

# JAPANESE CULINARY LEXICON

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**Adzuki** (sometimes spelled **azuki**) is a small red bean that is mixed with sugar to make **anko**, the sweet bean paste that is used in many Japanese cakes and confections (see **wagashi** below).

**Bento** are “boxed meals” with several compartments, each containing a different type of food. Usually included are rice, pickled vegetables (**tsukemono**), dumplings, and small portions of several other foods, including sushi and sashimi. Bento are often prepared in the home to be taken to school or work, but can also be bought almost anywhere and range from a quick “to-go” lunch to an elegant sit-down meal. Train stations (**eki**) in Japan each sell their own special bento called **eki-bento** and compete with each other to provide the best quality and value. The bento boxes themselves may be made of wood, plastic, cardboard, or beautiful lacquerware. Multi-tiered elaborate bento boxes called **jubako** are true works of art.

**Cha** (usually referred to honorifically as **o-cha**) is the Japanese word for tea and specifically denotes Japanese green tea made from unfermented tea leaves. A special finely powdered form of green tea is called **matcha** and is used in the formal tea ceremony.

**Chankonabe** is a rich stew used to fatten up sumo wrestlers. It usually contains chicken, fish, vegetables, soy, and tofu. Traditionally the flesh of quadrupeds is not used, since being down on all fours means defeat in sumo.

**Chawan mushi** is a steamed savory egg custard made with **dashi** (see below). It usually contains chicken or shrimp or both, and is served in distinctive small china cups (called **chawan**) with lids.

**Daikon** is a giant white radish, often served (finely shredded) with sashimi.

**Dashi** is a delicate soup stock that is widely used in Japanese cooking. It is made from fine shavings of **katsuobushi** (dried, smoked, mold-cured bonito which is central to Japanese cuisine) and shredded **konbu** (a coldwater kelp which grows off the coast of northern Japan). Dashi is used as a base in almost all soups and broths, including **miso soup**.

**Donburi** is a general term for “bowl.” It is also the name of a popular Japanese dish: a bowl of steamed rice with a main dish on top, which might include egg, chicken, pork, eel, or tempura, among others.

**Edamame** are soybeans in the pod. Boiled edamame are a common snack served with beer.

**Fugu** is the highly poisonous pufferfish, a prized Japanese delicacy. Its liver and ovaries contain tetrodotoxin, a neuromuscular toxin which is the most lethal substance on earth. The Japanese consume fugu raw as sashimi, eat the toasted fins, and enjoy a stew made from fugu. A few fugu deaths occur almost every year, usually in those who have not sought the services of a highly trained fugu chef who can avoid contaminating the adventurous meal with tetrodotoxin. Don’t try this at home.

**Gyoza** are Japanese-style dumplings, usually filled with pork, cabbage, and chives. Originally a Chinese dish (a.k.a. potstickers), gyoza have become very popular across Japan.

**Higashi** are candies and sweet or savory crackers. They are one type of **wagashi** (Japanese confectionary) and are served with tea to balance the tea’s bitterness.

**Jizake** is local (“microbrew”) sake.

**Kaiseki** is Japanese *haute cuisine* served in an elegant and restrained environment, with emphasis on seasonality of the food and artistic presentation. It usually consists of many small and varied courses, and is often served on exquisite or even antique dinnerware that is carefully chosen to complement the food's artistic qualities.

**Kawara-soba** is a traditional dish of soba noodles and much more cooked and served on a ceramic roof tile - it has historical origins in the siege of Kumamoto Castle in 1877 during the Satsuma Rebellion.

**Kayu** (usually honorifically referred to as **o-kayu**) is a delicate rice porridge served for breakfast. It may be flavored with bits of salmon, **umeboshi** (dried, salt-pickled Japanese apricot), **seri** (Japanese parsley) or other flavorings.

**Konowata** is fermented sea cucumber intestines, a favorite Japanese delicacy (really).

**Kujira** is whale meat, served in specialty restaurants, especially in the Shibuya district of Tokyo.

**Kushiage** is a sort of deep-fried shish-kebab with a wide variety of ingredients.

**Mirin** is a sweet rice liqueur used in cooking. It is what gives **sukiyaki** its delicate sweetness.

**Miso soup** is served every morning in Japan, with small cubes of tofu and the flavors of seasonal vegetables, including Japanese green onion (**negi**). Made with **miso** (fermented soybean paste) and **dashi** (see above), this soup can be found at almost any meal.

**Mochi** are glutinous rice cakes, soft and sticky, which are eaten at New Year and other holiday celebrations. They are very popular and are thought to bring good luck - but unfortunately they bring very bad luck to some as they are a recognized choking hazard which causes several mochi deaths (usually in the elderly) each year.

**Nabemono** refers to any of the Japanese hot pot dishes, including **shabu shabu**, **sukiyaki** and **yudofu**. These dishes are cooked at the table and served directly from the pot.

**Natto**, a fermented soybean dish, is soft, sticky, and thread-like in texture. It has a very strong aroma and flavor that is often not appreciated by foreigners.

**Okonomiyaki** is sometimes called a "Japanese pizza," but it is more like a savory pancake with generous toppings. "Okonomi" means "as you like," and refers to the variety of ingredients, including eggs, beef, pork, chicken, seafood and vegetables. It is often prepared at the table.

**Okashi** refers to the enormous spectrum of Japanese snack foods, sweet and savory, and always packaged creatively. Think of the snack food aisle at your grocery store and multiply by 1000.

**Ponzu** is a piquant dipping sauce made from Japanese citron (**yuzu**) and **shoyu** (soy sauce). It may have a touch of dashi, rice vinegar, and/or mirin in it as well.

**Ramen** are thin yellow egg noodles, originally imported to Japan from China. "Ra-men" is the Japanese pronunciation of the Chinese characters for Lo-Mein. Over the last few decades, ramen has gained great popularity inside and outside of Japan. Fresh ramen noodles are a far cry from the instant dried variety in the square packages we are familiar with, and are delicious served in soup with various toppings.

**Rice** is Japan's most important crop, and has been cultivated by the Japanese for over 2,000 years. Its fundamental importance to the country and its culture is reflected by the facts that rice was once used as a currency, and that the Japanese word for cooked rice (*gohan*) has also the general meaning of "meal." The literal meaning of breakfast (*asagohan*), for example, is "morning rice."

**Sake** is an undistilled liquor made from rice. (It is a misnomer to call it "rice wine" since it is brewed rather than vinted, and it is made from grain rather than fruit). It almost certainly originated in China but the Japanese – the great refiners – have done wonders with it over two millennia. There is an enormous range of flavor and quality, due to both technique and *terroir*. Sake rice is fermented with *Aspergillus* mold (which converts the rice starch to sugar), and also with yeast (which converts the sugar to alcohol) in a

unique simultaneous (known as ‘double-parallel’) fermentation process. The average final alcohol content is around 16%. The finest sakes are made from the most highly polished rice, *i.e.*, more of the outer portion of the rice kernel, known as the cortex, is removed – leaving what the Japanese refer to as the *shinpaku*, the white heart. Finer sakes are always drunk cold. Sake is best drunk fresh- no need to know vintages!

**Sampuru** - derived from the English word 'sample - Faux food/replica food. Originally made from wax, now typically plastic. Uniquely and often whimsically Japanese.

**Sashimi** is sliced, raw seafood of seemingly infinite variety.. Many kinds of extremely fresh fish and shellfish may be used and are always artistically presented. Sashimi pieces (like **sushi**) are typically dipped into **shoyu** (soy sauce) mixed with a bit of **wasabi** before they are eaten.

**Sembei** are tasty Japanese rice crackers, either savory or sweet. You can find sembei flavored with soy sauce, **nori** (dried seaweed), **konbu** (kelp), sesame seeds, or soybeans, plus a huge range of more modern flavors like cheese, chocolate, and kimchee. Many cities have unique sembei specialties.

**Shabu Shabu** is a do-it-yourself hot pot dish featuring thin slices of beef and assorted vegetables dipped into a boiling stock. It is a favorite winter dish, derived from the Mongolian hotpot of Chinese cookery.

**Shiitake**, the best-known Japanese mushroom, is extensively cultivated and preserved by drying. The dried fungi keep almost indefinitely and maintain a strong aromatic flavor. Shiitake derive their name from the *shii* tree, a kind of chestnut oak, on the cut logs of which the mushrooms are cultivated.

**Shiso**, a member of the mint-basil family, is eaten with sushi and sashimi and also served as a garnish and flavoring with rice and in soups. It has a unique flavor with delicate hints of basil and spearmint.

**Shochu** is a popular vodka-like distilled spirit made from sweet potatoes (most commonly), regular potatoes, rice, barley, buckwheat, millet or corn. Alcohol content is about 40%.

**Shojin ryori** is Zen Buddhist vegetarian cuisine, dating back to the 6<sup>th</sup> century and reflecting the Buddhist strictures against eating flesh. The Kyoto specialty **yudofu** (large cubes of tofu and vegetables in a hot broth with a soy/ginger/onion dipping sauce) is a quintessential shojin ryori dish.

**Shoyu** is Japanese soy sauce, essential to Japanese cuisine. It is made from fermented soybeans, wheat, and salt. **Tamari** is made from soybeans and salt only.

**Soba** are Japanese noodles made of buckwheat flour (*soba-ko*) and wheat flour (*komugi-ko*). They are roughly as thick as spaghetti, and prepared in various hot and cold dishes.

**Sukiyaki** is one of Japan’s most famous dishes. It is a **nabemono** (hot pot cook-at-the-table dish) made in a shallow cast-iron pot. Thin slices of well-marbled beef and a variety of vegetables including green onions, shiitake mushrooms, and chrysanthemum leaves are simmered with **shoyu** (soy sauce) and **mirin** (sweet fermented rice liqueur) and served piping hot. Hot morsels are dipped into raw egg (which then cooks as a coating) just before eating. Sukiyaki is of great historical significance in that it was a dish created and promoted during the Meiji Restoration as a break with Buddhist tradition and an embrace of modernity. Eating beef was a way of emulating the West and was considered civilized and chic. Beef was also very inexpensive at the time, which is no longer the case.

**Sunomono** is a salad dressed with lightly sweetened rice vinegar. Sliced cucumbers and seafood are the most common ingredients.

**Sushi** is both the best-known Japanese dish outside of Japan, and the most popular dish among the Japanese themselves. It originally derives from fish preservation methods using vinegared rice, and probably originated in China (though the Koreans will be quick to tell you that *they* invented sushi). The Japanese refined it in Edo by using swimmingly fresh fish atop the vinegared rice – thus the term *Edo-mae*

sushi. Being the great refiners that they are, the Japanese added many more creative and delicious touches. Sushi can be the classic *nigiri* (flattened oblong rice balls with raw fish or other ingredients on top), *maki* (a ‘roll’ of vinegared rice and raw fish or other ingredients wrapped cylindrically in a dried **nori** seaweed wrappers), *gunkan* (a collar of **nori** wrapped around an oblong rice ball with fish or other ingredients on top – *gunkan* literally means ‘battleship’, due to its shape), or *temaki* (a **nori** seaweed cone - aka ‘hand-roll’ - filled with rice and raw fish or other ingredients).

**Tataki** is a seared filet of bonito or beef, raw on the inside. It is served with a soy and ginger sauce.

**Tempura** consists of seafood and/or vegetables deep-fried in a light and airy batter. Tempura probably owes its origins to the Friday fried fish meals of Portuguese sailors and traders in 16<sup>th</sup>-century Japan – with the Japanese refining it almost beyond recognition. Today it is a very popular dish in Japan and worldwide. Tempura is usually served with a special dipping sauce made from **dashi**, **shoyu**, and ginger. **Kakiage** is a special type of tempura: a deep-fried clump of tiny fish, shrimp, and vegetables.

**Tendon** is tempura served over rice (a donburi dish).

**Teppanyaki** is cuisine cooked on a hot iron griddle, usually served with a soy/mirin/garlic/sesame dipping sauce. Beef, shrimp, scallops, chicken, and vegetables are the usual fare. Virtually every home in Japan has a **teppan** (iron hot plate griddle) which is used to make grilled foods (**yaki**). ( ‘Benihana of Tokyo’ restaurants in the U.S. serve a theatrical Americanized version of this Japanese specialty.)

**Teriyaki** is grilled food coated with a sauce made from **shoyu** (soy sauce) enriched with **mirin**. Teriyaki sauce provides luster and added flavor to grilled food.

**Tofu** is soybean curd made from strained soybean milk to which is added a coagulant (magnesium chloride) derived from sea salt. There are several different grades and textures. The Kyoto specialty **yudofu** consists of tofu and vegetables in a hot broth, and is often served at Buddhist temples.

**Tonkatsu** is a very popular deep-fried pork cutlet coated with egg and bread crumbs. It is succulent and typically served with finely shredded raw cabbage and a thick Worcestershire-style sauce.

**Udon** are thick and hearty Japanese wheat noodles. Their longer, thinner counterpart is called **somen**.

**Unagi** (freshwater eel) is a Japanese favorite, so much so that spirits rise and fall with the size of the unagi harvest each year. Unagi is rich and fatty, and usually served with a sweetish teriyaki sauce. It is very popular as a topping for *nigiri* sushi.

**Wagashi** are Japanese sweets, usually made with a sweet red bean paste known as **an**. They are not served for dessert, but rather accompany tea to offset its bitterness.

**Wasabi** is Japanese horseradish which traditionally accompanies sushi and sashimi. It is less harsh and more aromatic than its Western cousin. The ubiquitous green powder we see in the West is not the real thing, but rather a cheaper substitute made from Western horseradish, green food coloring, and powdered mustard. Real fresh grated wasabi is delicious - and expensive, because wasabi grows only in the wild, along cold streams. It is served at finer restaurants in Japan or you can buy it yourself at many markets.

**Yakitori** is grilled (**yaki**) chicken (**tori**) speared on sticks. Many different parts of the chicken may be used, including the liver and other organ meats. Leeks, onions, or savory chicken meatballs may also be included. Countless small, informal yakitori restaurants line the streets of Tokyo and other cities.

**Yaki niku** literally means grilled meat, and that is exactly what it is. You grill bite-size pieces yourself on a griddle on the table, along with veggies. It also known as ‘Japanese Barbecue’ but the Koreans insist it is just ‘Korean Barbecue’ stolen by the Japanese. I won’t get in the middle of that, but it’s fun and delicious.