

# food forum

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by Yo-Ichiro Sato



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Rice

# Preparation and Partaking

*In this continuing series on rice, we introduce the different ways in which the country's iconic staple grain has been cooked and consumed in Japan over the centuries.*

—  
by Yo-Ichiro Sato

The traditional *washoku* menu is referred to as *ichiju san-sai*: one soup and three dishes, served with rice and pickles.

**R**ice is generally prepared and eaten as the whole kernel, in contrast to wheat or corn, which are ground into flour for consumption. In Japan, until the third century, rice kernels were apparently boiled with other grains. After the third century, primitive equivalents of contemporary steamers appeared, using such ware, rice steamed alone without other grains became the daily standard, and was called *kowa-meshi* ("hard rice"), which had a much firmer texture than rice consumed today. By the twelfth century, the *kama* flanged iron pot came into use—and nearly a thousand years later, it is still being used to cook rice. Roughly equal quantities of water and rice are placed in the *kama* pot. The amount of water used is calculated as being just enough to cook the rice through. The pot is tightly sealed with a heavy

lid made of wood, which creates high pressure inside the pot. This pressure-cooking mechanism of the *kama* pot results in a much softer texture of cooked rice.

## Polishing rice

The image of glistening mounds of white rice has long represented "bounty," as yearned for by the Japanese. White rice, to the Japanese, refers to cooked polished white rice without bran, and is considered much tastier with a cleaner, softer texture compared to unpolished or semi-polished rice. Polished white rice was probably not available to most people until around the beginning of the Edo period (1603-1867), and even then, it was limited primarily to urban areas such as Edo (Tokyo). Records from that time indicate that wealthy Edo families might have eaten about 750 grams of polished rice a day, the equivalent of about 2,700 calories. In the mid-nineteenth century, it is said that members of Kyoto merchant

houses, from the house head to apprentices, enjoyed about 450 grams of polished white rice per person per day. Prior to the Edo period, it seems that semi-polished rice was consumed, prepared by pounding whole rice with hulls using a mortar and pestle. During this hulling process, bran was partially removed from the surface of the kernel, producing whiter, partially polished rice. In the seventeenth century, techniques for completely removing the bran were developed, and in urban areas such as Edo and Kyoto, white rice became more generally available.

## Staple food

Throughout Japan's history, ways of eating rice and the amounts consumed have varied considerably by century, as well as by region. British travel explorer and writer Isabella Bird (1831-1904), traveling in the northern Tohoku region in the late 1870s, wrote that those living in mountainous regions did not so much eat "rice," as

they consumed more millet and buckwheat, evidence that, even at that time, rice was not the staple in some of the more remote parts of the country—although those living in such places would certainly have desired sufficient amounts of polished white rice. Even in western areas of the archipelago, people often ate what was called *kate-meshi*, rice supplemented with barley or other grains, along with diced vegetables such as sweet potato. The rice itself was likely only semi-polished. Consequently, although rice is often thought to have been the staple food of Japanese from antiquity, it might be more accurate to say that it was an unattainable, yet “yearned-after staple,” as one researcher aptly put it.

### Modern cookers

Modernization brought changes to the way rice was cooked. Just one hundred years ago, in 1924, the electric rice cooker was invented, making it possible to cook rice with electricity rather than over a wood fire. Twenty years afterward, electric rice cookers that turned off automatically when rice was done were introduced to the market. Standard practice was to transfer cooked rice from the pot or cooker to a covered wooden tub called a *hitsu* that would absorb excess moisture and make the rice fluffy for eating. The drawback of this practice was that the cooked rice becomes hard and less tasty over time. Rice cooled quickly, especially during the winter season, and cold rice was often eaten by pouring hot water or tea over it. The disagreeable experience of eating cold rice inspired the Japanese phrase, “eating cold rice,” as a metaphor for misery, or for being treated poorly. In the 1970s, new electrical appliances were devised to keep rice warm after it was cooked, and “cold rice” became a thing of the past.

### Rice consumption

In the 1960s, the national average daily rice consumption reached about 330 grams, or 120 kilograms per person per year, and it was then that rice



Cooking rice in a traditional *kama* iron pot



A wood *hitsu* absorbs excess moisture and fluffs the rice before eating.



Modern electric rice cookers have a warming function for cooked rice.

did indeed become the staple of the “Japanese national diet.” From that time, however, rice consumption actually decreased.

In response to today’s smaller families, rice cookers themselves are now marketed in smaller sizes, including those with a capacity to cook only one *go* or cup (0.18 liters) at a time. The *go* is a very old Japanese measure of volume that is still commonly used as the unit of measure for rice and sake.

### Food for the spirit

Rice has long been an offering made to *kami* (deities) in shrines, where offerings also include sake, *mochi* glutinous rice cakes and salt. All of these are characterized as “white,” and thus are associated with purity. The fact that three of these four items are rice or derived from rice is an indication of the high status that rice holds in Japanese society. Although the quantity of rice consumed today has declined, people’s appreciation and respect towards rice as part of Japanese culture and cuisine remain essentially unchanged. Rice, with all its cultural, social and traditional

significance, remains integral to the Japanese spirit. ●

**On the cover** *Kuri*, featured in Spirit of the Seasons, page 5; and freshly cooked rice.

### 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).

# *Furikake* Rice Seasoning

*Furikake* is a savory Japanese condiment that fundamentally comprises dried fish flakes, sesame and seaweed, originally created to sprinkle on cooked rice—in fact, *furikake* literally translates as “sprinkle over” in Japanese. Early iterations of *furikake* were first introduced to the market during the Taisho era (1912-1926) as basic blends of crushed dried fish with dried *aonori* seaweed and sesame, or ground dried fish seasoned with soy sauce, seaweed, sesame and dehydrated egg granules. Meals at that time were rather modest, with fewer dishes on the table, so households likely welcomed umami-rich *furikake* not only for its calcium-rich nutrients, but for adding flavor to plain rice and whetting the appetite.

More affordable *furikake* became available from the 1960s, and today it is sold in supermarkets and convenience stores, ranging from simple mixes to gourmet blends. There are two types of *furikake*: one to dust over rice, and the other to mix into rice. The latter is commonly

used when making *onigiri* rice balls for bento box lunches, as the mixed rice remains tasty even after the rice cools down. *Furikake* are further categorized into dry types, which have a long shelf-life, and soft, moist varieties, which typically require refrigeration after opening.

*Furikake* flavors range from classic soy sauce or salt blends to fusion-inspired options that might include popular curry or taco rice. Its diverse ingredients have expanded to include minced meats, vegetables, wasabi, *natto* fermented soybeans and seafoods such as *tarako* cod roe and sea urchin. Packaging for *furikake* is just as varied: for example, pouches or tabletop dispensers are used at home to better accommodate greater volumes for daily family use, while individual single-portion sachets are tucked into bento boxes and



*Furikake* on rice



*Onigiri* rice balls with *furikake*

appear alongside school lunches. These days, *furikake* mixtures are so distinctive and tempting, they are used to season far more than rice, as diners explore ever-more flavorful ways to enhance both Japanese and Western dishes, including udon, pasta, salads, stir-fried vegetables or even toasted bread. ◆

## Simple mixes and gourmet blends



Diverse mixes in assorted packaging

# Kenchin-jiru

## Vegetable Soup

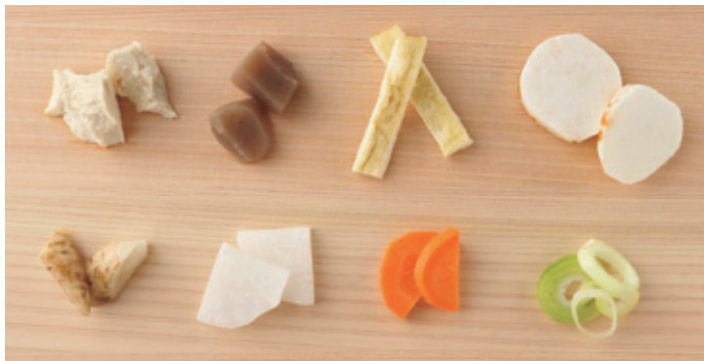
Our ongoing look at Japanese soups introduces the very filling kenchin-jiru.

*Kenchin-jiru* is a clear soup made with various root vegetables like daikon, carrot, burdock root and Japanese taro, along with konjac and tofu. Often made at home, the vegetables are first sautéed in sesame oil, cooked in dashi stock, then seasoned with soy sauce. The idea for

this hearty soup arose from *kenchin* rolls, originally made for monks at Zen Buddhist temples. Similar to spring rolls, *kenchin* deep-fried *yuba* beancurd-skin rolls are filled with stir-fried vegetables and tofu, and inspired the concept for this nutritious and satisfying soup. ◆

### Kenchin-jiru

1. Wrap a block of firm tofu in paper towels. Place a weight on top for 30 minutes to force out moisture, so as not to dilute the soup. Hand-tear into bite-sized chunks. Scoop konjac with a teaspoon\* and parboil for 2-3 minutes to remove distinct smell. Pour boiling water over *abura-age* thin deep-fried tofu to rinse off surface oil. Squeeze out water and cut into thin strips.
2. Peel and slice *satoimo* taro. Rub salt on the slices, leave for 15 minutes, then rinse well. Scrub burdock root and cut into small chunks, soak in water for 5 minutes. Peel and cut daikon into quarter slices. Peel and slice carrot. Cut Japanese long onion into small slices (see photo).



Clockwise from top left: tofu, konjac, *abura-age*, *satoimo*, Japanese long onion, carrot, daikon, burdock root

3. Heat sesame oil and sauté konjac and burdock root. Add *satoimo*, daikon and carrot and sauté until oil coats all ingredients. Add dashi stock, simmer for 5 minutes. Add tofu, *abura-age* and salt, simmer until vegetables become tender. Add Japanese long onion and soy sauce to taste. Serve in bowls sprinkled with coarse ground black pepper or with *shichimi-togarashi* seven-spice chili pepper, as preferred. \* Rough surfaces of tofu and konjac better absorb soup flavors.



Kenchin-jiru

# Kuri

栗



Kuri kinton

**Kuri Japanese chestnuts, pictured on the cover**, come into season during autumn in Japan. Japanese *kuri* have a long history in this country, where it is estimated that chestnut trees have been a source of food since around 5,500 years ago. Prior to the introduction of rice, *kuri* and acorns were at one time important sources of nutrients in Japan: *kuri* are rich in vitamin C, potassium and dietary fiber, and their astringent skin contains the antioxidant tannin. Japanese chestnuts are larger in size with a higher water content compared to other global varieties, and are more suited to boiling than roasting.

Chestnuts appear in a wide range of Japanese dishes, from savory to sweet. Autumn menus typically feature aromatic *kuri gohan* rice cooked with chestnuts. During the New Year, the traditional dish *kuri kinton* symbolizes wealth and fortune for the coming year. Its golden yellow color is made by boiling sweet potatoes with gardenia fruit, which are mashed and cooked with sugar to make a paste before mixing in sweetened chestnuts. Sweetened *kuri*, made by stewing peeled and boiled chestnuts with sugar, are also used whole or as a paste in various *wagashi*, such as *kuri manju* soft buns and *kuri yokan* red bean paste jelly. ◆

# Sautéed Mackerel with Grated Cucumber-Herb Sauce

## Serves 4

186 kcal Protein 20.8 g Fat 11.1 g  
(per serving)

### Grated cucumber-herb sauce

- 2-3 Japanese cucumbers, unwaxed\*, total 250 g / 9 oz.
- 1/2 t Kikkoman Soy Sauce
- 1 t grain vinegar
- Dill, 1 T chopped + garnish
- Italian parsley, 1/2 T chopped

### Nihai-zu vinegar\*\*

- 3 T grain vinegar
- 3 T Kikkoman Soy Sauce

- 2 mackerel fillets (fresh or frozen), each about 150 g / 5 oz.
- 1/2 t salt\*\*\*
- 4 t sake

- 1 t canola oil
- 4 cherry tomatoes, quartered, for garnish

**1** Cut off the ends of the cucumbers, then grate using a daikon grater (see photo). Place the grated cucumber in a strainer and press it lightly; mix in 1/2 t soy sauce and 1 t grain vinegar. Stir in the chopped dill and Italian parsley and set aside.



**2** To make *nihai-zu*, mix the vinegar and soy sauce and microwave on 600 W for 35-40 seconds or until the mixture is hot and steamy. This will help remove excess acidity. Set aside to cool.

**3** Cut each mackerel fillet in half and make cross-slits in the skin. This prevents the skin from shrinking and curling up when cooking. Sprinkle just a little salt on the flesh side, and the rest on the skin side. Allow to sit for 15 minutes. Remove moisture from the fillets by patting with a paper towel. Rinse both sides with 1 t sake per piece and pat off moisture again.\*\*\*\* Sprinkle another pinch of salt on the skin sides.

**4** Heat 1 t canola oil in a non-stick frying pan over medium heat and wipe lightly with paper towel. Cook the fillets skin-side down, pressing down with a spatula. When the skin is nicely browned, turn over. Cook until a skewer passes easily through the fish.

**5** Place each fillet on a serving plate and spread the grated cucumber-herb sauce on top. Garnish with cherry tomatoes and dill. Pour over preferred amount of *nihai-zu*.

\* May substitute unwaxed Persian or English cucumbers.

\*\* *Nihai-zu* is a combination of vinegar and soy sauce in a 1:1 ratio. Japanese grain vinegar is recommended for a milder taste.

\*\*\* Amount of salt based on 1% of the total weight of the fillets.

\*\*\*\* Salting the fish and rinsing with sake removes strong unsavory flavors and improves taste.

Recipe by Michiko Yamamoto



*Grated daikon and soy sauce typically accompany grilled fish in Japan. Sautéing mackerel, with its high fish oil content, creates a crispy skin similar to grilling, while aromatic cucumber-herb sauce garnished with tart cherry tomatoes lends this dish a Western touch.*



# Takikomi Gohan

## Seasoned Rice with Mushrooms

### Serves 4

434 kcal Protein 15.0 g Fat 8.0 g  
(per serving)

- 400 ml / 1 2/3 C japonica rice
- 200 g / 7 oz. boneless chicken thighs
- 1/2 t Kikkoman Soy Sauce
- 1/2 t sake
- 100 g / 3.5 oz. burdock root
- 50 g / 1.7 oz. shimeji mushrooms
- 50 g / 1.7 oz. white or brown mushrooms

### Cooking liquid

- 480 ml / 2 C dashi stock
- 1 T Kikkoman Soy Sauce
- 1 T sake
- 1/2 t salt

Chopped green onion\* for garnish

**1** Wash rice and allow to drain in a colander for about 15 minutes.

**2** Remove fat from chicken and cut into 7 mm / 1/4 in. cubes. Sprinkle with soy sauce and sake and mix well.

**3** Shave burdock root into short strips,\*\* soak in water for 5 minutes and drain. Separate the stems of shimeji mushrooms. Cut white or brown mushrooms into thin slices.

**4** Combine ingredients for the cooking liquid in a pot, add the chicken, burdock root, all mushrooms and simmer for 3-4 minutes over medium heat (see photo). Drain and save the liquid. Allow everything to cool.



**5** Prepare 480 ml / 2 C liquid from Step 4 to cook the rice. If the amount of liquid is insufficient, add water to total 480 ml / 2 C. Place the rice and the liquid in a rice cooker. Arrange the cooked ingredients evenly on top of the rice, then turn on the rice cooker. When rice is cooked, gently mix so that the ingredients are evenly distributed throughout the rice.

**6** Serve in individual rice bowls, garnished with green onion.

\* Chopped watercress stems may be substituted.

\*\* Burdock root strips may be shaved using a peeler.

Recipe by Kikkoman Corporation

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



# 2023 YFU Kikkoman Summer Activity

International cultural enrichment for students



Participants in 2023 YFU Kikkoman Summer Activity

Since 1978, Kikkoman Corporation has sponsored an international student exchange program hosted by Youth for Understanding (YFU), a US-based international non-profit organization, to provide students with opportunities for education and personal development. The YFU exchange program invites about twenty US high school students to Japan for homestays with Japanese families for the summer, while Japanese high school students study in the US for one year. The program aims to deepen an understanding of the cultural differences between the two countries, to learn respect through cultural experience, and for young people to develop confidence and motivation to achieve their dreams.

This July, Kikkoman organized the YFU Kikkoman Summer Activity and invited the US students and their host families, together with a returning Japanese student, to the Kikkoman Soy Sauce Museum at the company's Noda plant, where participants enjoyed a plant tour and a hands-on soy sauce brewing experience. The tour provided an opportunity to observe and learn about today's automated soy sauce brewing process, as well as about traditional brewing at the

Goyogura brewery, where soy sauce has been made for the Imperial household for generations. Kikkoman Soy Sauce is produced using the brewing method *honjozo*, developed during the Edo period (1603-1867), which involves the fermentation of soybeans, wheat, salt and water with microorganisms. This essential process has remained unchanged for centuries, and is used in all of Kikkoman's overseas plants today, delivering high quality soy sauce to over one hundred countries.

Working in teams, students tried their hand at parts of the soy sauce brewing process,

which brought smiles to their faces. Participants also enjoyed ice cream made of milk and soy milk with a touch of soy sauce, a delicious combination that surprised them with its caramel-like flavor. To conclude the event, the enthusiastic students shared their thoughts about

the program, many having learned for the first time that microorganisms are used in producing soy sauce. This activity provided an excellent opportunity for the students to discover the secret behind delicious Kikkoman Soy Sauce, and Kikkoman will continue to promote international youth exchange by supporting the YFU program. ●



Teams share their thoughts at the end of the activity (top); Making soy sauce

