

和食

WASHOKU

English



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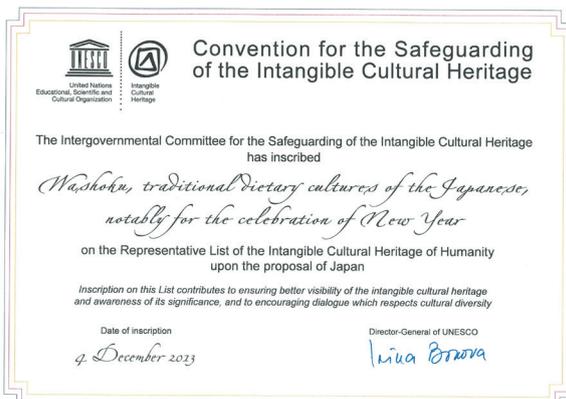
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Definition

“Washoku”, as registered by UNESCO, goes beyond the food itself, referring to Japan’s rice-centered culinary culture. It encompasses the food-related customs that are rooted in the Japanese people’s spirit of “reverence for nature”.



Washoku was Registered by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Asset, But What is It?

The Four Characteristics of Washoku Culture



Diverse, fresh ingredients, and respect for their individual flavors

The land of Japan extends a long way from north to south, and is covered by an expressive expanse of nature through seas, mountains, and villages. Diverse ingredients with local roots are used in each part of the country, and preparation techniques and implements have developed to make the most of their flavors.



Nutritional balance to support a healthy diet

The diet based on ichiju sansai (one soup and three dishes) makes it easy to get a good nutritional balance, makes the most of the umami of dashi stock and of fermented ingredients, and keeps down the intake of animal fats. That helps the Japanese people live long and resist obesity.



Expression of the beauty of nature and the changing seasons

Dishes are decorated with items such as seasonal flowers and leaves, and furnishings and utensil are used that match the season. These techniques express the beauty of nature and the changing of the seasons in a way that is another characteristic of washoku culture.



Intimate linkage with New Year and other annual festivals

Japan’s dietary culture has grown up in close linkage with its annual festivals. Sharing the food that is the blessing of nature, and sharing time for food, deepens family and community ties.

What is Washoku as Cuisine?

Washoku Ingredients

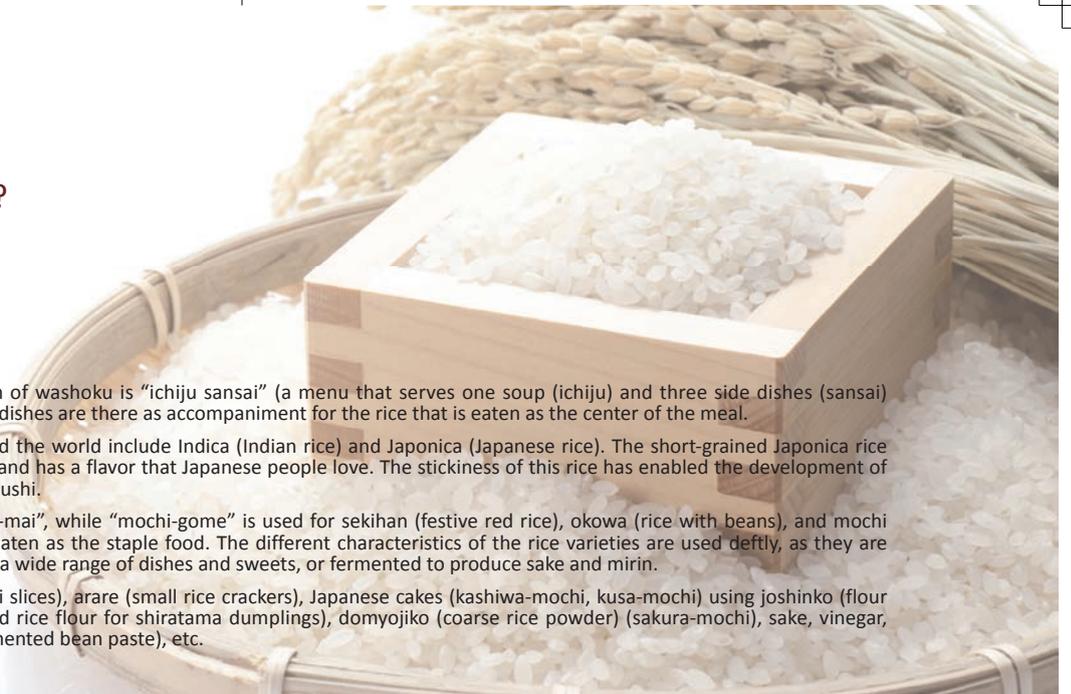
Rice

Rice is essential for washoku. The basic form of washoku is “ichiju sansai” (a menu that serves one soup (ichiju) and three side dishes (sansai) alongside rice and pickles). The soup and side dishes are there as accompaniment for the rice that is eaten as the center of the meal.

The major types of rice now cultivated around the world include Indica (Indian rice) and Japonica (Japanese rice). The short-grained Japonica rice that is typically eaten in Japan is highly sticky and has a flavor that Japanese people love. The stickiness of this rice has enabled the development of pressed rice cuisine, like onigiri rice balls and sushi.

The cooked rice we eat day by day is “uruchi-mai”, while “mochi-gome” is used for sekihan (festive red rice), okowa (rice with beans), and mochi (pounded rice cake). In Japan, rice isn't just eaten as the staple food. The different characteristics of the rice varieties are used deftly, as they are used as grains, flour, or other forms, to create a wide range of dishes and sweets, or fermented to produce sake and mirin.

Mochi (pounded rice cake), okaki (fried mochi slices), arare (small rice crackers), Japanese cakes (kashiwa-mochi, kusa-mochi) using joshinko (flour from non-glutinous rice), shiratamako (refined rice flour for shiratama dumplings), domoyjiko (coarse rice powder) (sakura-mochi), sake, vinegar, mirin (sweet rice wine for cooking), miso (fermented bean paste), etc.



Vegetables

Japan's natural environment yields a multitude of varieties of vegetables through its seasons. Around 150 types of vegetable are currently being distributed in the Japanese market. The range really is amazing, from potatoes and beans to root vegetables, stalk vegetables, leaf vegetables, fruits, and more.

The wild produce of the forests, such as sansai wild vegetables and mushrooms, is also processed with special techniques to become culinary ingredients.

The range of diversified vegetables has expanded as they have come to be more widely marketed in recent years, with the addition of foreign imports and improved varieties. However, there is a contrasting trend towards interest in the “heirloom vegetables” that have been cultivated in Japan since ancient times.



Seafood

The range of seafood landed in Japan, surround as it is by seas, is truly abundant. Just the varieties of fish living in Japanese waters number around 4,200. Other than the sea fish, freshwater fish such as koi (carp), ayu (Japanese trout), funa (crucian carp), and unagi (eel) have long been used as readily-available culinary ingredients.

Sea vegetables, which are rich sources of minerals and vitamins with low calories, are another indispensable element of washoku. Around 50 varieties of sea vegetable are currently eaten in Japan, making the Japanese an unusual people in world terms, for the diversity of their processing and consumption of sea vegetables. Sea vegetables are also deeply connected with offerings to the gods, making it an essential food for festivals and religious ceremonies, not just for everyday life.



Wagyu

Wagyu is high-grade beef that has been developed by and for Japanese cuisine. It has an established beef traceability system to earn the trust of consumers and ensure food safety. The system can be used to get information on the history of production and distribution of every cow born in Japan, through to the end product.

One characteristic behind the deliciousness of wagyu is that it really does melt in the mouth. That mouth feel comes from the way the quality of the meat known as “shimofuri” has been nurtured to have fat like a net, enfolding each muscle fiber.

The cows are raised with pride by fattening specialists, amid Japan's rich natural environment. Wagyu is a work of art created by Japanese culture.

Washoku Condiments

Dashi

Dashi is the most important element in the flavor of washoku. It is the stock used as the base for all kinds of soups and simmered dishes. The secret of dashi's flavor is that it is packed with umami ingredients. That umami is based on the glutamic acid that is abundant in kombu (kelp), inosinic acid from katsuobushi (cured bonito) and niboshi (small dried fish), and guanylic acid from dried shiitake mushrooms. When these umami ingredients are brought together, their synergy heightens the umami flavor still further.

Dashi from natural ingredients is fragrant, and rich in umami and nutrients, but has almost no salt. Dishes made with dashi taste good even when other seasoning is applied more sparingly, which is healthy because sugar and salt content can be reduced.

The most widely used ingredients of dashi are kombu and katsuobushi, but other ingredients include niboshi, vegetables, dried shiitake mushrooms, fish organs and fish ara (heads and bones).



How to make delicious dashi From kombu and katsuobushi

Ingredients

1L of water, 15g of kombu, 20g of katsuobushi

Preparation

- 1 Measure the water into a pot, put the kombu into the water, and leave it to soak for around two hours in summer, or three hours in winter.
- 2 Put the pot on the heat, and pick the kombu out of the water just before it boils.
- 3 Turn the heat down low, add the katsuobushi to the pot, then turn the heat off immediately.
- 4 Once the katsuobushi has sunk to the bottom, strain it out gently.



Recipe using dashi: Clear soup

Ingredients (Serves two)



1/4 block of tofu (kinugoshi type), 4 stalks of mitsuba (Japanese coriander leaf), 400ml of dashi from kombu and katsuobushi, 1/4 teaspoon of salt, 1/3 teaspoon of light soy sauce

Preparation

- 1 Cut the tofu into 1.5cm cubes, and tie the mitsuba stalks into rings.
- 2 Heat the dashi in a pot, add the salt and light soy sauce, then add the tofu.
- 3 Turn off the heat once the soup boils.
- 4 Place the tofu in bowls, garnish it with the mitsuba, and pour the soup stock over the top.

Fermented Condiments

Other than dashi, fermented condiments such as miso, soy sauce, vinegar, sake, and mirin are essential for flavoring washoku. Japan gets hot and humid in summer, so it has a well-developed tradition of fermented foods, in common with other Asian countries.

The process of salting and fermenting soybeans and grains breaks the proteins of the raw materials down into amino acids, to create condiments bursting with umami ingredients.



Soy sauce

Soy sauce is made by adding salt water to koji made from soybeans and wheat to produce moromi, which is fermented and matured. It is widely used for dishes such as sashimi, grilled fish, simmered dishes, and stir fry. The five types are koikuchi (strong), usukuchi (light), tamari, saishikomi (refermented), and white.



Miso

This is one of Japan's most representative condiments, made by boiling or steaming soybeans and mixing them with koji culture and salt to ferment and mature. It is used in miso soup and simmered dishes. One characteristic of miso is its regional diversity, with different areas using different types.



Sake

Sake is another condiment that is essential for flavoring washoku. The main effects of sake as a condiment are that it removes the odors of ingredients while bringing out their umami, improves taste and fragrance, and adds sweetness.



Vinegar

Vinegar is used as a condiment to add sharp acidity to dishes such as sushi and namasu (raw fish and vegetables in vinegar). It is made by adding acetic acid bacteria to sake brewed from rice, and fermenting it. Pickling in vinegar helps to preserve ingredients.



Mirin

The main ingredients of mirin are steamed mochi rice and rice koji culture, which are matured together for between 40 and 60 days to make this fermented condiment. Compared to sugar, it has a softer sweetness, and it also has the effect of removing odors from ingredients. It is also used to give a glaze to dishes such as grilled fish.



Fish sauce

This condiment is made by salting and fermenting fish. It has a unique fragrance and a dense umami. Examples include the shottsuru made in Akita from hatahata (sandfish), and the ishiru made on the Noto Peninsula from squid and sardines.

Washoku recipe using fermented condiments: Miso soup with onions and potatoes

Ingredients (Serves two)

1/2 an onion (100g), 1/2 a potato (70g), 300ml of niboshi dashi, 30g of miso



Preparation

- 1 Peel the potato and slice it 1cm thick. If the potato is large, cut it in half first.
- 2 Cut the onion into wedges 7mm thick.
- 3 Put the potato and dashi in a pot on the heat, then add the onion once the contents have heated through.
- 4 Once the vegetables are boiling, dissolve the miso into the soup, bring it back to the boil, then turn off the heat.

How to make dashi From niboshi

Ingredients

1L of water, 30g of niboshi dried fish (with the heads and guts removed)

Preparation

- 1 Put the water and niboshi in the pot and leave it for between 30 minutes and half a day.
- 2 Put the pot on the heat and boil it for around five minutes, skimming off any froth that appears on the surface.
- 3 Turn off the heat, place a sieve over a bowl, and strain the dashi.



Yakumi

In Japan, spices are called yakumi. They are used in cooking to express the mood of the season, and to draw out the flavors of the ingredients. Yakumi have various effects, such as killing insects and bacteria, removing odors, adding flavors, and whetting appetite, and most of them are used fresh. The yakumi placed as garnishes on top of simmered dishes and marinated foods are called “tenmori”, while those added to soups are called “suikuchi”. They are essential for Japanese cuisine.



Wasabi (Japanese horseradish)

The wasabi added to sashimi and sushi is not just there to cover the scent of raw fish and whet the appetite. It also has disinfectant and antibacterial effects. Japan has abundance of superbly fresh seafood, most of which can be eaten raw, but eating it together with wasabi, that provides powerful disinfectant and antibacterial benefits, is a further measure against food poisoning.



Shoga (ginger)

Shoga, used grated or finely chopped, is an essential ingredient for Japanese cuisine. Its characteristic fragrance and spiciness excite the appetite. Its spicy constituents whet the appetite and improve metabolism, as well as having a powerful disinfectant effect. Old kampo (Chinese medicine) texts say that “ginger protects against all ills”, and it really is an excellent ingredient for health.



Negi (green onions)

Negi has white and green parts. The allyl sulfide included in negi has the medicinal effects of encouraging the secretion of digestive juices, raising appetite, and warming the body. The green part of negi has benefited from sun exposure, which leaves it rich in calcium and vitamins.



Shiso (perilla)

Shiso was first brought to Japan over 5,000 years ago and has been grown since ancient times as a spice plant. Its colors, shape, and fragrance lead to its use in a wide range of dishes. It is nutritionally rich in vitamins and minerals. Ancient people knew to use it as a garnish for sashimi, for its disinfectant properties. It can be broadly divided by color into green shiso (aojiso) and red shiso (akajiso). Aojiso, which is also known as “ohba” (literally “big leaf”), is the one generally used as yakumi.



Yuzu (Japanese citron)

Yuzu is an ingredient deeply connected with Japanese customs, not just as yakumi for flavoring food. In Japan, it is said that bathing with yuzu in one’s bath on the winter solstice protects one from diseases and disasters. That was the wisdom of Japanese ancestors, who knew that a yuzu bath warms the body and leaves the skin smooth. Yuzu also contains abundant nutrients, including vitamin C, calcium, potassium, iron, and other minerals. When it is used as yakumi, the yellow part of the peel is grated, or peeled off and chopped or cut into fine strips. The fruit may also be cut in half and squeezed.

Recipe using yakumi

Ingredients

Tofu, yakumi to taste

Preparation

- 1 Cut the tofu into bite-size chunks.
- 2 Add yakumi (shoga, negi, and shiso are recommended)
- 3 Add soy sauce and eat (a sprinkling of katsuobushi as the last ingredient is a delicious addition).



Washoku Style

Ichiju sansai

A washoku meal is built around rice at its heart, with the addition of side dishes based on the principle of “ichiju sansai”.

Ichiju sansai means one soup and three “okazu” side dishes (one main and two secondary dishes), combined to complete the meal. The light taste of the rice matches any kind of okazu, and adopting the pattern of “ichiju sansai” provides an excellent nutritional balance through the use of numerous ingredients.

The main side dish uses high-protein ingredients, such as fish, meat, eggs, or tofu. The secondary side dishes use ingredients rich in vitamins, minerals, and dietary fiber, such as vegetables, potato varieties, beans, mushrooms, and sea vegetables.



Cha-kaiseki and Kaiseki

Kaiseki is one of the forms of Japan’s traditional culinary culture. It treasures the sense of the season, which is fostered by the use of seasonal ingredients, the ways those ingredients are cut, and even how the dishes and utensils are used.

The term “kaiseki ryori” really refers to cha-kaiseki, which is the multi-course meals served to guests invited to attend tea ceremony, and eaten before the tea is served. Kaiseki, on the other hand, is a multicourse meal which guests eat while enjoying sake.

Both types of “kaiseki” involve selection of delicious seasonal ingredients and the use of techniques to draw out their innate flavors, and are imbued with “omotenashi no kokoro” (the heart or spirit of hospitality) that empathizes with the person eating the food.

Nihonshu (Japanese sake)

Japan’s culture has grown up around rice cultivation, and rice has been a precious food. Every individual grain was thought to be a shelter for a god, and similarly, the ability to make sake was seen as a divine gift. Sake has been used since ancient times as an offering to the gods, and as a means of approaching the divine.

It also has an important role in cementing ties with family, relatives, and the local community.

For example, sake offered to the gods is always shared out and drunk by all those present after the ceremony. Drinking the same sake as the gods, and sharing it among the people, strengthens local ties and community cohesion.

Sake has the important roles of bringing out the flavors of washoku and bringing people’s hearts together.



Wagashi (Japanese cakes) and Nihoncha (Japanese tea)

Wagashi cakes, which give thanks for the blessings of nature and give sensitive reflection to the changing seasons, and nihoncha, which soothes the heart as well as the thirsty throat, are indispensable elements in washoku.

There are countless varieties of wagashi, including “mochimono” items made of mochi, such as dango and daifuku, “nerimono” kneaded items, such as gyūhi and ame, “nagashimono” molded items, such as yokan, and “agemono” fried items, such as age-senbei and karinto. There are also cakes linked to annual festivals. For example, kusamochi is eaten on hina-matsuri (Doll Festival) on the third day of the third month of the old calendar. Kusamochi is mochi rice cake blended with yomogi, a plant that symbolizes strong life force and the repulsion of evil.

Green tea was brought to Japan from China in the 12th century. The production process for green tea, in which the fresh tea leaves are steamed, then kneaded and dried, is unique to Japan. The caffeine in green tea has a stimulant effect, while catechin is an antioxidant, and there is also plenty of vitamin C. Green tea really is a healthful drink.

Chopsticks and the Manners of Eating With Them

Ohashi

Ohashi (chopsticks) are essential for we Japanese at mealtime. We use them not just for eating, but also for the preparation and serving stages. Many countries use chopsticks, but Japan is the only one that uses only chopsticks to eat meals.

The ohashi used for meals are the ones that people use to feed themselves (shokubashi) and the ones that are used to take servings of each dish (toribashi).

Some shokubashi are also called ryokuchibashi because they are narrow at both ends. They are shaped that way because the person holding them uses one end, and the gods use the other. The idea that the gods use the same ohashi as people and share their meals reflects the hope of attracting prosperity and averting disaster. That is why these ohashi are used on special days, such as festivals and celebrations. The correct way to hold ohashi is to hold the upper one with the thumb, index finger, and middle finger, and hold the lower one between the third finger and the base of the thumb. The lower ohashi is the axis and only the upper ohashi is moved, to grip food.

There are some things one must not do while holding ohashi. The main ones include "neburibashi", which means licking or biting the ohashi, "yosebashi", which means moving a dish with the ohashi rather than with one's hands, "sashibashi", which means poking ohashi into something or using them to point at someone, and "mayoibashi", which means moving one's ohashi around indecisively while thinking about what food to take.



Manners for Eating

In Japan, the word "itadakimasu" is said as a greeting to a meal. Besides marking the start of the meal, it is an expression of gratitude, giving thanks for receiving the life of the ingredients.

At the end of the meal, "gochisosama" is said to express gratitude to the person who made the meal. "Itadakimasu" and "gochisosama" are the basics of mealtime etiquette.

Rice and soup are not left standing on the table while they are eaten. Rather, the proper etiquette is to lift each dish and hold it in the hand while eating the contents.

The Washoku Association of Japan (Washoku Japan)

As a national movement to pass on washoku culture to the next generation, Washoku Japan welcomes groups involved with regional foods, local governments, individuals as well as manufacturers, service companies and distributors who support the Japanese diet. We are looking for members to join our campaign.

和食会議

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