

A part of the crafted textile displayed caught my eyes at Iizawa Shoyu Miso Ten, the artisan food producer outside of Kurobe, Toyama Prefecture

Japanese Food Artisans

A visit to three family-run businesses in Toyama Prefecture

Susan Ellicott, Great Britain

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The author enjoying a chilled corn soup with lotus leaf at Sougo restaurant in Tokyo, part of a summer menu of Buddhist vegetarian shojin ryori cuisine by the chef Nomura Daisuke

Motivation Many Japanese worry that their country's rich heritage of local food production is being lost as Japan becomes more urban and its young pick professional jobs over traditional crafts. To promote awareness of the skills behind Japan's iconic foods, I wanted to document the work of artisan producers of the key ingredients in miso soup without which Japan's famed cuisine would be unimaginable.

Objective This research focuses on the owners of three traditional businesses in small towns in Japan's central prefecture of Toyama, a region with sea and mountains, whose fresh and preserved foods are highly regarded by Japanese chefs.

Context Japan is famous around the world for its historic reverence for traditional crafts and its government's recognition of artisans, including creators of pottery, textiles and *washoku*, Japanese cuisine. I am fascinated by regional Japanese foods because, due to their local ingredients or production skills known only by the families who make them, they cannot be found or replicated anywhere else.

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A residential side street in central Kanazawa

Of all the many ways to appreciate Japan if you are a visitor, one of the best is to go for an early morning walk through a residential area where elderly people live. You don't need a plan. Just stroll at random and sniff the air.

Whether you're in a city, town or village, your nose will soon detect a fishy scent, warm and sweet, escaping from kitchen windows. All over Japan, before shops and offices have raised their shutters, this enticing aroma escapes from even the smallest of homes, enveloping passers-by like a grandmother's loving hug.

The source is *dashi*, the smell of tradition. It whispers that someone has risen early to cook a fresh pot of the classic broth made with water, dried kelp (konbu) and dried, smoked skipjack tuna (katsubushi), the essence of Japanese cuisine. Dashi is the base for miso soup, sauces and clear broths, and the liquid in which vegetables, even fruits, are poached to bring out the savoury flavour of *umami*, the fifth key taste after sweet, sour, bitter, and salty.

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Green vegetable poached in dashi broth with finely striped leek

So central is dashi to Japan's identity that a Japanese friend in Tokyo who's married and has children says she feels guilty if she doesn't make a batch from scratch for her family before she leaves for work. At Japanese restaurants, making a cauldron of dashi is typically the first task of the day for apprentices.

Dashi is the soul of Japanese cuisine, said Yoshida Shinichi, an accomplished restaurant chef who showed me how to make dashi at Tokyo Cook, an English-language cooking school in Tokyo, last year. *It's a product of our history of survival and our unique environment.*

Japan without dashi would be unthinkable, like, say, England without cake or Italy without pasta. Except there's a big difference. In Europe, where I grew up, most home cooks create complexity of flavour by combining a number of raw ingredients and applying lots of cooking time to them. For example, my homemade broth, like my grandmother's, uses fresh raw meat bones, herbs, and vegetables simmered in water for several hours.

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Chef Yoshida Shinichi lifts kelp from a bowl after soaking it in water

By contrast, dashi made from scratch is quick to prepare. Using kelp soaked overnight, the cooking takes only minutes. Yet it's a deceptive simplicity because all the hard effort is hidden. In reality, a good dashi takes years of work: only minutes at the stove but weeks, months, sometimes years, for the drying and fermentation of the kelp and fish.

We get so many treasures from our preserved foods, Chef Yoshida told me.

They've kept us fed through disasters, severe seasons and other hardships. They're the key to our survival.

He lifted soft greenish brown strands of kelp from a bowl of water.

But the younger generation doesn't make dashi from scratch anymore, he added. It's only our elderly people or chefs who know how.

Like many top food professionals, Chef Yoshida, who hails from Kyushu in the south of Japan, wants younger Japanese to appreciate the skills and artistry in his country's regional foods. I agree with him. I'm a British journalist who's loved Japanese food since I first tasted miso soup in New York 30 years ago, made and served in a tiny restaurant in Greenwich Village run by three friends from Tokyo.

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So, last summer, I travelled to Japan to meet some of Japan's artisanal food producers. My hope was that, in documenting their work, I might educate not only foreign visitors about the regional skills of Japan's traditional food producers but also inspire native Japanese to appreciate the expertise that goes into creating local food specialities.

I travelled for a month, visiting fresh food markets, stores, restaurants and producers in a variety of cities – Tokyo, Kyoto, Kanazawa, Takamatsu, Kobe, and Hakodate – and smaller towns. For this essay, I focus on three producers in the prefecture of Toyama in central Japan.

The region combines stunning mountain villages perched in lush forests, charming coastal ports, such as Kurobe with its natural soft water springs, and picturesque simple wooden houses. Many of its towns are not customarily on the itineraries of visitors who don't speak Japanese. They require a car, and therefore a degree of commitment along with a sense of adventure, given that road and street signs, being away from big cities, are not written in English.

For part of the trip, I travelled with Chef Yoshida and a fellow group of food professionals from Tokyo Cook, including Chef Nomura Daisuke, the celebrated head of Sougo, a vegetarian restaurant in Tokyo, and two chefs from the US.

We visited several small family-run businesses with impressive histories of producing local or regional foods, including three of the key ingredients typically used in making a classic miso soup. This, when made authentically, has dashi as its base, and also includes konbu, miso (of course!) and, frequently, tofu.

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The Welcome archway to Gokayama



Old Gokayama is a UNESCO Heritage Site

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My first stop was Gokayama, a mountain village best known as the site of a cluster of wooden chalet-style houses protected by UNESCO for their heritage value. whc.unesco.org

A few miles away, the less picturesque but more vibrant village of modern Gokayama lines a sloping two-lane street through a 'welcome' archway.

On the ground floor of a modest two story building, Iwasaki Kihei, the son and grandson of tofu makers, prepares fresh tofu every day at his business, Kihei Shouten. When I visited on a hot, humid August day, the windows were wide open, capturing a breeze from the conifers along the ridge behind his building.

The air inside smelled pleasantly beany. The room was kitted out with deep stainless sinks, plastic buckets, sieves, ladles, bowls, hoses, and metal machines with temperature gauges, all spotless. Kihei prefers to work *the old fashioned way*, he said, on a small scale that allows him to perform most tasks by hand. Drawings by his young grandchildren decorated the walls.

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Iwasaki Kihei's tofu production room with traditional equipment



Local river stones from Iwasaki Kihei's grandfather



– used as weights to squeeze liquid from the setting tofu

Kihei's tofu is famous locally for its extra firm texture. The chefs travelling with me from Tokyo were surprised. Never before had they tried a tofu this solid – it easily survives being tied in a rope and lifted from a sink of water – or with such a clean, refreshing taste.

A demonstration explained why. One production secret comes from his grandfather – a selection of large granite stones the late tofu maker pulled from a nearby stream of fresh mountain water. (The business shares the pristine stream with an artisan sake brewery.)

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Beans are soaked overnight to make fresh soy milk every day



Soaking soy beans



Fresh soy milk as Iwasaki Kihei looks on in his white plastic boots



Straining the mixture after the addition of a coagulant

Starting with raw yellow soybeans soaked overnight to soften them, Iwasaki Kihei makes a frothy milk by cooking the beans in a machine with the soft local mountain water, and then liquidises them.

He adds a commercial setting agent from a big drum, and pours the thickened mixture, after straining, into deep cloth-lined loaf tins on which he lays the river stones as weights. Liquid runs from holes in the tins. Not too fast, not too slow. The weights apply a gentle, consistent pressure. If he wants softer tofu, he removes the stones when the mixture has shrunk part way down the mould. For a harder, drier tofu, he waits longer.



Iwasaki Kihei's tofu is known for its firm texture – a regional speciality

It's an art, he said proudly. People ask me how long it takes for the tofu to be ready. I say it depends on the day. You have to watch it.

The tofu leaves the moulds in solid white blocks. With a flourish, Iwasaki Kihei slices one with a knife and proudly lifts it into the air to show how solid it is.

It's unlike a factory-made tofu, which, even when firm, has a pudding-like texture. His has a longer shelf life, he said, and is best uncooked, sliced onto salads. He also smokes tofu, which he sells in vacuum packs, and makes delicate soymilk ice-cream, which his wife served to us in cones as we said goodbye.

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Iizawa Yumiko (left) and Shigeto run a small business, making a regional version of traditional miso paste and soy sauce using rice as its base

©Iizawa Shoyu Miso Ten

In heavy summer rain, we drove a few miles to eat freshly made soba (buckwheat) noodles at a restaurant in the mountains.

Descending to flat farmland, my next visit was to the small family-run business, Iizawa Shoyu Miso Ten, which specialises in producing local-style miso paste and soy sauce.

The owners are a husband and wife team, Iizawa Shigeto and Yumiko. Like many artisanal food businesses in Japan, it's a family affair. Their daughter works with them part-time while caring for her baby daughter.

Iizawa Shigeto showed me a shed next to his building with two taps of natural spring water bubbling up from different depths, one colder than the other. *They taste different, too*, he explained. *Because of the minerals in the ground.*

Here, too, local water plays an essential role as a key ingredient in the products.

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These giant drums of fermenting miso paste really are big!

©lizawa Shoyu Miso Ten



The business's supply of fresh local spring water

This business makes miso paste which is traditionally created by using a fungus with white rice, *Aspergillus oryzae*, to ferment soy beans slowly. Depending on where it is made, some versions of miso might contain barley. The lizawas use locally grown rice for their miso production, and they let me mix up a batch by hand in a sterilised plastic bucket.

Their own containers of paste look like giant drums, several feet tall. Until the miso reaches maturity, they store their production supplies for a year in drums, with heavy boxes of salt on the lids – a very practical way to weigh them down hygienically as natural gases build up during the fermentation process.

Like many family-run businesses, the lizawas improvise to keep costs down, and their resourceful frugality is one of the reasons they are able to survive alongside larger companies.

Traditionally, miso paste is made in winter when farmers, who have produced their own version, have no outdoor work in their fields and the levels of natural bacteria in the air – which affect flavour and fermentation – are low. For their unique miso, they use fine quality rice, steamed and then cooled at body temperature so it will react with the fungus.



Two samples of artisan-style miso paste: as it is prepared and when it is matured, ©lizawa Shoyu Miso Ten

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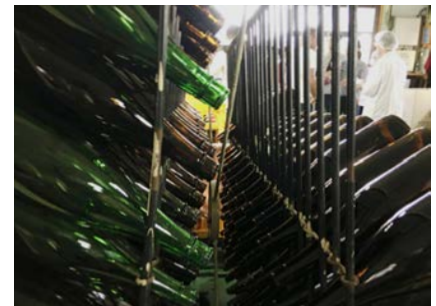
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lizawa Shigeto explaining how fermentation works with Koji (Aspergillus oryzae) through presentation of making sweet sake



The tank of soy sauce going through thermal processing before bottled – The soy sauce of the lizawas is a regional version sweeter than most



Bottles ready for soy sauce as lizawa Shigeto says farewell to visitors

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The lizawas are also known for making an uncommon version of soy sauce, which is sweeter than most, according to local taste. Their products are unique because of the combination of local ingredients and their hand-production methods, including attention to detail and a commitment to quality raw materials.

Delicate and well-balanced flavour is what only small factories like ours can achieve, said Shigeto, through an interpreter. You can't buy our products in a Tokyo supermarket. We are special.

The big companies apply heat to speed up fermentation, he explained. Because it's cheaper to make that way, but ours is produced with a natural fermentation process that occurs in our climate, which makes it unique to this region.

His hope for the future is that his son, recently a student in London, UK, will return to Japan and join the business with the rest of the family.

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Aimono Naoyuki explains where kelp grows wild in Northern Japan



The exterior of Aimono Naoyuki's dried kelp business

The next day, I went to visit the shop, storage room and packing house of Aimono Naoyuki outside the port town of Kurobe. His company, Aimono Konbu, is internationally recognised for its high quality dried kelp, known as konbu.

Aimono Naoyuki is a second-generation konbu producer – drying the seaweed is his art – with strong ties to the region. His grandfather, Aimono Kousaku, was born in Toyama prefecture and moved to Rishiri in Hokkaido, Japan's northernmost island, to trade. His late father, Aimono Naoji, started the company after studying kelp in Osaka, and worked at the company into his 90s. Impressively, he was to be seen in the production room when I visited, skillfully cutting konbu by hand with a special guillotine. Sadly, he passed away in April 2018 and is sorely missed.

During my month-long visit to Japan, I was delighted to discover so many family-run businesses with older family members still valued for their expertise and knowledge, and encouraged to continue working without retiring.

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An unusual ribbon-shaped dried kelp



Aimono Naoyuki's father Aimono Naoji, the founder of the company, still works in his 90s

Aimono Naoyuki attributes the special taste of konbu from Hokkaido to the minerals in the mountains that run into the sea during the spring snowmelt. His products are varied – unusually so. I'd never before seen so many colours, shapes and sizes of seaweed. Visitors can browse through hundreds of packets displayed on shelves that fill three walls of his showroom – and ask to taste any of them.

My favourites including kelp shaved like striped ribbons, and one, floppy like a linen scarf, which melted on my tongue with a vinegary kick. Others are hard like plastic, waiting to be soaked in water to form the base of an excellent dashi.

Visiting the windowless storeroom requires wearing a face mask and protective booties for hygiene reasons. It's a cold place – good for kelp but chilly for people.



Inside Aimono Konbu's climate-controlled store room

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One of the many varieties of kelp dried in Kurobe and sold to famous chefs



A finely shaved kelp used in Japanese cooking to wrap fish or chicken



Aimono demonstrates his slicer that cuts to a fraction of a millimetre

Some of Aimono Naoyuki's best products are expensive – \$1,000 for his largest boxes of top quality kelp – and he sells to a number of celebrity chefs in Japan and overseas. Yet pricing isn't a concern. His biggest worry is sustainability.

I easily sell everything I produce, he said. But recently we worry about the temperature of the sea. This year, it was warmer, which means oysters stick on the kelp. That limits our harvest. Over time, we might have to use more farmed kelp if we don't have enough wild.

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The white substance is Mannitol, a naturally occurring sugar alcohol, that is a sign of high quality dried kelp

With native kelp in shorter supply, last year he asked the Russians to sell him ten tonnes of wild kelp from Sakhalin, an island in the Pacific Ocean, for drying into konbu, but they released only 1.5 tonnes to him. He was disappointed.

The Russian harvesters can make easy money without drying the kelp, he said. They don't have the skills to dry it as we do, and they're not interested. They don't make dashi from konbu. They eat it as vegetable and don't preserve it.

The chefs travelling with me from Tokyo, New York and Portland, Oregon, could not resist buying up armfuls of top grade giant kelp (which takes two years to mature in the wild), kelp powders and various mixes with sesame seeds for garnishing rice. I filled my own suitcase with a dozen shapes and colours.

Later, I showed my purchases to chefs I know in California and the UK, as well as to my friends. Hardly anyone could believe that my fabric-like shavings with the light acidic scent (from natural fermentation) were actually seaweed.

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While Japanese food is hugely popular in Europe and the US, most non-Japanese are familiar only with nori, a toasted seaweed used to wrap sushi rolls, or a few varieties served as salads.

Like all artisans, Aimonio Naoyuki thrives because his products are essentially very simple. He obtains the highest quality raw materials thanks to relationships with suppliers built on trust. Then he applies techniques that go back centuries, and he resists using industrial techniques.

It is refreshing to visit his packing room and hear it buzz with quiet conversation as his employees – a dozen ladies dressed in delicate pink uniforms – weigh and pack the kelp by hand. (They also sort and weigh dried shiitake mushrooms.)

My grandfather was happy when I decided to start a konbu business, he said. He told my father: I was waiting for this day. And now my son has decided to come into the business with me. I have made a good life.

Closing Indeed, the notion of making *a good life* helps to explain why Aimonio Konbu and other family-run Japanese artisan food producers still exist.

The people who run them are committed to mastering a traditional skill. They value their role in their local community or region. They are focused on high standards that provide a livelihood for themselves and their families. Their goal is quality not scale. They seek to survive with integrity without eyes on creating a business to lure investors or buyers.

Meeting these artisans was a positive experience. It was heartening to see and hear in each case that the current owners' offspring are committed to taking over, or have already joined their parents in the family business, even after leaving to travel or study temporarily overseas or outside of the region.

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As a visitor, I am encouraged that their decisions to return indicate that Japan's special status in the world as a culture of artisan food producers is still robust.

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At the same time, it is evident that processed and industrial foods are gaining ground in Japan, as in other modernising countries. So, as someone who loves Japan and its remarkable cuisine, I feel it is my duty to tell anyone who will listen that traditional foods used to dominate the food culture.

I hope this essay will encourage other visitors to seek out artisan foods, and clamour for them, in Japan and from overseas, so that they will never be lost.

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Susan Ellicott is a British-born writer, film maker, television journalist, communications professional, and founder of a food business in London. Her lifelong passions are cooking, eating, and reporting on seasonal food and its producers.

Susan grew up next to a farm in Cornwall, England. Her career has allowed her to travel extensively, including two trips to Japan, where she fell in love with Japanese artisan culture. She has visited Tokyo, Kyoto, Kanazawa, Kobe, Hakodate, Takamatsu, and islands in the Inland Sea. Her dream is to spend a full year in Japan to experience the country's cuisine in all four seasons, cooking with chefs, and writing about their work.

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Places **Aimono Konbu Co.,Ltd.**

A second-generation specialist in curing top quality kelp harvested from Hokkaido. As president of the local food producers' trade association, he is well known in the Kurobe area of Toyama Prefecture, continuing the business that has been founded by his father decades ago.

938-0072, Toyama, Kurobe shi, Ikujinaka ku 339-5

[web-site](#) (Japanese)

Gokayama

Located on the southwestern border of Toyama prefecture, Gokayama is made up of 40 small villages, two of which, Ainokura and Suganuma, are UNESCO World Heritage sites. Gokayama is best known for its Gassho-zukuri farmhouses with thatched roofs, reminiscent of the shape of hands joined in prayer (gassho).

[web-site](#)

Iizawa Shoyu Miso Ten

A family-run business outside of Kurobe, Toyama Prefecture, which uses locally-grown soybeans and rice to ferment a popular regional style of miso paste and shoyu

938-0072, Toyama, Kurobe shi, Ikujinaka ku 85

[web-site](#) (Japanese)

Jippensha

A restaurant along Route 156 that serves two outstanding specialities of Gokayama, soba and tofu. Try *Tofu Agedashi Soba*, soba noodles served with fried tofu, and enjoy the fresh aroma of buckwheat together with the soft textures of cooked Gokayama tofu.

Opening hours 11:00-16:00

Closed on Wednesdays

939-1914, Toyama, Nanto shi, Kaminashi 747

[web-site](#) (Japanese)

Kihei Shouten

Traditional family business producing and selling the special *Gokayama Tofu*, revered for its firm texture and delicate taste

939-1914, Toyama, Nanto shi, Kaminashi 608

[web-site](#) (Japanese)

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Places **Sougo**

A restaurant in the Roppongi district of central Tokyo, headed by celebrated chef Nomura Daisuke. Its specialities are imaginative modern versions of shojin ryori, Buddhist-style vegetarian cuisine.

106-0032, Tokyo, Mianato ku, Roppongi 6-1-8, Roppongi Green Building 3F

[web-site](#)

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People



Aimono, Naoyuki

Aimono Konbu Co.,Ltd.

A second-generation specialist in curing top quality kelp harvested from Hokkaido. As president of the local food producers' trade association, he is well known in the Kurobe area of Toyama Prefecture, continuing the business that has been founded by his father decades ago.

[web-site](#) (Japanese)



Iizawa, Shigeto and Yumiko

Iizawa Shoyu Miso Ten

A husband and wife team renowned for their small business making miso and soy sauce with locally grown rice and soybeans. Their daughter Tomomi joins them part time while taking care of her baby. The Iizawas use ancient Japanese fermentation skills and local spring water to achieve the unique flavours of their products.

[web-site](#) (Japanese)



Iwasaki, Kihei

Kihei Shouten

A third-generation maker of tofu who learned his craft from his father and grandfather. He works in a small village in the Gokayama mountains, relying on the stream behind his business for pristine water. His tofu is much firmer than commercial varieties and owes its texture to his family technique of using river stones to force moisture from the tofu after it has been poured into deep metal vessels.

[web-site](#) (Japanese)

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Nomura, Daisuke

Sougo

The head chef at one of Tokyo's most highly regarded vegetarian restaurants, he specialises in creating imaginative modern dishes within the Buddhist tradition of vegetarian shojin ryori (devotion cuisine). Known internationally among chefs, he was a guest presenter at the Culinary Institute of America's 2018 'Worlds of Flavor' conference in California.

[web-site](#)



Yoshida, Shinichi

Tokyo Cook LLC

A celebrated Tokyo-based chef originally from Kyushu in southern Japan. After a successful career as top soba restaurant chef at Ichibancho-Yoshida, he is best known for his work as a Japanese cuisine instructor at the Tokyo Cook culinary school in Tokyo – and for making soba noodles by hand.

[web-site](#)

Publications

Bending Adversity: Japan and the Art of Survival

Pilling, David, 2014, Penguin Press

An account of how repeated crises and reconstructions shaped Japan's survivalist mentality

Japanese Cooking: A Simple Art

Tsuji, Shizuo, 2012, Tokyo: Kodansha International

When it was first published over 30 years ago, it changed the way, Japanese food was perceived internationally. This thoroughly researched book explains the philosophy and basic craft of Japanese cuisine and provides recipes for readily available ingredients.

Preserving the Japanese Way: Traditions of Salting, Fermenting, and Pickling for the Modern Kitchen

Singleton Hachisu, Nancy, 2015, Kansas City: Andrews McMeel Publishing

A comprehensive introduction to Japan's long-established food preservation practices

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Publications

Rice, Noodle, Fish: Deep Travels Through Japan's Food Culture

Goulding, Matt, 2015, New York: Harper Wave/Anthony Bourdain

An innovative new take on the travel guide, Rice, Noodle, Fish decodes Japan's extraordinary food culture through a mix of in-depth narrative and insider advice, along with 195 colour photographs

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The History and Culture of Japanese Food

Ishige, Naomichi, 2001, London: Kegan Paul

Despite the popularity of Japanese food in the West today, remarkably little is known about its history. This is a detailed study of the food and dietary practices of the Japanese from the Palaeolithic era, before rice was cultivated, through the period when the distinctive Japanese culinary tradition reached its culmination (between 1640 and 1860), and on to the present day.

Web-Sites

Historic Villages of Shirakawa-go and Gokayama

UNESCO world heritage website explaining to great detail the Historic Villages of Shirakawa-go and Gokayama in the rugged high-mountain Chubu region of central Japan

[web-site](#)

The Japanese Food Report

Food writer Harris Salat's informative blog on Japanese food culture, detailing aspects such as preparation and preservation techniques in a light colloquial tone

[web-site](#)

Tokyo Cook

This Japanese culinary school, located in Roppongi, the heart of Tokyo, offers classes from Japanese home cooking to sushi, tempura, soba noodles, and shojin ryori (vegetarian Buddhist diet)

[web-site](#)

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Glossary

Dashi

A soup stock typically made from bonito flakes (katsuobushi), dried fish, dried shiitake mushrooms, and dried kelp (konbu). Its distinct savouriness is a defining element in Japanese cuisine, which enhances and yields flavours of ingredients cooked together.

[web-site](#)

- ▶ Five Key Tastes
- ▶ Katsuobushi
- ▶ Konbu
- ▶ Shiitake
- ▶ Umami

Five Key Tastes

Basic tastes that people can identify: sweet, sour, salty, bitter, and savoury, also known as umami

[web-site](#)

- ▶ Umami

Gokayama Tofu

While the tofu typically found in almost any supermarket in Japan is soft and breaks apart easily, Gokayama tofu is renowned for its firmness and extra sweetness; even bound with string, it retains its shape. It is made with pure local spring water using techniques handed down over generations.

[web-site](#)

- ▶ Tofu

Hokkaido

The second largest and northernmost island of Japan, surrounded by the Pacific Ocean, the Sea of Japan, and the Sea of Okhotsk. Rich in history and natural resources, Hokkaido is renowned for fishing and agriculture industries that supply a wide range of foods.

[web-site](#)

- ▶ Rishiri

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Glossary

Katsuobushi

Bonito that is smoked, fermented, and then dried into a rock-hard block that is shaved to produce the typical translucent flakes. With its concentrated savouriness, it is the most widely used ingredient in dashi.

[web-site](#)

- ▶ Dashi
- ▶ Umami

Koji

Aspergillus oryzae, a fungus used to ferment soybeans, rice, grain, and potatoes. Widely exploited in Asian cuisine, and vital in Japanese cuisine for making soy sauce (shoyu), bean paste (miso), and sake

- ▶ Miso

Konbu

Kelp rich in glutamic acid, often used to make dashi in Japanese cuisine. Four types are used to make dashi: ma, rausu, rishiri, and hidaka, each with its own distinct flavour.

[web-site](#)

- ▶ Dashi
- ▶ Umami

Kurobe

A small city in northeast Toyama prefecture. Set in breathtaking natural surroundings its area extends from sea level to the 3,000m high ranges of the Northern Alps. In the heart of the mountains, the Kurobe River winds through Kurobe Gorge, Japan's deepest, to supply pure mountain water.

[web-site](#)

- ▶ Toyama

Meibutsu

Originally the Japanese term for *masterpiece*, historically used to distinguish tea utensils and swords of exceptional quality and known provenance. Today it also refers to regional specialities.

[web-site](#)

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Miso

Fermented soybean and grain made into paste, one of the key seasonings of traditional Japanese cuisine. Variations are produced all over Japan, and differ in colour and taste according to region and ingredients.

[web-site](#)

►Koji

Nori

Edible seaweed made from red algae, including *pyropia yezoensis* and *pyropia tenera*. Its origin dates back to the beginning of 8th century, when it was consumed as a wet paste. The current dried sheet form was invented in today's Tokyo during the Edo period (1603-1867).

[web-site](#)

Rishiri

An island in the Sea of Japan about 20km off the coast of Hokkaido. Home to the 1,721m high Mount Rishiri, an extinct volcano that provides unobstructed panoramic views from its peak. Tourism and marine products are the main industries, including the supply of kelp.

►Hokkaido

Shiitake

A meaty, dark-coloured edible mushroom (*Lentinula edodes*) native to East Asian countries. Widely used in Japanese and Chinese cuisine. Mild when eaten fresh, the flavour concentrates when dried, often used to make dashi.

►Dashi

►Umami

Shojin Ryori

Literally *Devotion cuisine* has been brought to Japan from China and Korea as the vegetarian diet of Buddhist monks. Also referred to as *Temple Food*, this specific preparation of food is based on the principle of non-violence against all living things and has become a staple of washoku (Japanese Food).

►Tofu

►Washoku

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Glossary

Soba

The Japanese name for long, thin buckwheat noodles, prepared in both hot and cold dishes. A staple food in Japanese cuisine.

Tofu

Bean curd rich in protein made by coagulating soy milk. Tofu originated in China and is said to have been introduced to Japan in the 8th century. In Zen Buddhist diet, it provides an important source of protein, replacing meat and fish. There are many different variations of tofu and it can be served in many dishes. *Tofu Hyakuchin*, published in the 18th century, lists 100 tofu recipes.

►Gokayama Tofu

Toyama

Located in the central part of Japan's main island, Toyama is blessed with a beautiful natural environment. It faces the Sea of Japan to the north and is surrounded by the mountainous terrain of the Northern Alps. The abundant, year-round supply of pure water from the mountains is a vital resource for producing high quality food ingredients.

►Kurobe

Umami

Literally *great flavour* and also known as savoury, is one of the five key tastes along with sweet, sour, salty, and bitter. Umami is an appetitive taste, the response to glutamate on the taste buds, and was first scientifically identified by Ikeda Kikunae, professor at Tokyo Imperial University, in 1908, through experiments on konbu dashi.

►Dashi

►Five Key Tastes

►Katsuobushi

►Konbu

►Shiitake

Washoku

Literally *Japanese Food* is becoming increasingly recognised worldwide as a healthy and delicious cuisine that is not based on fat but water and stimulates all five key tastes. Simple in appearance, its preparation requires a range of highly sophisticated crafts for preparation, preservation, and presentation.

►Five Key Tastes

►Shojin Ryori

Japanese Food Artisans

A visit to three family-run businesses in Toyama Prefecture

Imprint

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