

JAPANESE FOOD TIPS

JAPANESE CUISINE

We have come halfway around the world to experience a new and very different culture.

Please do not indulge in your usual American foods. Eat like the Japanese to better appreciate the culture.

If you find yourself, for example, wanting a sandwich for lunch, please try eating *onigirii*.

These are the Japanese equivalent to a sandwich and are small balls of rice with some stuffing inside. The stuffing could be fish or vegetable, so please ask someone which is what. (See the full list below.) Another great choice for lunch or dinner is noodles.

There are many *ramen* and *soba* shops. An explanation of these is also follows.

If you must have a coffee, go to a Japanese faux French place at least, rather than Starbucks.

If you must have a hamburger, please do not do it in front of me. One year we had a student who claimed to be vegetarian, and was always eating french fries, pizza, and pringles, some of the most toxic things you can put in your mouth. Japanese cuisine has many delicious and healthful foods that contain no meat and or no fish.

Macrobiotics is simply what every Japanese person ate about 100 years ago.

An important rule in traveling is to really experience things and not pre-judge. One rule of the adventurer is to try everything twice, because if you don't like it the first time it is probably because you are doing it wrong! People will often say, "I don't like *tofu*". If this opinion comes from your experience in the United States, realize that you probably have never had good *tofu*. Also realize that there are hundreds of different kinds of *tofu* in Japan, and all taste different. And since *tofu* is probably the most nutritious thing you can eat on the planet, it is probably worth learning to eat it, even if you don't really like it even the second time. Did you really like beer the second time you tasted it, or did you learn to like it? Please apply the same philosophy to seaweed.

Yes, sometimes we need some comfort food, and many American foods are available in Japan. But try to stick to a mainly Japanese diet while you are here. Please be aware that just because something has a Japanese label on it does not mean it is Japanese. If we see you eating a mostly western diet we can only think that you are not learning much from the Workshop and your experience here.

RESTAURANTS

Each restaurant in Japan only serves one kind of food. They specialize, and they get it right.

The Japanese restaurants in American usually mix many types of Japanese food together, but it is not like that here.

Each type of restaurant serves a particular combination of food. There are many types of accompaniments and sauces. It is fun to learn what goes with what.

Japanese food is balanced with side dishes that are designed to aid digestion. If a platter has pickles, please eat them. They contain the enzymes that are necessary to digest that dish. If you get a ball of grated radish (*daikon oroshi*) please sprinkle a bit of soy sauce on it and eat it because it will break down the fat in the fried food it accompanies.

But be aware that many modern Japanese fast foods contain a lot of MSG and salt, and are not so good for you. If you are really Vegan, realize that many foods are seasoned with *katsuo*, flakes of dried shaved fish. It is also hard to find brown rice, because the Emperor always ate pure white rice, an ironic twist. (p.s. do not eat brown rice with fish, they do not digestively compliment each other.)

JAPANESE FOOD TIPS, cont'd

GOHAN & MISO

Gohan is the Japanese word for rice. Since rice is such a staple in this country, the word also means simply, food. A typical Japanese meal consists of eating from many small bowls of prepared food while talking and drinking. Not much food is eaten. It is more a matter of flavor and about being social. Finally, at the end of the meal, a bowl of *gohan* (hot white rice) and a bowl of *miso* soup are presented, and this fills you up. Or it fills you up about 60%. You must remain patient because the liquid of the soup will make the rice expand slowly in your stomach. Then you will be very full. If you eat quickly until you are really full, you run the risk of exploding later. Americans, on the other hand are used to being served one big bowl of food and we tend to gulp it down all at once. Please try to eat slowly, and savor every bite of the unique tastes that you will experience. This is a very subtle country, from food to design. We are also used to being served the soup at the start of the meal. Japanese restaurants tend to serve a salad and then some miso soup at the start of the meal. When you return home, ask for the soup at the end of the meal, Japanese style. Your server will be impressed (if they are even Japanese).

ETTIQUE

slurping

noodles are sucked up into the mouth with a loud slurping sound
eating quietly is an insult to the chef –
he thinks you are not enjoying yourself

picking up bowls

it is okay to pick up any bowl of food and
shovel the food into your mouth
bringing your head down toward the plate on the table
is referred to as 'dog eating'

hashi (chopsticks)

you do not have to pick everything up, they can work like a spoon
hold them higher up rather than lower
never pass food from chopstick to chopstick. that is for funerals only!

quiet and polite

In general, Japanese are quiet people,
Americans are known as loud and sometimes rude
If you become intoxicated, try to do so with civility.
Bow to everyone and always say thank you '*arigatou*'

respect

This is a very respectful society. If you arrive at a door the same time as someone else, stop and let them proceed. A simple gesture to go ahead accompanied with the word '*dozo*' (please go) will make a great impression. Extend this behavior to other circumstances.

cleanliness

Japanese people do not wear their shoes inside the house. Shoes are too dirty. They change into slippers. And when they go to the bathroom, they remove their slippers and change into bathroom slippers. Never should one shoe touch the floor where the other shoe touches. They are very careful about this. Americans often respond by saying, "but my stinky socks...", but these are nowhere as disgusting as the bottoms of your shoes.

You will also notice that most Japanese people dress very nicely. They do not wear baggy, ill-fitting pants, dirty sneakers, and walk around with their tee shirts hanging out (unless they are kids emulating Americans). Please try to look a little bit nicer than usual, and set a good example.

FOOD TYPES & RESTAURANTS (overview)

This is a general list of the food types and restaurants found in Japan. There are more specific details written below this list.

FISH

- Sushi vinegared rice w/ raw fish or vegetables on top
- Sashimi the very freshest raw fish
- Unagi salt-water eel, served in special restaurants

NOODLES

- Soba & Udon cold or hot in broth w/ toppings
- Soba thin buckwheat noodles
- Udon fat white wheat noodles
- Ramen Chinese noodles in meat broth w/ toppings
- These are everywhere and are the most popular food in Japan.
- Quick and cheap.
- dashi soup broth
- soba & udon dashi are combinations of seaweed (*konbu*) and fish stock
- ramen dashi is pork based, vegetarians beware!
- tofu is served in a seaweed based stock flavored with fish

RICE

- Donburi bowl of rice w/ meat on top
- Curry Japanese (not indian or thai) brown curry on rice

FRY

- Tempura quickly deep-fried fish and vegetables
- Tonkatsu fried pork cutlet, but fish is served this way as well

GRILL

- Yakitori literally "*yaki* = grilled + *tori* = chicken"
- an assortment of foods cooked on an open grill w/ beer or shochu
- Shioyaki literally "*shio* = salt + *yaki* = grilled"
- another healthy way to prepare fish

BAR

- Izakaiya often serve their own brand of alcohol, and serve great food
- salary men often come in groups and get wasted after work

YATTAI

- an old-style stand or pushcart found outside railroad stations
- There are also small take-out restaurants that serve this food outside train stations
- Yaki-Soba is sautéed Chinese noodles, with cabbage and some pork
- (vegetarians can say *nikku nashi* to get it cooked without meat)
- Tako Yaki small batter balls with a dot of octopus inside, made on a griddle
- Okonomi Yaki a batter pancake with vegetables, seafood, or meat
- these last two are served with mayonnaise, pickled ginger, and sprinkled with

DRINKS

- Beer usually Sapporo or Kirin, also Asahi, or
- just order "*nama beeru*" whatever is on draft
- Sake many grades depending on how the rice is prepared
- Shochu Japanese Vodka, straight, on the rocks,
- or mixed with fruit juice, soda, or hot water
- Tea *o-cha* = fresh (undried) green tea, *hoji-cha* = roasted tea,
- kuki-cha* = twig tea, or *muji* or *soba* tea (served iced)
- Water *mizu*

DESERTS

- Japanese do not traditionally eat desert. However, ice cream and many French style bakeries abound in Tokyo!

SUSHI & SASHIMI

Sushi is not the most popular or even most often eaten food in Japan. In fact, *sushi* is usually eaten only on special occasions by the common Japanese family.

The word *sushi* refers to a small ball of vinegared rice upon which a small piece of fish or vegetable is placed. The fish is most often uncooked, because it is as fresh as possible. *Sashimi* is only the fish, without the rice. The best *sushi* and *sashimi* is served in restaurants that serve only this type of food. The very best are small and the sushi master is the owner. This means that he purchases the fish personally, ensuring the very best quality.

Sushi typically includes a small dash of *wasabi* (horseradish) made by grating *wasabi* root that is grown in ice cold water in the mountains of Japan. *Sashimi* is usually accompanied by *wasabi* on the side and added to the *shoyu* (soy sauce). The purpose of *wasabi* is as an antibiotic, just in case the fish is not absolutely fresh. It is not intended to produce a 'kick' of hot flavor. If you ignore this fact and say, "But I like it hot and spicy!", you are ignoring the tradition of *sushi* and insulting your *sushi* chef. A famous chef was once heard complaining about a client who covered each piece with lots of *shoyu* and *wasabi* by saying, "He is not tasting my fish." Please appreciate the intended flavor of the cuisine. We are not in Mexico!

Sushi is properly (but not always) eaten by turning each piece on its side with *hashi* (chopsticks) and then lightly dipping the fish side in *shoyu* and then placing the entire piece in the mouth so the fish touches the tongue first. Take your time and savor the taste of the fish. It is okay to eat it with your hands or with *hashi*, maybe depending on the restaurant. This is particularly okay in "Kaiten *Sushi*" (rolling sushi) restaurants.

Sushi and *sashimi* are also usually accompanied by *gari* (pickled ginger) that is supposed to cleanse the palette between pieces. If the *gari* is too strong it will overpower the taste instead. If the color is pale, you are in a good restaurant. If it is a dark artificial-color red, you are not.

There are many kinds of sushi that are American inventions. Please do not ask for a California Roll in Japan. Most chefs will not know what that is. The idea of rolling sushi 'inside-out' is also an American idea. While some restaurants may do some of these things, it is not traditional *sushi*. This is neither better nor worse – it is just different, and we are now in Japan, not the United States.

There is no green salad served with ginger dressing. This is also an Americanism. Please do not put Ginger dressing or anything other than soy sauce on your sushi when you get back to the US. This drives your sushi chef crazy, although he will never say so.

Hot Green Tea (*o-cha*) usually finishes a sushi meal. Green Tea is a high in anti-oxidants, keeping many Japanese people healthy. Please do not embarrass yourself by asking for a coke with your sushi – you will *never* be able to taste the fish.

SOBA & UDON

Soba & Udon cold or hot in broth w/ toppings

Soba thin buckwheat noodles

Udon fat white wheat noodles

Soba restaurants serve both of these noodles. You will always be asked which one you want, *soba* or *udon*. Then you will be asked if you want them hot (*attakai*) or cold (*sumitai*).

There are many fast-food soba places, and they are inexpensive

The next higher level Soba restaurant will get you better noodles and better soup (less MSG, salt, sugar).

If you can find an old style '*tachi guey*' (standing soba) then you will have the best of both worlds.

Udon restaurants are harder to find and serve only Udon. They have a larger selection of topping and sides. These are great meals.

Hot soba is eaten from the bowl. A mouthful of noodles are picked up with *hashi* (shopsticks) and the entire length is sucked into the mouth. The more noise you can make the more you tell your chef that you are enjoying the food. When you get halfway through and the bowl cools down, you can pick it up and continue to eat and drink. The soup stock can be drunk directly from the bowl as well.

Hot Soba / Udon toppings

These noodles are typically topped with some type of tempura (deep fried in a very light batter, nothing like deep fried in the US)

generally available

yasai ten mixed vegetable tempura

kake age mixed tempura (usually shrimp & veggie)

kitsune fried tofu (sheet)

ebi shrimp tempura [ebi ten]

ika squid tempura

chikua fish cake tempura

available in better places

gobo burdock root tempura

ningin carrot tempura

anago fresh water eel tempura

kissu small white fish tempura

oba tempura shiso mint leaf (more unusual)

other options:

tomago raw egg added to hot broth (that poaches from the heat)

inari sushi rice inside a slightly sweet tofu pocket

Cold soba is usually served on a small bamboo tray with a dipping sauce on the side. There will be some *negi* (chopped scallion) and some *wasabi* (horseradish) on the side. You can add these to the dipping sauce, although they usually give you way too much *wasabi*. It should not have a 'kick'. The dipping bowl is picked up and a mouthful of noodles are picked up with your hashi and dipped into the sauce and then sucked up into the mouth, with the bowl very close to your lips.

Mori soba is completely plain

Zaru Soba has small pieces of *nori* (dried seaweed) on top

Tempura can also be served on the side of these plates.

other toppings:

tororo *yamaimo* (wild mountain potato) grated into a paste

oroshi grated daikon radish

natto fermented soybeans

okra sliced okra

YAKITORI

These restaurants are great fun. They serve barbequed chicken on small wooden skewers. They are also famous for drinking beer and whiskey. These items are ordered slowly, just a few at a time and these dinners can last several hours, just for fun.

Some typical pieces are:

shou niku (正肉)	chicken thigh pieces - "standard yakitori", usually with skin
sasami (ささみ)	skinless chicken breast pieces
negima (ねぎ間)	alternating pieces of chicken thigh and scallion
nankotsu (軟骨)	chicken cartilage
hatsu (ハツ)	chicken heart
rebā (レバー)	liver
sunagimo (砂肝)	chicken gizzard
tsukune (つくね)	chicken meatballs
torikawa (とりかわ)	chicken skin, grilled until crispy
tebasaki (手羽先)	chicken wing
ikada (筏)	Japanese scallion, with two skewers to prevent rotation

Vegetarians also have some options in these places, including:

shitake	mushrooms
shishito	small mild green peppers
piman	green pepper
ginan	ginko nuts
negi	scallion
niniku	garlic

Also sold in Yakatori places are other side dishes such as:

potato salad
tomato salad

ONIGIRI (rice balls)

Onigiri flavors

ume	pickled plum
ikura	salmon caviar
shaké	cooked salmon
konbu	prepared seaweed
katsuo bushi	dried fish flakes
tarako	cod fish roe

Nori Maki rolled sushi (also available in Combini)

takuan	pickled vegetable
kappa	cucumber
natto	fermented soy beans (stinky but good)

other options:

yaki onigiri grilled rice balls served in Yakitori restaurants

VOCABULARY

"irashaii masen"	welcome (the restaurant workers will all scream)
"sumi massen"	excuse me or thank you
"arigatou"	thank you
"onegaishimasu"	please (say at the end of <u>every</u> sentence, everywhere)
"oiishi kata"	that was delicious
"go chi so sama deshita"	thank you for a wonderful meal
"atakaii / sumataii"	hot / cold
"moto"	more
"daijyobu"	that's okay (enough)
"sugoi"	great!