

food forum

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THE JAPANESE TABLE

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Rice

Agricultural and Societal Roles

Continuing our series on rice, we examine how this grain historically came to dominate Japanese agriculture while transforming the country's socio-economic framework.

—
by Yo-Ichiro Sato

Satoyama rice-farming landscape
in Nagasaki Prefecture

Although it remains unclear when rice was first introduced to Japan, it has been established that wet-rice agriculture—the cultivation of rice in flooded paddies—reached Japan about 3,000 years ago. Rice probably arrived in the Japanese archipelago by several routes, but considering that existing ancient strains are, genetically speaking, fairly homogeneous, it seems that the amount of rice originally brought into Japan was very limited. Around 2,000 years ago, wet paddy rice-growing was practiced widely throughout the islands; not until the sixth century, however, did rice cultivation expand to the point of changing the very nature of society.

Rice as power

When royal authority became genuinely established in the archipelago around the sixth century, development of the state was founded on rice cultivation. Innumerable workers were ordered to construct great keyhole-shaped tumuli, symbolic

of that royal authority, and large-scale paddy expansion was undertaken in order to grow the copious amounts of rice required to feed these workers. Reservoir ponds and irrigation ditches were built on elevated land to irrigate the paddies, while fish living in their waters provided a ready source of protein. The “rice and fish” combination that is fundamental to Japanese *washoku* cuisine dates from this time.

The ancient state leased paddy fields to farmers and collected a portion of harvested rice as tax. However, as the population increased and soil quality deteriorated from continuous cultivation, the rice supply from state-held lands could not keep up with demand, and additional land had to be reclaimed for new fields. Rice cultivation shifted into private hands, as the state came to rely on the power of noble families to develop these new fields. This led to the formation in the Heian period (794-1185) of privatized estates known as *shoen*—land owned by powerful members of the elite that was farmed by peasants.

By the time the warrior class began to accumulate power in the thirteenth century, a wide range

of technological developments, including the deliberate selection of rice strains, had advanced. Warriors fought to gain control of rice-producing domains, their rivalries eventually intensifying into civil wars that raged throughout the country from the late fifteenth through sixteenth centuries. During this era, rice gradually acquired the status of a “battle resource,” as myriad strategies were developed to increase rice production of one’s own domain, and decrease that of rivals.

Cultivation technologies

It is often said that the Japanese archipelago is well-suited to rice cultivation because of its climate of high temperatures and humidity, but this is not necessarily so. Some areas suffered from a lack of water; others were beset by flooding. Land was made suitable for rice farming through centuries of hard labor in building reservoirs, irrigation canals, levees and other engineering works, thus improving water distribution systems and adapting practices to local ecologies—including selecting

rice strains which correspond to specific characteristics of the land. Engineering works led to advancements in surveying techniques, stone wall-building, and in the mathematics that underpins these technologies.

During the Edo period (1603-1867), Japan was known for its high literacy rate, and it is noteworthy that this higher level of learning in society as a whole was partly the result of efforts to advance the technologies of rice cultivation.

The high productivity of land achieved by technological advancements during the Edo period formed the unique Japanese landscape of mountains and cultivated fields; the forest and mountains surrounding farm villages are called *satoyama*. Farmers in villages obtained fertilizer, food, fuel and lumber from *satoyama*, integrating agriculture, lifestyle and nature through coexistence, thus establishing sustainable lifestyles. Designated as tax, rice became the foundation of the economy of the domains; research in agricultural technologies was therefore encouraged in many domains, with benefits accrued to those families farming the land. Such research has been preserved in collective agrarian technology reference books known as *nosho*, which chronicle the names of many rice strains and explain suitable soils for each strain in detail, by region.

Rice as foundation

During the Meiji era (1868-1912), rice again assumed its role as a “battle resource.” In wars waged with China and Russia, massive quantities of rice were transported to the respective fronts to feed troops. Further improvements in strains and cultivation were made, and

these efforts later became state-sponsored. There was also tremendous enthusiasm towards improving rice cultivars during this particularly patriotic era. Rice shortages eventually caused the price of rice to skyrocket,



Ripe rice grain clusters become heavy and turn golden when ready for harvest.



This woodblock print depicts a *satoyama* landscape and rice planting in the Edo era, by artist Utagawa Hiroshige I, from his print series *Rokujuyoshu meissho zue* (1853).

Courtesy of National Diet Library Digital Collections

fueling rice riots (*kome sodo*) in various parts of the country. The largest such protests in Japanese history erupted in 1918, when rice became the target of market speculation.

Rice shortages continued until the end of the Second World War. Subsequently, rice production increased, and shortages were resolved in the 1960s. This was the moment when, for the first time, the long-coveted rice diet

could be claimed as standard for all Japanese. Ironically, from this time, the consumption of rice fell sharply and Japan entered an era of rice surplus. Rice consumption, which stood at 118 kilograms annually per capita in 1962, has since fallen to a little over 50 kilograms in 2020.

For over two thousand years, rice played a leading role as the foundation of this country's

state power, as a currency in its economy, and as a vital resource in the waging of war. In the future, rice is anticipated to play a new role in making unique contributions toward the preservation of Japan's landscape, traditions and food culture. Our next installment will explore the essential role of rice in Japanese cuisine. ◆

On the cover Edamame, featured in *Spirit of the Seasons*, page 5; and sheaves of ripe rice and polished grains after harvest.

Author's profile

Yo-ichiro Sato was born in 1952 in Wakayama Prefecture. He holds a PhD in agriculture from Kyoto University. He has been director of the Museum of Natural and Environmental History, Shizuoka since 2021. From 2019, he served as distinguished professor at Kyoto Prefectural University; since 2023, he has held the post of visiting professor there. His many publications include *Shoku no Jinruishi* (Human history of food, 2016), and *Kome no Nihonshi* (Rice in Japanese history, 2020).

Japan's *Neo Wagashi*

In recent years, conventional notions about *wagashi* Japanese confectionery have been upended, as quirky innovations are redefining the look and taste of these traditional sweets. The trend may have started with *daifuku*, a small, round *wagashi* made of *mochi* glutinous rice and filled with sweet *azuki* red bean paste, a classic and much-beloved accompaniment to tea. The idea of combining this mainstay with fresh fruit was once inconceivable—until the renowned *ichigo daifuku* was introduced in the 1980s. Revolutionary at the time, *ichigo daifuku* features a fresh strawberry (*ichigo*) nestled inside. Today this concoction of sweetness complemented by tart fruit remains one of Japan's most popular *wagashi*.

By paving the way for the so-called *neo wagashi* trend, the *ichigo daifuku* inspired more imaginative *daifuku* fillings, like sweet white bean paste, whipped

cream, and fruit including Shine Muscat grapes, *mikan* satsuma and kiwi. *Dorayaki* small pancakes and *taiyaki* fish-shaped waffle cakes, both traditionally filled with sweet *azuki* paste, now also offer assorted fillings: some include butter, cream or fruit with *azuki* paste; other temptations are matcha cream, Western-style custard, cream cheese or chocolate.

Ohagi is a traditional *wagashi* of steamed glutinous rice pounded only lightly, so half the grains remain intact. This is typically oval-shaped and coated with *azuki* paste or dusted with sweetened *kinako* roasted soybean powder. As *neo wagashi*, however, *ohagi* are round and covered with bright,



Ichigo daifuku

colorful sweet bean pastes and decorated with nuts or shredded coconut. *Warabi mochi*, made of bracken starch, is a jelly-like *wagashi* served with *kinako*. It now enjoys a new role added to milk tea or café latte, and, as with bubble tea, a wide straw delivers the jiggly, deliciously chewy *warabi mochi* to the mouth. Traditional *wagashi* will always endure, but the fresh takes on flavor and offbeat twists on presentation of *neo wagashi* continue to evolve and delight. ●

Traditional wagashi are being redefined



Traditional *dorayaki* and *taiyaki* (top left and right) alongside *neo wagashi* fruit *daifuku*, cream-*azuki* paste *dorayaki* and matcha cream *taiyaki*.

Sumashijiru

Clear Soup

Our focus on Japanese soups continues with sumashijiru, whose delicate umami complements a wide variety of ingredients.

Sumashijiru is a clear (*sumashi*), dashi-based soup (*jiru*), sparingly seasoned with salt and light color soy sauce. Although Japanese dishes are often accompanied by miso soup, *sumashijiru* is considered more suitable for accentuating the flavors of the ingredients in the soup.

This clear soup imparts the delicate fragrance of dashi made with dried bonito flakes and/or kelp, and is considered the embodiment of umami. A variety of ingredients can be added to *sumashijiru*, including daikon radish, mushrooms or seafood. ●

Sumashijiru with egg-tofu (serves 6)

1. Prepare a steamer. Break four eggs into a bowl, beat thoroughly. Add 240 ml / 1 C cooled dashi, 2/3 t salt, 1 t mirin and 1/2 t light color soy sauce to the eggs. Mix, then pass through a strainer. Pour the mixture into a mold.*
2. Place mold in steamer, cover with steaming cloth and a lid. Steam over high heat for 1 minute, then over medium-low heat for 11 minutes. Insert a bamboo skewer into center of egg-tofu; it is done when liquid does not run out. Take out mold, set aside to cool. Remove egg-tofu from mold (see photo), cut into 6 pieces for serving.
3. Parboil 1/2 bunch of spinach, plunge into cold water, squeeze out excess moisture. Chop into bite-sized pieces for serving.
4. Heat 960 ml / 4 C dashi, 1 t light color soy sauce and 1 t salt in a saucepan (see photo). Adjust to taste.
5. Place egg-tofu and spinach in soup bowls, slowly pour warm dashi over to serve and garnish with greens as desired.

* Silicon molds can be used.



Sumashijiru with egg-tofu

Edamame

枝豆



Edamame rice

Edamame, featured on our cover, are young soybeans. The bean pods grow in bunches on branches and are picked while still immature; the Japanese word edamame derives from *eda*, branch or stem, and *mame*, bean. Native to East Asia, soybeans may have been introduced to Japan from China in the eighth century, and for centuries have been indispensable in making soy sauce, miso and tofu. It was perhaps not until the Edo period (1603-1867) that people began to boil fresh edamame in their pods and pinch out the beans to eat. Even today, boiled edamame are a classic appetizer eaten at home and in restaurants, especially during the summer.

As Japanese cuisine continues to become more globally widespread, so too have edamame, with their healthy reputation as a snack low in calories, yet high in protein and dietary fiber. After boiling edamame in salted water, the tender beans can be eaten as-is, or added to various dishes such as rice, salads, soups, tempura and simmered dishes—all of which are brightened by their rich green color and delicate crispness. Edamame are also enjoyed in *zunda-mochi*, a traditional Japanese sweet of *mochi* glutinous rice coated with lightly sweetened edamame paste, a specialty of Japan's northern Tohoku region. ●

Balsamic-Teriyaki Chicken Bowl

Serves 4

477 kcal Protein 39.5 g Fat 5.6 g
(per serving)

- 2 boneless chicken breasts, total 600 g / 1.3 lbs.
- 2 T *shio koji* salted malt*
- Freshly ground black pepper
- Flour
- 1 T canola or vegetable oil

Balsamic-teriyaki sauce

- 6 T balsamic vinegar
- 3 T Kikkoman Soy Sauce
- 3 T honey
- 3 T water

- 500 g / 3 C hot cooked rice

Salad

- Peppery salad greens; e.g. rocket, wild arugula, watercress
- White mushrooms, sliced
- Walnuts roughly chopped, optional
- Extra virgin olive oil

1 Cut the chicken breasts into pieces about 1 cm / 1/3 in. thick. Lightly massage the chicken with liquid *shio koji* and place in the refrigerator for at least 30 minutes to help make the meat moist.

2 Mix ingredients for the balsamic-teriyaki sauce in a one-quart saucepan. Bring to a boil then reduce heat and maintain a gentle boil for 2 minutes. Remove from heat. Set aside 1 T of the sauce for salad dressing.

3 Sprinkle the chicken with black pepper and lightly dust with flour. Add canola or vegetable oil to a non-stick frying pan, followed by the chicken pieces. Cook briefly over medium-low heat until slightly colored and then turn over. Remove chicken when a skewer can be inserted smoothly, and set aside in a cooking tray.

4 Lightly wipe excess oil from the frying pan with a paper towel. Add the balsamic-teriyaki sauce to this pan over medium heat. As the sauce bubbles, return chicken with its juice to the frying pan and coat the meat evenly with the sauce for 2-3 minutes.

5 Remove chicken from pan and cut into bite-sized pieces. Spoon out hot cooked rice into a serving bowl and level off the top. Place the chicken on the rice and pour about 2 t of the remaining sauce from the pan over the chicken. Serve accompanied with salad greens drizzled with dressing that was set aside in Step 2, along with a few drops of extra virgin olive oil. Add more balsamic-teriyaki sauce if desired.

* There are two types of *shio koji*: clear liquid and thick ivory-colored liquid. Use the clear liquid *shio koji* in this recipe, and adjust according to weight of chicken; i.e., about 1 t *shio koji* per 100 g / 3.5 oz. If unavailable, you may skip this ingredient.

Recipe by Michiko Yamamoto



Japanese rice is a perfect fit for this balsamic-teriyaki fusion sauce, as the sauce binds well to the rice. Rich in flavor, only a small amount of the sauce is needed to create delicious harmony in a bowl.



Mitarashi Dango

Rice Dumplings with Sweet Soy Sauce Glaze

Makes 4 skewers

162 kcal Protein 2.1 g Fat 0.3 g
(per skewer)

Dango

- 50 g / 2 oz. *shiratamako* glutinous rice flour*
- 50 g / 2 oz. *joshinko* rice flour**
- 2 t granulated sugar
- 90-100 ml / approx. 2/5 C warm water
- 4 bamboo skewers

Mitarashi glaze

- 2 T Kikkoman Soy Sauce
- 4 T granulated sugar
- 2 T cornstarch
- 100 ml / 2/5 C water

1 To make *dango*, mix well the *shiratamako* and *joshinko* flours with the granulated sugar in a bowl. Add warm water little by little and knead until the dough texture becomes smooth and slightly elastic.

2 Divide dough into 16 pieces, each about 12 g / 0.4 oz., and roll into balls using the palms of your hands.

3 Boil water in a pot; quickly add the *dango* dumplings to the boiling water. *Dango* will start to float to the surface while cooking, but continue to cook for total of 10 minutes (see photo).



4 Scoop out the boiled *dango* with a slotted ladle and place in a bowl of cold water. After they have cooled, drain in a colander and thread four dumplings onto each of the bamboo skewers. Set aside.

5 Combine all ingredients for the *mitarashi* glaze in a small saucepan and mix well. Stir continuously over medium heat, and when it begins to bubble, reduce heat to low and continue to stir with a spatula for 2-3 minutes, until the glaze thickens and becomes slightly translucent.

6 Place *dango* skewers in a baking dish large enough to fit the lengths of the bamboo skewers. Gently spoon the *mitarashi* glaze over the *dango* dumplings, rotating the skewers to coat evenly, and serve.

* *Shiratamako* flour, made from glutinous rice, produces the soft, smooth, springy texture of *dango*.
** *Joshinko* flour is made from non-glutinous rice and adds firmness to *dango* texture.

Recipe by Kikkoman Corporation

1 C (U.S. cup) = approx. 240 ml; 1 T = 15 ml; 1 t = 5 ml



“Kikkoman Global” YouTube Channel

Entertaining videos featuring recipes, brand stories, Kikona and more

In March, Kikkoman Corporation launched its official YouTube channel, *Kikkoman Global*. To enhance global consumer awareness, *Kikkoman Global* presents an entertaining collection of brand-related content, including recipe videos using Kikkoman Soy Sauce, the story behind the iconic Kikkoman Soy Sauce tabletop dispenser, and videos featuring Kikkoman’s official brand mascot, Kikona. Through this channel, Kikkoman continues to support good health and overall fulfillment for as many people as possible around the world by creating delicious memories through the joys of food.



A few of the many videos now available on this channel include:

Corporate Brand Video “seasoning your life”

Kikkoman’s corporate slogan “seasoning your life” conveys the idea that as Kikkoman seasons and enriches your food, it brings fulfillment to life as a whole. Kikkoman Soy Sauce, originating in Japan, fuses with global food cultures and brings happiness to tables around the world by creating new deliciousness.



The Story of Kikkoman Soy Sauce Tabletop Dispenser

See how the Kikkoman Soy Sauce tabletop dispenser was invented, the concept behind its ingenious design, and how this distinctive bottle has evolved over time to symbolize Kikkoman Soy Sauce. Today, this globally recognized dispenser is registered as a three-dimensional trademark in several countries, including the US and the EU.



Recipes

These short videos present simple recipes using Kikkoman Soy Sauce, including delicious stir-fried udon noodles and *kara-age* deep-fried chicken.

Kikona Cooking Tips

Accompanied by a cheerful soundtrack, Kikona shares helpful cooking tips, like how to prepare Japanese *kabocha* squash and parboiling bamboo shoots.



Kikkoman will continue to post new and entertaining content related to the company, its history and global activities, plus many more delicious recipes on *Kikkoman Global*. 🍡

Kikkoman Global Official YouTube Channel
https://www.youtube.com/@kikkoman_global



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