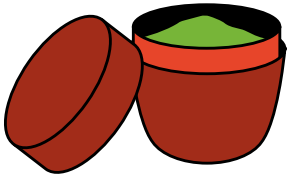
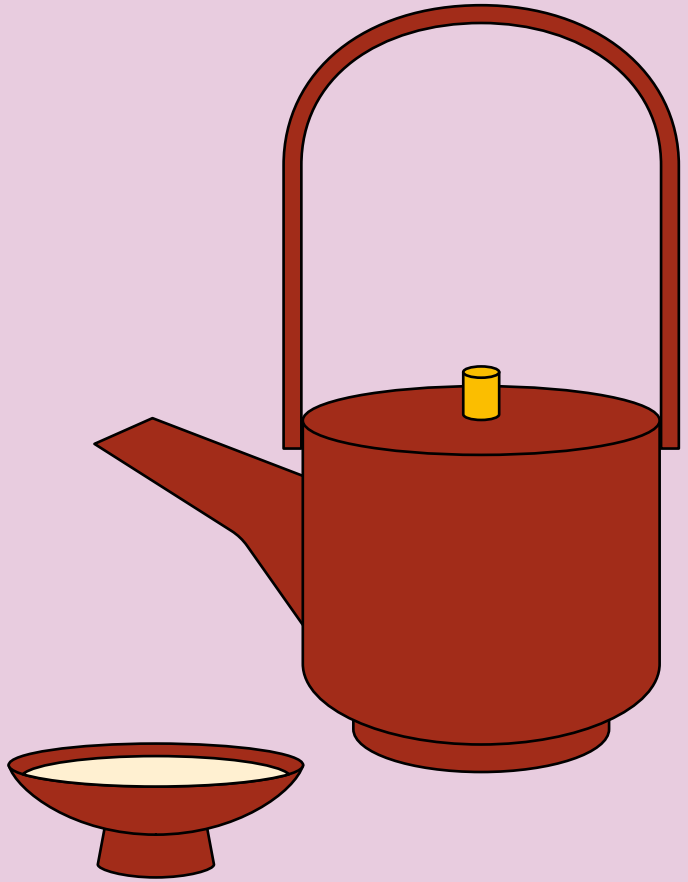
Japanese cuisine from miso to matcha

Lannoo



A culinary journey in 150 tips

Inge Rylant



Otoso, p.101

Introduction

It's been a little over ten years since my first trip to Japan, and when I look back on it now I see so clearly how little I knew about Japanese gastronomy then. Like so many other tourists, I assumed that Japanese cuisine basically consisted of sushi, white rice, and a few kinds of noodles. And I came home with all the same shibboleths about vegetables being hard to find there and fruit being unaffordable, because I had seen the beautifully, individually packaged strawberries being sold like gourmet pastries.

Now that I live half-time in Japan and experience everyday life there, I understand that Japanese cuisine is the exact opposite of all these assumptions. Far from being plain and predictable, the flavour palette is unbelievably complex, and the variety of ingredients is tremendous – not to mention the textures, which in Japanese cuisine are every bit as important as the flavours. I gradually came to appreciate the chewiness of a good mochi and the slimy threads of the infamous nattō; when the day came that I had raw sea squirt for the first time, and someone asked me how it was, I responded with a hearty "oishii!" ("yummy!") and I meant it. In short, not only did I discover that Japanese cuisine offers a whole universe of experiences (with many dishes being true revelations), but I also fell in love with the subtlety, balance and incredible variation.

And yet, every time I come back from Japan I still get the same question from friends and family: "Did you eat sushi every day?" No. I don't even particularly like sushi, and to be honest, I hardly ever eat it. You want to know what I did eat? Japanese curries, fragrant enoki mushrooms, chicken necks, sweet omelettes, stews with fish cake, sea grapes... I could go on and on. I did drink sake, of course, but more often than that I drank iced coffee, Japanese beer and plum liqueur. And still, every time I set foot back in that extraordinary country I discover something new: local specialties like edamame-flavour mochi, a variation on the Japanese dessert treat yōkan, or a new ingredient like shio kombu.

Consider this book as my answer to the sushi question. In the pages that follow, you'll find an overview of the foundations of Japanese cuisine in thirty chapters. I have tried to present you with all the traditional and modern classics in food and drink–yes, sushi too. Of course, the selection is somewhat personal, but it's a broad introduction that will help you understand, and taste, Japanese culinary culture. Read it before you go if you want to know what to look for and where to find it on your trip, or bring it along and pull it out whenever you find yourself baffled by a Japanese menu. I also made the decision to include the terms in Japanese characters, so whenever you start feeling "lost in translation" in the supermarket or the local izakaya, you can point to the word.

But even if you're not lucky enough to be going to Japan, you can still use this book to help you discover Japanese cuisine in your own home. Working with culinary expert Tomoko Kaji, I've selected seven popular Japanese dishes with entirely "normal" ingredients that you can make yourself. Be inspired, be adventurous, and most importantly: keep this book handy for when you one day get that tired old sushi question, and use it to educate the ignoramus who asked it! Itadakimasu!

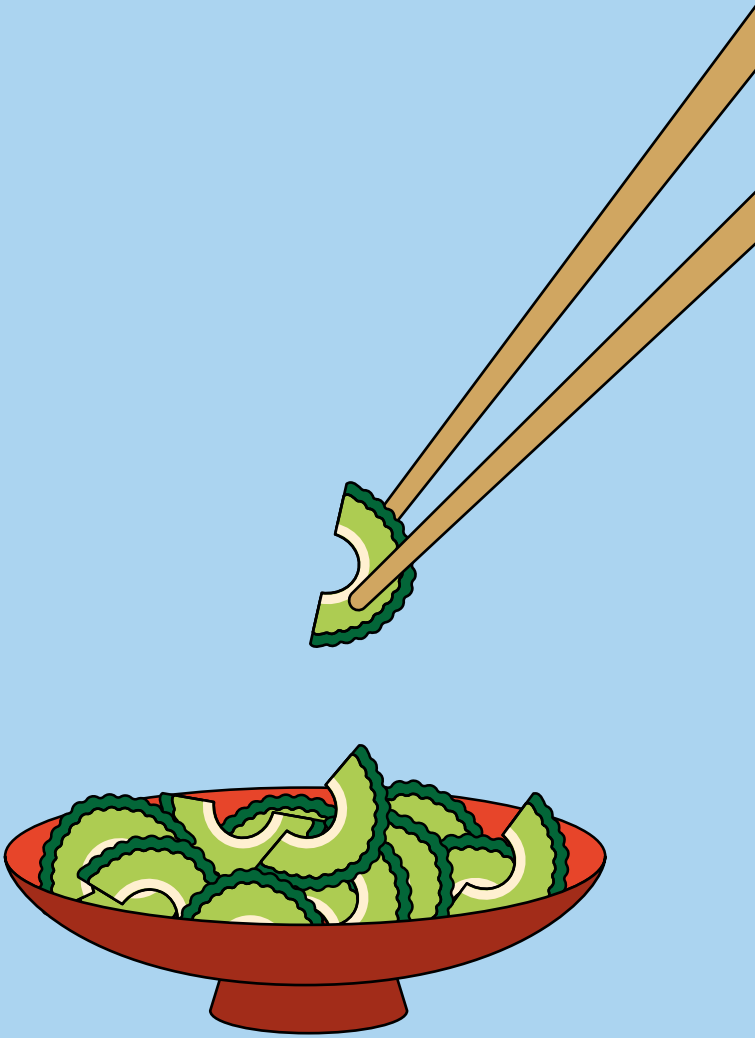
About nomenclature, language and usage

Japanese gastronomy is liberally seasoned with regional and dialectical terms. For this book, I made the choice to use the nomenclature from the Kantō area (around Tokyo), because these are, broadly speaking, the most likely to be understood around the whole country. But be aware that in other regions, such as Kansai (Osaka, Kyoto), Hokkaido in the north, or Kyushu in the south, completely different terms may be used for the same things.

With regard to pronunciation, I indicate the long vowels with a macron, the bar above the letter, as in: ō and ū. The diphthong “ei” is pronounced as a long a (ā), like the a in “today”. The 'g' is pronounced like in the word “good”.

Where I use the word sake, I am referring to nihonshu, Japanese rice wine. When referring to any other form of alcohol, such as shōchū, I use its name.

Finally, please keep in mind that this book is not a dictionary or encyclopaedia, but an invitation to explore. There are far, far too many variations in local customs to cover everything here. But if it inspires you to try something new or experiment yourself, then I will have achieved my goal.



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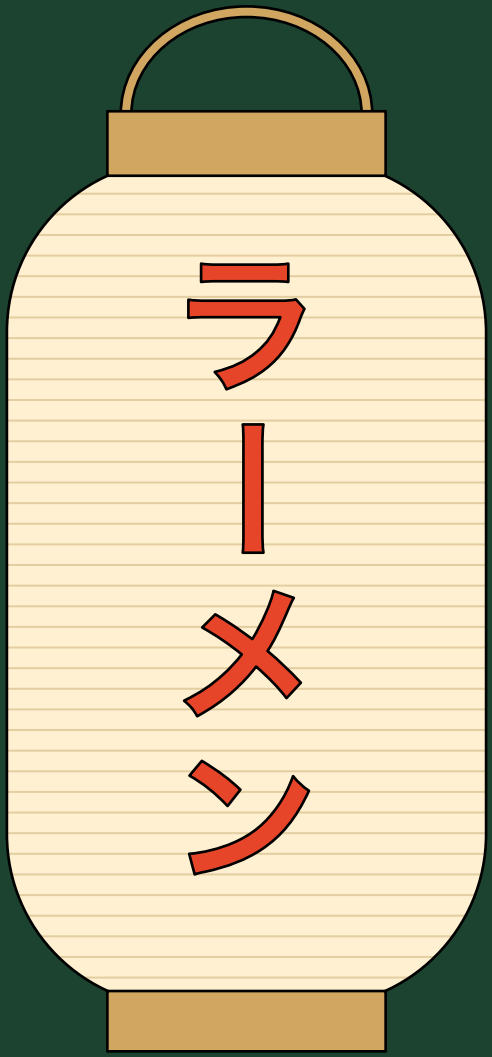

ラーメン

Places to eat

You'll find a great many dishes described in this book, but where can you try them? In Japan, you'll find all kinds of places to eat—from specialised, top-tier restaurants to simple neighbourhood diners. Many restaurants focus on a single type of dish; for grilled chicken skewers, for example, you go to a yakitoriya, while if it's noodle soup you're after try a ramenya. The name of the dish followed by -ya ("shop" or "business") is a common indication. But there are also dining establishments where the name might leave you guessing about what to expect. Here are a few of the most common types of restaurants and eateries.

Kaiseki · Ryōtei	Traditional restaurants where you will be served a refined menu in multiple courses.
Izakaya	Lively and charming eateries where drinks and small plates go hand-in-hand.
Teishoku	Simple dining establishments with set menus, ideal for a quick and affordable lunch.
Famiresu	Informal restaurants with a wide selection of often Western-inspired dishes.
Shokudō	Homey eatery with simple, affordable dishes from the traditional kitchen.
Kaitenzushi	Sushi bars with a "sushi train" (small plates of sushi moving along on a conveyor belt).
Yokochō	An alley packed full of places to eat and drink in a wild, "street food" atmosphere.

The basics

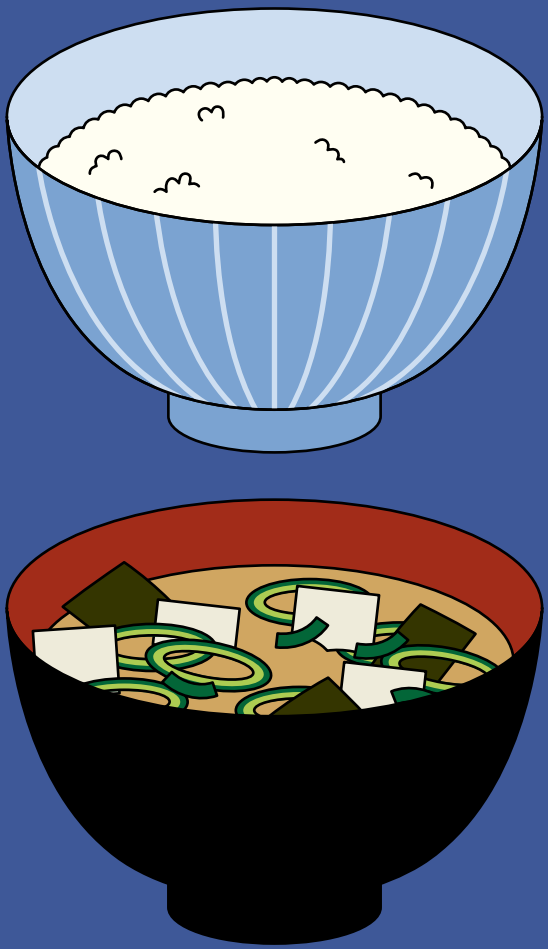
Seven fundamental ingredients make up the backbone of Japanese cuisine. These determine the flavour and character of a dish, no matter how simple or refined. Because you will encounter them often in this book, I list them here for quick reference.

Japanese rice	Glutinous rice. Also known as "sticky rice", it is white with a round grain and soft structure.
Rice vinegar	A mild, lightly acidic vinegar made from fermented rice. Indispensable in the preparation of sushi rice.
Soy sauce	A dark, sweet sauce made from fermented soybeans and wheat. Adds depth to vegetable and fish dishes, soups and bouillon, and is also used as a dipping sauce.
Miso	A thick paste of fermented soybeans, often with grains (rice or barley) and salt. Miso can also vary in colour and flavour; white miso is lighter in flavour, while red miso is aged and more pungent.
Mirin	A sweet white wine with a low alcohol content that gives dishes shine and a slight sweetness.
Dashi	A clear, umami-rich bouillon, normally drawn from kombu (p.28), katsuobushi (p.15) or shiitake. The base for countless soups and sauces.
Sake	A fermented drink made from rice; good ones are drunk, while cheaper ones and versions specially formulated for kitchen use are used for cooking.

Other ingredients

Alongside the seven basic ingredients, there are several other ingredients that you will find in many Japanese dishes.

Katsuobushi	Paper-thin shavings of dried, fermented bonito (tuna). Adds a deep umami flavour to dashi and is also used as a topping on things like tōfu (p.23) or takoyaki (p.149).
Ponzu	A tart, citrus-sour sauce made from soy sauce, rice vinegar and yuzu, or sudachi juice. Often used as dipping sauce or to flavour raw fish or vegetables.
Daikon	A large, elongated white radish with a mild and fresh flavour. Used thinly sliced or grated as a garnish or alongside tempura.
Japanese mayonnaise	A creamy mayonnaise made from egg yolks and rice vinegar. Its flavour is richer and sweeter than that of Western mayonnaise.
Sesame seed	Toasted sesame seeds are sprinkled on salads, vegetables or rice to add extra flavour and texture. Both white and black sesame seeds are used in Japanese cuisine.



Gohan — Miso shiru

Breakfast

The traditional Japanese breakfast is one of the healthiest breakfasts in the world. It is a primarily savoury breakfast built around the principle of ichijuu sansai: a combination of soup, rice and side dishes. A Japanese breakfast will often consist of miso soup, grilled fish, rice and pickled vegetables, accompanied by nori (p.27), an egg dish or tōfu (p.23). The flavours and textures are balanced, nutritious and light. Although these days, many Japanese opt for a faster or more Western-style breakfast, the traditional is still considered the ideal. Unlike in the West, where breakfast is of an entirely different nature than the other meals of the day, the Japanese breakfast follows the structure of the standard Japanese meal: balanced and varied.

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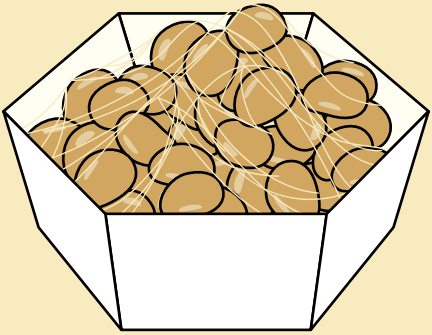
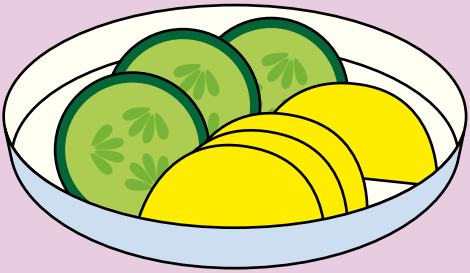
01 Gohan

ご飯
ごはん

Steamed rice
Rice is the heart of any Japanese meal, and that includes breakfast. The word gohan not only means "rice," but also "meal," which should give you a sense of how fundamental it is. Breakfast is often referred to as asagohan, or "breakfast rice." Traditionally, white rice is steamed and eaten plain, but it may also be enhanced with seasonal ingredients. A popular breakfast dish is tamago kake gohan: hot rice with a raw egg and a dash of soy sauce.



Nattō



Tsukemono

02 Miso shiru

味噌汁
みそしる

Miso soup
Miso soup is the warm, hearty basis of a traditional breakfast. The soup is made from dashi (Japanese bouillon) mixed with miso, a fermented soy base, and will often contain tōfu (p.23), seaweed and spring onions. The flavour differs by region and by season. White miso will make for a sweeter and milder soup, while red miso gives the soup a deeper umami flavour.

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03 Nattō

納豆
なっとう

Fermented soybeans
Nattō is famous, and infamous, for its strong odour, powerful flavour and sticky threads. It owes its slimy texture to the fermentation of the beans. Nattō is served cold, often mixed with soy sauce and mustard. There is even a special technique to elegantly wrapping the sticky threads around your chopsticks as you eat. Although many people don't find the flavour of nattō palatable, it is extremely popular in Japan, and Japanese will be quick to ask you if you like it–so see it as a challenge.