great food is the result of an uncompromising commitment to each individual ingredient and a rigorous devotion to traditional methods of production.”

One of Anderson’s goals now is to earn a qualification as a “beer sommelier.” While numerous varieties of beer are sold by major corporations, in recent years many areas of Japan have been producing their own craft beer.

“I’m a huge fan of Japanese beer so I want to explore how craft beers from different regions can complement Japanese cuisine,” says Anderson. “I hope to continue to share the appeal of Japan’s diverse and fascinating food culture with people around the world.”

EMJ Ambassadors continue to close the distance between Japan and the rest of the world through food. 🍷



Konnyaku
 Photo: masa/PIXTA



Home page of the “EAT! MEET! JAPAN” official site <https://eatmeetjapan.co>
 Image: Courtesy of Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF)



Anderson (left) and Leina Bambino (right) look at the local specialty iwagaki rock oysters in Maizuru City, Kyoto Prefecture, facing the Sea of Japan
 Photo: Courtesy of Shizuka Anderson



Mealtime at Mayuko's Little Kitchen



Okada Mayuko

A Japanese Home Cooking School for Overseas Visitors and Non-Japanese Residents

Okada Mayuko is the owner of Mayuko's Little Kitchen, a small cooking school in Tokyo, and she teaches Japanese home cooking to overseas visitors and residents. We'll look at what makes her school so appealing, as well as two popular recipes.

SATO KUMIKO

MAYUKO'S Little Kitchen¹, a school teaching Japanese home cooking in English, is found in a corner of a residential area next to Shinjuku Gyoen National Garden, an enormous park in central Tokyo. This cooking school was started in 2015 by owner Okada Mayuko out of a desire to have non-Japanese residents experience Japanese life and culture in a more intimate way through home cooking. Mayuko's recipes are

ordinary Japanese home cooking passed down from her mother and grandmother.

There are two basic courses. The first is a one-day lesson for visitors. The second is what Mayuko calls a "survival course," and during this course, mainly non-Japanese residents of Japan learn about how to handle unique Japanese ingredients sold at supermarkets, such as *hijiki* brown seaweed and konnyaku. She also offers online lessons, and occasionally arranges trips to experience the harvesting of vegetables and fruit with producers.

While each small class is made up of only around 6 to 7 students regardless of the program, Mayuko's Little Kitchen has been visited by close to 4,000 people since its opening, gaining the top place among cooking schools for non-Japanese people on Tripadvisor, a popular online travel platform. Mayuko has also received the Certificate of Excellence award six years in a row for offering an excellent service allowing customers to eat authentic Japanese food and understand food culture.

Mayuko says, "In Japan, we select

¹ <https://www.mayukoslittlekitchen.com>

All photos: Courtesy of Okada Mayuko

Mushroom & Salted Salmon Rice (serves 3 to 4)

Ingredients

360 ml (or 1.5 US cups) of uncooked Japanese rice
150 g of your favorite variety of mushrooms (photo shows *maitake* mushrooms)
Two fillets of raw salmon with skin (rubbed with salt) (If you cannot buy pre-salted salmon, season the salmon with 1 tsp of salt)

Seasoning:

1 tbsp each of soy sauce, sake, and mirin
2 tbsp of sesame oil
Toasted sesame seeds (or spring onion to garnish)

Recipe

Wash the rice and place in a heavy-bottomed pot.
Add the soy sauce, sake, mirin and water, and stir.
Place the salmon and mushrooms on top and heat on medium heat.
When the pot comes to a boil, turn the heat down to the lowest setting, cover with a lid, and let steam for 11 minutes. Turn off the heat, and let it sit for 10 minutes without removing the lid.
Finally, add the sesame oil. Serve topped with sesame seeds or salt to your liking.



ingredients based on the season even for home cooking, and there is a seasonal attitude towards fish, as well as vegetables. If non-Japanese people learn only this, meals in Japan will become even more enjoyable.” Speaking about the characteristics of Japanese cuisine, she says, “Japanese-style cooking draws out the natural flavor of the ingredients, and it is important not to adjust too much a recipe’s cooking temperatures, amount of seasoning, and so on.”

Mayuko introduced us to two popular recipes from her school. 📖



A cooking class

Teriyaki Chicken/Tofu (serves 2)

Ingredients

300 g chicken thigh (boneless)
or 400 g tofu
3 tbsp corn starch (or potato starch)
2 spring onion stalks (as garnish)
(For teriyaki sauce):
2 tbsp sugar
2 and 1/2 tbsp soy sauce
2 and 1/2 tbsp sake (or white wine)
2 and 1/2 tbsp mirin (or if not available, mix 2 tbsp sake with 1/2 tbsp sugar)



Recipe

Mince the spring onion finely.
Cut the chicken into bite-sized pieces (about 2 in/5 cm) and coat with corn starch.
For the tofu version, cut the tofu into bite-sized pieces, wrap gently in paper towels, and set aside.
Make the teriyaki sauce by mixing the sugar, soy sauce, sake, and mirin.
Add two tablespoons of oil to a frying pan, and heat at medium-high heat. When the oil is hot, add the chicken or tofu. Flip the chicken after about 4 or 5 minutes (or after 2 or 3 minutes for tofu). Add the mixed teriyaki sauce to the pan. Turn the heat down to low and simmer for 4 to 5 minutes (or 1 to 2 for tofu) until cooked all the way through.
Put the chicken or tofu on a plate. You can heat the remaining sauce in the pan to thicken it and drizzle the chicken or tofu with it. Finally, sprinkle with minced spring onion. Serving with white rice is recommended.

Nigiri (shaped by hand) sushi (*chutoro*, medium fatty tuna)
Photo: Nicolas Lobbستاël



Chef Okazaki prepares a dish
Photo: Nicolas Lobbستاël



A TASTE OF FINE SUSHI IN PARIS

A Paris sushi restaurant created as a collaboration between two chefs—one Japanese and one French—has earned high acclaim.

SAWAJI OSAMU



Caviar *gunkanmaki* (seaweed-wrapped) sushi
Photo: Nicolas Lobbستاël



Temaki (rolled by hand) sushi (*otoro*, fattiest tuna)
Photo: Nicolas Lobbستاël

THE number of overseas restaurants serving Japanese cuisine has increased in recent years. According to estimates by the Japanese government's Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF)ⁱ, such restaurants numbered around 24,000 in 2006, increasing to around 89,000 in 2015 and around 159,000 in 2021. Some of these overseas Japanese restaurants have even gained international acclaim. One such restaurant is L'Abygge in Paris, which in 2022 was awarded two stars by the world-renowned restaurant guidebook, the Michelin Guide.

L'Abygge is a sushi restaurant that opened in 2018 in the Pavillon Ledoyen, a historic building from 1842 located in the gardens of the Champs-Élysées. It is owned by Yannick Alléno, one of France's most famous chefs. Aside from L'Abygge, Alléno owns two other restaurants in the Pavillon Ledoyen, which in 2022 were awarded three and one Michelin Guide stars, respectively.

Alléno first encountered traditional Japanese cuisine some 30 years ago, when he visited Japan at the age of 20. Over the course of his three-week stay, Alléno was captivated by ingredients such as fish and shellfish, and cuisine such as sushi.



From L'Abygge's 12-seat counter, guests can observe Chef Okazaki making sushi at close quarters
Photo: Nicolas Lobbstaël

After that, he began to visit Japan frequently, savoring the dishes served at many famous restaurants, interacting with Japanese chefs, and acquiring knowledge and skills.

The name "L'Abygge" ("deep sea") incorporates Alléno's homage to Japan, an island country that is surrounded on all four sides by the sea, and which is deeply connected to oceans and fish.

The 2022 Michelin Guide website praises L'Abygge as follows. "A great Japanese sushi master, ingredients of stunning quality (*ikejime*ⁱⁱ fish from the Atlantic) and the creative touch of Yannick Alléno: L'Abygge takes us to the heady summits of Japanese gastronomy."

The "great Japanese sushi master" mentioned here is Okazaki Yasunari. The son of a sushi chef himself, Okazaki embarked on his own journey as a chef at the age of 18. Since then, he has refined his skills for over 20 years, working at top-class restaurants. Okazaki met Alléno for the first time in 2016, when he was working at a sushi restaurant in Ginza, Tokyo.

"I was able to break the ice with Chef Alléno right away through our conversations about cuisine," Okazaki recalls. "From the way he talked, I could feel his strong passion for sushi."

With his particular love of sushi, it was Alléno's dream to open a sushi restaurant in Paris. After recognizing Okazaki's skills and talent, he invited him to open a sushi restaurant together in Paris.

"Going to France was actually a dream of mine. I very much wanted to open a sushi restaurant in Paris," says Okazaki. And so, in 2018, Okazaki left Japan behind and became the sushi master at L'Abygge. Within just half a year of opening, the restaurant gained one Michelin star, and has earned two stars for three successive years since 2020.

The course dinners at L'Abygge consist of three parts. The first course features such dishes as seasonal *tsukemono* (pickled vegetables), white asparagus cooked in a *kombu* (kelp) broth, and *sashimi* (raw fish). Next comes the main course, which



Chirashizushi (scattered sushi)
Photo: Nicolas Lobbstaël

is *nigiri* (shaped by hand) sushi. Last is the dessert course, featuring dishes such as mushroom ice cream with *sobacha* (buckwheat tea) nougatine. (Current menu as of June 2022.)

Chef Okazaki creates the restaurant's menu together with the other chefs, and the menu is finalized after the addition of ideas from Chef Alléno. The dishes served often include Extractions[®] of various ingredients obtained using a special method developed by Chef Alléno. For this reason, guests at L'Abygge can enjoy Japanese cuisine imbued with the essence of French cuisine, and which can only be savored at this Paris restaurant.

"I have two objectives," says Okazaki. "One is to gain three Michelin Stars. The other is to have people around the world feel that they want to eat the sushi made by Chef Alléno and myself. I want us to reach a level where, when people think of sushi, our names come to mind."

This collaboration between Japanese and French chefs is opening up a new world for sushi and, by extension, Japanese cuisine. 

i https://www.maff.go.jp/j/shokusan/eat/attach/pdf/160328_shokub-13.pdf

ii *Ikejime* is a specialized method of killing fish, used to maintain the freshness of their meat.

Hida beef is renowned for its marbling



Hida Beef

From Gifu to the World

Hida beef cattle from Gifu Prefecture, located in the inland area of the main island of Honshu, are slaughtered for their meat according to international food-sanitation standards and Hida beef is now being exported abroad more and more.

Hida beef cattle graze freely in the abundant nature

SASAKI TAKASHI



SINCE the modernization of Japan beginning around 150 years ago, the Japanese Black breed of cattle has been gradually improved, and the cattle are now collectively known as *wagyu*, meaning “Japanese beef.”

Today, approximately 90% of *wagyu* is of the Japanese Black breed and hybrids of this variety, and the high quality of the meat has made it popular both in Japan and overseas. There are over 200 brands of *wagyu* beef with different names based on production area and methods used for raising the cattle. Among these varieties, Hida beef has gained a reputation as a luxury brand, alongside Kobe beef and Matsusaka beef.

Kobayashi Mitsushi is the Representative Director of Hida Meat Agricultural Cooperatives (JA Hida Meat), an organization that processes and sells Hida beef. He says, “Farmers in the Hida region of northern Gifu Prefecture began raising cattle for meat about ninety years ago. In the mid-1970s, the entire region pushed to improve the breed, and from there, the delicious flavor of Hida beef became known across Japan.”

A bull named Yasufukugo, known as the father of Hida beef, played a major role at that time, producing more than 40,000 offspring. It is said that the majority of cattle with superior quality meat across Japan trace their roots to Yasufukugo.

In the Hida region of inland Honshu, location of the cities of Takayama, Hida and Gero, and the village of Shirakawa, there is a great difference in temperatures between summer and winter, and between day and night. As there is also heavy snowfall in the region’s mountainous areas, as seen in the snowscape of Shirakawa-go (see *Highlighting Japan*, January 2022), the area is blessed with clear water. According to Kobayashi, this environment is great for cattle, and the meat quality is improved by



Yasufukugo, the “father of Hida beef”

having the cattle grow stress-free among the abundant nature. Hida beef produced in this way features fat tightly woven into the fresh red meat, known as marbling. Even with ample marbling, the flavor is not too heavy, and you can enjoy the exquisite flavor of the soft meat that melts on your tongue.

Kobayashi says, “We began exporting the beef in 2010. Just like today, Hida beef was very popular then and as there is a limited supply being shipped, there is enough demand domestically, but there is a reason why we ventured into exports. While demand has fallen due to the pandemic, there are many famous tourist spots within Gifu Prefecture, including the World Heritage Site at Shirakawa-go, and many tourists from overseas visit. We want these tourists to enjoy Hida beef even when they return home and we want them to come back to the Hida region after being drawn in by the flavor of the meat.”

Kobayashi adds, “At the JA Hida Meat factory, which features some of the best hygienic management capabilities in Japan, we introduced international food-sanitation standards early on upon starting exports.”

As a result of being recognized as an export facility by the US, EU, and twelve other countries with extremely strict sanitary standards for meat, total exports reached more than 500 million JPY in 2018. In 2021, JA Hida Meat also established the Hida Meat Agricultural Cooperatives Consortium, a consortium between producing organizations and exporters, offering specific explanations about export measures to farmers, and actively engaging in activities to convey the appeal of Hida beef to businesses and buyers at export destinations by having people involved work together.

Prior to the effects of COVID-19, the number of foreign visitors to the Hida region was increasing, with, for example, tourists visiting Takayama as Hida beef hamburgers became popular among foreign visitors. Kobayashi says they are hoping that many people from around the world will visit the Hida region in the post-COVID period as they did before and enjoy the charm of the area, including local cuisine such as Hida beef hamburgers and Hoba Miso grilled beef, a dish that pairs well with sake. ■



Hoba Miso with grilled beef is a specialty of the Hida region



The SAVOR JAPAN certification logo

SAWAJI OSAMU

WITH a mild climate and abundant nature, Japan is blessed with a variety of food ingredients, including agricultural products and seafood. There are many regional cuisines throughout Japan that make use of locally sourced ingredients. The Japanese government's Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (hereinafter, MAFF) is promoting “*nouhaku*,” a type of tourism in which travelers can enjoy not only local food but also traditional life experiences and interactions with



Top page of “Our Regional Cuisines”

Bringing Japan's Regional Cuisines to the World

SAVOR JAPAN

We introduce five of Japan's certified “SAVOR JAPAN” farming, mountain, and fishing communities and the regional cuisines nurtured there.

people in farm, mountain, and fishing communities that nurture these diverse regional cuisines. As part of this initiative, MAFF certifies SAVOR JAPAN areas (<https://savorjp.info>).

In a SAVOR JAPAN area, efforts are being made to utilize regional cuisines, the agriculture, forestry and fishery industries that produce essential ingredients for these cuisines, as well as distinctive local landscapes and history as tourism resources, with the government promoting the all-Japan brand of “SAVOR JAPAN” and utilizing that brand to centrally disseminate information both in Japan and internationally. As of May 2022, 37 areas have been certified as SAVOR JAPAN areas.

Further, to inherit and disseminate the traditions of regional cuisines, MAFF has launched “Our Regional Cuisines,” a website that introduces regional cuisines from Japan's 47 prefectures (https://www.maff.go.jp/e/policies/market/k_ryouri/index.html). This website introduces the origins, history, and recipes of about 1,300 kinds of regional cuisine from all over Japan (in Japanese). Some recipes also include cooking videos.

The following are five SAVOR JAPAN areas and some of their representative regional cuisines.

ODATE, AKITA PREFECTURE

Akita Prefecture is one of the foremost rice-producing areas in Japan. In the past, hunting animals such as bears was popular in mountainous areas, and there were many people called “*matagi*” who made a living from hunting. The Akita Inu dog, which is now very popular worldwide, was originally a dog that the *matagi* kept for hunting.

Regional cuisine: *Kiritampo-nabe*
hotpot is a chicken-broth hotpot made

*Kiritampo-nabe**Akita Inu puppies*

with chicken, vegetables, and other ingredients as well as *kiritampo*, which is ground cooked rice wrapped around a wooden skewer and grilled over a charcoal fire. It is said to have originated from what the *matagi* ate in the mountains, which included simmering ground rice and mountain birds in a pot.

TOKAMACHI CITY, NIIGATA PREFECTURE

Tokamachi City is one of the snowiest areas in Japan, with more than 3 meters of snow accumulating in mountainous areas in winter. In the past, during the snowy off-season of farming, many farmers made a living by weaving. Those techniques have been passed on, and Tokamachi City remains one of the leading kimono producing areas in Japan.



Hegi soba noodles



A craftsman makes a kimono

Regional cuisine: *Hegi soba* noodles are soba noodles that use seaweed called *funori* as a binding agent and which are served in a wooden vessel called a *hegi*. It is thought that *funori* was originally used as glue to increase the strength of the thread used to weave kimonos, and eventually was also used to make soba noodles.

NORTHERN KYOTO, KYOTO PREFECTURE

The northern parts of Kyoto Prefecture, facing the Sea of Japan, are blessed with a variety of food ingredients nurtured by its sea, mountains, and fields. In the past, mackerel and other seafood caught in the Sea of Japan were transported to central Kyoto. Along the coast, there are many scenic locations such as Amanohashidate, which is one of the Three Views of Japan, and the *funaya* (boathouses) in



Tango-barazushi

Note: This article has been created on the basis of materials published by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries.



Funaya (boathouses) in Ine

Ine, which has been recognized as one of “Japan’s most beautiful villages.”

Regional cuisine: *Tango-barazushi* is a dish in which ingredients such as sweet and spicy boiled minced mackerel and dried *shiitake* mushrooms are spread on top of a thin layer of vinegared rice in a wooden box called a *matsubuta*. It has become a standard dish at festivals, weddings, birthdays, and other celebrations.

YAWATAHAMA CITY, EHIME PREFECTURE

Yawatahama City, which faces the Seto Inland Sea, has been cultivating *mikan* mandarins since the end of the nineteenth century. A distinctive landscape is formed by the terraced fields with stone walls built on steep slopes near the coastline. In the sea, fish farming of sea bream and other fishes is also flourishing.

Regional cuisine: *Satsuma* is a dish in which the grilled flesh of sea bream



Satsuma (the soup at bottom left)



Terraced fields of *mikan* mandarins

or other fish is broken into small pieces and mixed with barley miso in a mortar then combined with *dashi* stock to make a soup, which is poured on top of warm rice. *Mikan* peel and leeks are used as condiments.

SHIMABARA PENINSULA, NAGASAKI PREFECTURE

There are many hot springs on the Shimabara Peninsula, at the center of which are volcanoes such as Mt. Unzen. High-temperature hot spring steam is also used to steam vegetables and seafood. Since the Shimabara Peninsula is also rich in spring water, many dishes such as *tenobe somen* noodles, which have a history of about 400 years, make use of the spring water.



Kanzarashi



Rice paddies at the foot of the mountains in central Shimabara Peninsula

Regional cuisine: *Kanzarashi* is a sweet of rice-flour dumplings chilled in spring water and sprinkled with sugar and honey. In the past, farmers used to make rice flour for long-term storage, but it rotted easily in the summer. It is said that the origin of *kanzarashi* is that people started making rice flour into dumplings to be stored in spring water. 

i *Nouhaku* means “overnight travel to a farming, mountain, and fishing community” where you stay in and enjoy food, experiences, and so forth that make use of rich local resources in a farm, mountain, and fishing community <https://countrysidestays-japan.com>



“Space Big Data Rice” cultivated using satellite data

Efficient Rice Cultivation Utilizing *Space Data*

A novel method of rice cultivation developed by a Japanese space venture business that utilizes data from Earth observation satellites in response to recent climate change is attracting attention both in Japan and around the world.

SASAKI TAKASHI

Rice cultivation is thought to have been practiced on the Japanese archipelago for around 3,000 years. Throughout this time, the Japanese have worked to improve rice varieties and methods of cultivation. Indeed, it would be no exaggeration to say that the delicious tasting rice enjoyed by Japanese people today is the result of these centuries of endeavor by our ancestors. Recently, the space venture business Tenchijin, Inc., certified by

the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA), has begun supporting Japanese rice farmers in a highly innovative way.

“The Japanese agricultural sector has encountered significant challenges in recent years, including a manpower shortage due to an aging population and climate change due to global warming. We are striving to overcome these challenges by harnessing the vast amount of data gathered from satellites orbiting the Earth,” says Tenchijin CEO Sakuraba Yasuhito.

Sakuraba’s interest in satellite observation data was sparked by an encounter with Hyakusoku Yasutoshi, current COO of Tenchijin and a JAXA engineer, when he was working in the area of agricultural IoT¹. A shared interest in harnessing satellites for business led the pair to found Tenchijin in May 2019 under JAXA’s start-up support program, and to begin cultivating “Space Big Data Rice.” This is a program under which JAXA certifies and provides support to projects that utilize JAXA’s intel-

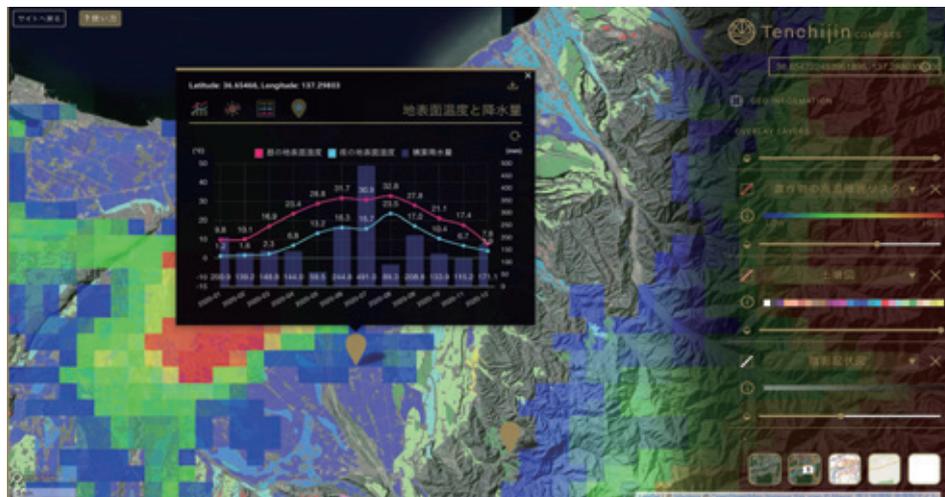
i. Internet of Things. Connecting people and physical objects via the Internet, allowing for the sharing of a vast array of knowledge and information to unlock previously unimaginable value.

lectual property and expertise, with JAXA employees investing in the venture company start-ups. As of June 2022, nine such companies have been established.

Says Sakuraba, “In Japan, around 300 varieties of rice are consumed as staple foods alone, each requiring differing climatic conditions for cultivation. Our first step was to analyze the vast amount of data obtained from satellite observations of atmospheric temperature, precipitation, surface temperature, and so forth, in order to determine the most suitable farmland for the cultivation of each variety.”

Tenchijin selects the optimal match between cultivation sites and rice varieties utilizing big space data such as meteorological and topographical information collected from satellites. Meanwhile, a “smart” sluice gate for rice fields that uses IoT to control water temperature automatically by linking it to satellite data was approved for use in a project to produce rice appropriate for the environment.

Contracted farms began cultivating rice using this method in 2021. Rather than handle the labor-intensive process of controlling water themselves, farms outsourced the process to an IT company which implemented a system that automates the control of water utilizing satellite data. During a spell of unusually hot weather, for example, when a risk of high temperature damage to rice plants is detected through satellite data analysis, rice fields are automatically flooded with



Tenchijin Compass, a land evaluation engine that utilizes space big data. The technology enables detailed surface temperature data in units of 1 kilometer and precipitation data in units of 10 kilometers from around the world to be viewed in an intuitive manner, making it possible to evaluate the environment of land that is difficult to observe directly.

water, ensuring that the appropriate soil and water temperature are maintained. This means that farms no longer have to manually control the water temperature of rice fields, resulting in a substantial reduction in labor requirements. In addition, the system enables farms to reliably cultivate rice varieties that are appropriate for the farmland, ensuring that the harvested rice is of high quality.

Rice produced using this system and method of control was harvested for the first time in the fall of 2021, and marketed under the brand name “Space Big Data Rice” in December of that year. Industry professionals highly evaluated the product, stating, “The rice exceeded expecta-

tions in terms of taste appraisal valueⁱⁱ, measured by protein and moisture levels, as well as in terms of yield.” Consumers also praised the rice, saying things like, “The texture is fluffy and it is very tasty.”

“Space Big Data Rice was more popular than anticipated, so much so that the warehouse ran out of stock soon after it was launched. I cooked the rice myself and also tried onigiri made from the rice at a rice ball specialty store. It tastes amazing,” says Sakuraba with a smile.

Tenchijin was awarded the Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries Award by the Japanese government in March 2022 (Space Development and Utilization Award by the Cabinet Office).

According to Sakuraba, one of the greatest benefits of analyzing the climate pinpointing the soil from satellite data is that identifying varieties that are appropriate for each region and location becomes as simple outside Japan as it is inside the country. With the recent surge in popularity of Japanese cuisine, an increasing number of farmers are becoming interested in cultivating Japanese rice varieties overseas. This innovative technique for growing rice not only saves farmers time and effort but also responds to the effects of climate change, and as such is gaining widespread attention both in Japan and in other parts of the world with different climatic and geographical conditions for its potential to improve the chances of producing high-quality rice. 



Hyakusoku Yasutoshi, COO of Tenchijin and JAXA engineer



Sakuraba Yasuhito (right) receives the Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries Award (Space Development and Utilization Award by the Cabinet Office)

ii. Calculated by measuring and analyzing the components in the rice, such as the amount of protein, starch and water content, and quantifying the taste on a 100-point scale.

Per Oscar Brekell on a visit to an organic tea estate in Shimizu City, Shizuoka Prefecture

Sharing the Charm of Japanese Tea with the World

Swedish-born Per Oscar Brekell is a Tokyo-based certified Japanese Tea Instructor conducting activities to promote the spread of Japanese tea.

SATO KUMIKO

“I think the 2022 harvest of Japanese tea will be of very good quality. Please give it a try,” says Swedish-born Per Oscar Brekell with sparkling eyes. Brekell is a certified Nihoncha (Japanese Tea) Instructor¹, having earned a qualification that is difficult even for a Japanese person to obtain, and has continued to work out of his base in Tokyo to communicate the appeal of Japanese tea.

Brekell developed an interest in Japan while studying world history as a high school student, and began to read books on Japanese culture. As he read, what captured his interest was *sado*

(or *chado*), the art of the tea ceremony that involves serving guests in a special space and specific manner.

“I wanted to know what this Japanese tea, which as a source of tea ceremony culture even came to represent Japan, tasted like,” explains Brekell. He found and bought some Japanese *sencha* tea from a tea specialty store and tried it out. His first impression was that it tasted bitter. But over the course of four or five cups, he began to notice the appeal of Japanese tea as it gave off a fresh, forest-like aroma.

“Strangely, I felt as if it refreshed the inside of my body, producing a calm-

ness. From that point on, I wanted to drink Japanese tea every day,” he recounts.

Although he entered university as a philosophy student, Brekell switched to the Japanese language department so that he could learn Japanese first, and in 2010 gained the opportunity to study abroad at Gifu University.

At one of the Japanese tea cafés that Brekell visited on a trip to Tokyo during that time, he encountered a special tea that would change the direction of his life.

“It was tea from Tobetto, a tea estate located on mountain slopes at an altitude of around 800 meters in Shizuoka City, Shizuoka Prefecture. With just one sip, it produced a vivid image of a mountainous landscape in my mind. That was followed by a deep and lingering aftertaste.”

The store not only carried blended teas but also distinctive teas from single tea

1. A qualification administered by the NPO Nihoncha Instructor Association. (Reference: <https://www.nihoncha-inst.com/english.html>)

- 1 Per Oscar Brekell at a matcha tea café in Nihonbashi, Tokyo
- 2 Brekell inspects new-growth tea leaves at Uji City, Shirakawa, Kyoto Prefecture
- 3 Brekell explains tea-tasting methods to a group of foreigners (2018)

producing regions around Japan or single varieties, and it was here that Brekell realized the true depth of Japanese tea.

“Just as there are sommeliers for wine and baristas for coffee, there should also be experts with proper knowledge about Japanese tea who can convey its charm to others. Japanese tea is an indulgence that has a special value on par with such beverages,” says Brekell.

It was at this point that Brekell decided to make a job involving Japanese tea his lifework, and in 2013 he returned to Japan. In 2014, he passed the Nihoncha (Japanese Tea) Instructor examination, which requires broad knowledge about Japanese tea, on his second attempt. He went on to study hard as a trainee at the Shizuoka Tea Center located in Shizuoka Prefecture, one of Japan’s leading tea producing regions, and began activities to popularize Japanese tea at home and abroad.

In particular, Brekell has conducted workshops where participants make and drink Japanese tea under his guidance. These workshops were held all over the world prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and proved increasingly popular especially with people from Europe and the United States. Brekell has also seen a significant response from his activities on social media, and in 2018 he even began selling Japanese tea based on his own selections. Each brand is accompanied by introductory descriptions from Brekell about its distinctive taste, encouraging consumers to enjoy finding a Japanese tea that suits their preferences.

In 2021, he fulfilled his dream to publish his book *A Beginner’s Guide to Japanese Tea* in English along with its French counterpart, *Le guide du thé japonais*. As Brekell explains, when he first wanted to know more about Japanese tea back in Sweden, there was almost no information available. “I wanted to make a comprehensive guidebook for people around the world who are interested in Japanese tea or who wanted to try it out,” says Brekell, explaining how he managed to accomplish one of those ambitions.

“I have one more big dream,” he says.



That is to one day serve Japanese tea at the dinner following the Nobel Prize Ceremony that is held in Sweden each year.

“Japanese tea is a drink packed with wisdom that condenses Japanese culture. I think it is perfect for an event that

honors those who have contributed to a peaceful and prosperous future for mankind,” explains Brekell.

It is a dream full of thought and worthy of Brekell as someone who knows the depth and flavor of Japanese tea. 



Per Oscar Brekell’s book *A Beginner’s Guide to Japanese Tea* and its French counterpart, *Le Guide du thé japonais* (both published in 2021)



A bronze statue of Issa built in 1990 in Shinano Town, Nagano Prefecture. It stands before Haikaiji Temple near graves of Issa's family, built in 1910 by locals who cherish Issa's memory

SAKURAI SHIN

KOBAYASHI Issa (hereinafter Issa), born in 1763 in a farmhouse in modern day Shinanomachi, Nagano Prefecture, is said to have written over 20,000 haiku poems before his death at the age of 65¹



The haiku *Yare utsuna hae ga te wo suri ashi wo suru* and self-portrait written on a fan by Issa himself

Kobayashi Issa

A Haiku Poet Who Empathized with the Weak

We take a look at Kobayashi Issa (1763-1828), who left behind many humorous haiku poems that use simple expressions and were written during difficult circumstances.

in 1828.

Issa's mother died when he was 3 and he didn't get along with his new stepmother who came into his life at 8. After being sent to Edo (now Tokyo) to serve as an apprentice at 15 and moving from employer to employer, he began to pursue haiku after he turned 20. He took haiku study trips and interacted with many haiku poets. Issa married a 28-year-old woman when he was 52, and while they had four children, all died from illness at a very young age and his wife died when she was 37. In 1827, the last year of his life, he lost his home to a fire, and died aged 65 living in a storehouse that was spared by the fire. It is assumed that these experiences had a significant influence on his works.

Watanabe Hiroshi, the curator at the Issa Memorial Museum built in Issa's hometown of Shinano Town, says, "Issa was a haiku poet who always wrote his poems from the perspective of the weak and powerless.



Portrait of Kobayashi Issa, painted by Muramatsu Shunpo (1772-1858), a disciple of Issa (Collection of Issa Memorial Museum)

"It is clear that behind his poems are the many hardships he faced and the fact that he did not live a life of wealth despite having his talent for haiku recognized. However, his style is not in tragic expressions but rather in the way he uses humor to write about his life. In his later years, haiku poet Masaoka Shiki (1867-1902), who established modern haiku, said that there were three main characteristics of Issa's haiku: humor, satire, and mercy. Issa's haiku style whereby he directly expressed his personal impressions was very different from the mainstream of haiku at that time when poets

The storehouse where Issa died, now designated as a National Historic Site



expressed their feelings through objective depictions of scenery.”

Joy, sadness, and hardship are things anyone may experience in life. Issa tackled these themes and wrote haiku with simple expressions that anyone could understand. In doing so, Issa’s poems became universal, going beyond differ-

ences in time period or living environment. This could be why Issa’s haiku are loved by many people even today. ㊦

i Ages given are as counted in the traditional *kazoe-doshi* reckoning, in which a child is counted as one year old at birth and every January 1 after that counts as a year older.

*Yase-gaeru
makeru na
Issa kore ni ari*

Lean frog,
Don’t give up the fight!
Issa is here!

Translation Henderson, Harold G., *An Introduction to Haiku: An Anthology of Poems and Poets from Basho to Shiki*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1958

Written in 1816 when Issa was 54. The *kigo* (seasonal word) is *gaeru* (frog), so this is a spring haiku. This is the most famous of Issa’s haiku. Issa, upon seeing two male frogs fight after chasing after a female, writes a poem in support of the weak, lean frog. This haiku expresses Issa’s viewpoint of being closer to the weaker frog, and this weaker frog is like Issa himself. Issa lost his eldest son that year, so the haiku can also be read as a shout of support for the lean frog, which Issa associates with his late son.

*Yare utsu na
hae ga te wo suri
ashi wo suru*

Do not kill the fly:
See how it wrings its hands;
See how it wrings its feet!

Translation Blyth, R.H., *Zen in English Literature and Other Classics*. Tokyo: Hokuseido Press, 1942

Written in 1820 when Issa was 58. The *kigo* is *hae* (fly), so this is a summer haiku. It is a humorous poem, meaning, “Don’t kill that fly. Isn’t he just begging for his life by rubbing his hands and feet together?” The poem is saying that even small creatures like the fly have life and ought not be killed needlessly, but the fly, looking as if it is praying that life is valuable, can also be read as expressing Issa’s emotions as he approaches old age.

*Meigetsu wo
totte kurero to
naku ko kana*

The child is crying;
“Give me it!” she wails—
The harvest moon.

Translation Blyth, R.H., *Zen in English Literature and Other Classics*. Tokyo: Hokuseido Press, 1942

Written in 1813 when Issa was 51. The *kigo* is *meigetsu* (harvest moon), so this is an autumn haiku. The poem talks about a crying child begging someone to grab the beautiful moon shining in the sky, but as he still did not have any children at this point, the crying child also expresses an image of Issa himself, unable to get up due to having a fever. This is a scene that children and parents with children the world over can understand.



Mophead hydrangeas
(*ajisai*)



Lacecap hydrangeas
(*gaku-ajisai*)



Mountain hydrangeas
(*yama-ajisai*)

SEASONAL FLOWERS

Ajisai

Hydrangea

A *jisai* (*Hydrangea macrophylla*) is a shrub of about 1 to 2 meters native to Japan that is also popular in the West. Many varieties have been developed through breeding. In Japan, the native *gaku-ajisai* (lacecap hydrangea), which grows all over the country, and the native *yama-ajisai* (mountain hydrangea), which grows mainly in the mountains, are especially popular. Hydrangeas bloom from the end of May to early July at a time when there is a lot of rain in Japan. Their beautiful blue and pink colored flowers are a beloved feature of the rainy season.

In the language of flowers, hydrangea means “fickle,” because its colors can change even during the same flowering season depending on the pH of the soil and exposure to sunlight. Acidic soil tends to make the blossoms more blue while alkaline soil tends to make them more pink. In Japan, where there is a lot of rainfall, the soil is often slightly acidic, so blue and purple hydrangeas are the most common. The “petals” of the lacecap hydrangea “flower” are in fact sepals which encircle a mass of tiny true flowers. As the small “flowers” group together to form one large flower head, hydrangeas are associated with “family ties” and in recent years have become popular as wedding decorations and bouquets.

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