



# Not just Sushi

LIGHT AND FLAVOURFUL,  
JAPANESE CUISINE IS AN  
ART. CHOPPING, SLICING THE  
MEAT, FISH AND VEGETABLES  
IS A SKILL, AND COOKING IT  
REQUIRES EXPERTISE.

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For the uninitiated, Japanese meals could be all about sushi and tempura. But there is a lot more to Japanese cuisine and each meal brings to the table, plenty of colour, sauces and serving dishes that are cute, colourful and art pieces by themselves, in various materials like ceramic, glass and lacquer ware. Bowls, flat plates, square and rectangular platters, and of course, sushi served in cute cups from ceramic bottles. Not only is Japanese cuisine great to taste, but a feast for the senses – in every way possible.

Japanese use the phrase “itadakimasu” before beginning a meal, like Grace that is said before meals. Itadakimasu, literally means “to humbly receive” or “to thankfully receive food”. It is also a thank you to the person who cooked the meal and an acknowledgment to the life that was sacrificed to make the meal possible.

Rice is the chief crop of Japan, so don't be surprised if you find rice for breakfast, lunch and dinner in Japan. Another feature of Japanese cuisine, is that soup is had at the end of the meal, unlike most cultures where it serves as a starter or appetiser.

Besides rice, be ready to have plenty of fish in Japanese cuisine – fresh, raw, dried,

salted, steamed, slivers and flakes. Not only fish, plenty of sea food that includes shell fish, mussels, molluscs, crustaceans, and echinoderms. Eels are a speciality in Japan.

Besides Tokyo, where one can experience all kinds of cuisine, certain prefectures like Toyama are famous for their fresh seafood.

#### A BITE OF JAPAN

So besides Sushi, all Japanese love the very popular local dish called Sashimi. These are slivers of raw fish, served in a plate, along with a smaller empty dish for serving a small portion of soy sauce. Often wasabi, or Japanese horseradish, is mixed into the soy sauce. Wet towels are provided at meal times, but these are for cleaning your fingers, not as a face towel.

To eat sashimi, each piece of sashimi is dipped into the separate dish of soy sauce and wasabi, and conveyed with the help of chopsticks into the mouth. One needs to dip the fish into the sauce, not pour the sauce on the fish.

Sushi is served on a wooden square plate in most restaurants, along with a small dish for serving soy sauce and wasabi. Uni is an expensive topping, and it's the sea urchin that looks very appealing

because of its bright orange colour. Uni is the soft orange centre of a sea urchin and most commonly eaten with rice or wrapped in rice and seaweed.

You can eat sushi with your fingers. Simply pick up a piece of sushi, dip it in the soy sauce and then eat it in one bite if you can!

Tempura, or battered and deep fried seafood and vegetables, are typically served with either salt, or a tempura dipping sauce or “tsuyu” as it is known in Japanese. When a tsuyu dipping sauce is available, it is usually served with a small plate of grated daikon radish and freshly grated ginger. Add the daikon and ginger into the tsuyu sauce prior to dipping your tempura to eat.

While visiting Miyajima island, about 45 minutes from Hiroshima, make it a point to have Octopus in any form at the restaurants there. Most popular are the called Takoyaki or octopus fritters. These dumplings are made by preparing a batter of flour blended with stock, chunks of octopus are added along with seasoning and then fried.

#### HOW JAPANESE CUISINE EVOLVED

During early times, A.D 700, Buddhism led to a ban on eating meat. Sushi became popular as a result since it is made with

#### AN EVENING IN TOYAMA Dinner with Chef Miura

Personalised meal with Shinichi Miura, former Japanese chef at Japanese embassy, hotel at Australia and New Zealand. He now runs the Yatohachi Inn in Toyama, which is famous for its Gomado Springs and a very popular destination during spring and summer season.

Chef Miura cooked up a Japanese meal with great love and affection. Sitting in the tatami room – dining area with a low broad table and a low chairs without legs called zaisu, I didn't know what to expect. But the warm hospitality of Chef Miura and his wife Kiomi, dressed in a traditional kimono made that evening a cherished one.

My meal began with a large lacquer red plate (the red side is used in winter and black during summers) with five bowls of various sizes on it, filled with different kinds of food and a set of exquisite chopsticks. I assumed this was my dinner. I began tasting each dish – one was a tangerine, scooped out of its fruit and stuffed with cheese, oysters and mushroom; another bowl had paper thin slices of lotus stem cooked in a sugary syrup; another a vegetable coated with batter and fried and a large bowl of tofu, coated and fried. This was just the first course! Kiomi then brought a ceramic bottle with Sake with two tiny cups. Sake, the rice wine, can be had either warm or cold and it makes for a great drink with a traditional Japanese meal.

The second dish was a sizeable piece of fish cooked in a sauce and topped with radish and carrot that was sliced extremely thin. Next came the soba noodles (made from buckwheat) with sauce served in a ceramic container with a cover, next came a beautiful pink plate with fish topped with beaten egg; then fish again followed by shrimp tempura. Then came hot piping Miso soup and rice, that was cooked in a traditional rice cooker, which is called Kama in Japanese. Kama can be used on a direct flame, and this allows for a slightly burnt rice at the bottom, which is called Okoge, and much favoured by the Japanese.

Rice is the last course of a Japanese meal and I truly had no space for dessert!



raw fish and rice. Japanese cuisine slowly became modern in the 1800s when vegetarian food was served in small portions, and all food was divided into five colour groups - green, red, yellow, white, and black-purple) and six tastes (bitter, sour, sweet, hot, salty, and delicate).

After a ban of more than one thousand years, beef returned to Japan during the Meiji Period (1868-1912).

Rice and noodles make their appearance at every meal. The soba noodles are very popular as they are thin brown noodles. Soy sauce and other

soybean products are also staples in Japan. These include miso (fermented soybean paste) and tofu (a soybean curd that resembles custard).

Green tea is the national beverage of Japan and hot water is served on tap. In some restaurants, a tiny chest of drawers hold bags of green tea and one can have the tea throughout the meal. It is a great digestive. The Sushi conveyor belt restaurants are quite popular in Japan.

Fresh ingredients are always used and seasonal produce is used to prepare most dishes. For those in a rush, lunch can be

a bento box. A typical lunch would be a bowl of broth with vegetables, seaweed, or fish. The bento is a traditional box lunch packed in a small, flat box with dividers. It includes small portions of rice, meat, fish, and vegetables. Stuffed rice balls called onigiri are very popular and are available in various combinations – rolled in seaweed; with tuna and the list goes on.

It is considered rude to eat while walking, or driving. The Japanese respect their food and rightly so, considering the efforts that go into making this wonderful cuisine!