



WASHOKU

RECIPES FROM THE JAPANESE HOME KITCHEN

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Washoku: The Five Principles

The calligraphy for *wa* is used to refer to things indigenous to Japanese culture. In the realm of food, *washoku* distinguishes Japanese food from foreign-inspired cuisines, such as *yōshoku*, or Western-style food.

The philosophy and practice of *washoku* can best be summarized by a set of five principles that describe how to achieve nutritional balance and aesthetic harmony at mealtime. The first three principles—one each concerning color, flavor palate, and choice of cooking method—deal with the practical considerations of food preparation. The fourth principle defines the sensual nature of food—that is, the need for food to appeal to all the five senses, not just taste and smell. The final principle, which is more spiritual and philosophic, compels us to appreciate both human endeavor and the natural forces that provide for us.

The five principles of *washoku* are as follows:

Five colors, or *go shiki*, suggests that every meal include foods that are red, yellow, green, black, and white. (Often very dark colors, particularly deep purple—eggplant, grapes—and sometimes brown—*shiitaké* mushrooms—are counted as black.) Vitamins and minerals naturally come into balance with a colorful range of foods.

Five tastes, or *go mi*, describes what the Japanese call *anbai*, a harmonious balance of flavors—salty, sour, sweet, bitter, and spicy—that ensures our palates are pleasantly stimulated, but not overwhelmed.

Five ways, or *go hō*, urges cooks to prepare food by a variety of methods, simmering, broiling, and steaming being some of the most basic. By combining various methods at every meal, it is easy to limit the total amount of sugar, salt, and oil consumed, thereby avoiding excessive calories.

Five senses, or *go kan*, advises cooks to be mindful not only of taste, but also of sight, sound, smell, and touch (in this case, the texture of food as we eat it).

Five outlooks, or *go kan mon*, are rules concerned with the partaking of food and have a strong basis in Buddhism. Indeed, many Buddhist temples in Japan that serve vegetarian fare (*shōjin ryōri*) will have these rules written on their menus. They instruct us, first, to respect the efforts of all those who contributed their toil to cultivating and preparing our food; second, to do good deeds worthy of receiving such nourishment; third, to come to the table without ire; fourth, to eat for spiritual as well as temporal well-being; and fifth, to be serious in our struggle to attain enlightenment.

The five principles are not unique to Japanese foodways. Many Asian cultures share similar beliefs. Indeed, the ideas arrived from China by way of the Korean peninsula about a thousand years ago. In Japan, the five principles intertwined with indigenous Shinto beliefs, such as humanity's oneness with nature, and evolved into a broadly encompassing, deeply integrated culinary philosophy. A vocabulary emerged to describe various aspects of this distinctive Japanese food culture. *Kisetsukan* is what the Japanese call their keen appreciation for seasonal cycles and other rhythms of nature. The word *shun* is used to describe a point in time when a particular food is at its peak of flavor. *Shun* can last for several weeks or even months—or it can be as fleeting as a few hours or days. The notion of *meisanbutsu*, or “regional specialties,” holds locally produced foodstuffs in especially high regard. In Japan, where lakes, rivers, and the ocean provide abundant food to complement the harvest of the land, the phrase *umi no sachi, yama no sachi* (the bounty of the sea, the bounty of the mountains) describes the harmonious union of foods from both land and water sources.

As with other aspects of culture, such as language and dress, foodways settle in and are eventually taken for granted by the society that gave rise to them. Most Japanese today would have a hard time articulating *washoku* notions, and would not usually discuss among themselves the guidelines for assembling a nutritionally balanced, aesthetically pleasing meal. Yet

when choosing items from an à la carte restaurant menu, selecting prepared dishes to take home from a department-store food hall, or purchasing packaged food from a convenience store or supermarket, most Japanese will, by instinct, employ the five principles on some level to create culinary harmony.

Despite the pervasiveness of *washoku* in Japanese food culture, the word itself and the concepts associated with it are relatively unknown outside the country, even among aficionados of Japanese cooking. And although its origins are deeply rooted in Japanese culinary history and habits, *washoku* can be practiced and enjoyed outside Japan, by Japanese and non-Japanese alike. Selecting ingredients at their peak of seasonal flavor, choosing locally available foods from both the land and the sea, appealing to and engaging all the senses, using a collage of color, employing a variety of food preparations, and assembling an assortment of flavors—a *washoku* approach to cooking gives the creative and contemplative cook an opportunity to satisfy his or her own aesthetic hunger while providing sustenance and sensory pleasure to others.

Putting Theory into Practice

To demonstrate how *washoku* principles are applied to ordinary meals, I will guide you, step by step, through the planning, preparation, and presentation of three complete menus. Simple preparations, such as those in the first menu, are often set up on a tray and served together. Not every dish needs to fulfill all the considerations of five colors, cooking methods, flavors, and so forth. Rather, these elements can cumulatively meet the guidelines for a balanced *washoku* meal or, if served in progression, unfold over the course of a lunch or dinner.

The first menu follows a common meal plan known as *ichi-ju san-sai*. Literally, “one broth, three dishes,” the meal is actually composed of five dishes, not four as you might expect (rice is assumed to be part of every meal; indeed, the word *gohan* means both “cooked rice” and “meal”). Our nourishing *ichi-ju san-sai* menu (illustrated on page 4) is made up of a

soup (Miso Soup with Enoki Mushrooms, page 117), a featured dish (Miso-Marinated Broiled Fish, page 229), two side dishes (Soy-Braised Hijiki and Carrots, page 187, and Citron-Pickled Chinese Cabbage, page 218), and rice (Rice with Mixed Grains, page 139).

This sample *washoku* menu incorporates vibrant and soft hues, textured and smooth foods, and delicate and assertive flavors. Fulfilling the five-colors principle, we have green (*mitsuba*, floating in the soup, and pickled Chinese cabbage), red (salmon, carrots, and chile pepper threads), yellow (lemon with the fish), white (rice, *tōfu*, and enoki mushrooms in the soup), and black (*hijiki*). In addition to providing visual interest, the color range ensures nutritional balance: green vegetables are rich in vitamin A, carrots are packed with carotene, citrus are rich in vitamin C, white rice mixed with various seeds and grains provide many B vitamins, and black *hijiki* is an excellent source of calcium.

Each of these dishes employs a different cooking method: the fish is seared with heat (broiling, grilling, skillet braising, and pan searing all fall within the realm of Japanese *yaki mono*, or seared foods), the *hijiki* is briefly sautéed in oil before being simmered with carrots in seasoned sea stock, the lightly pickled cabbage is considered “raw” because it has not been treated with heat, and the miso-enriched soup is simmered. Steamed rice completes the menu. Intake of fats and oils, salt, and sugar is limited by varying the preparation methods.

When you begin to eat, you appreciate that the rich, salty flavor of the miso-marinated fish is nicely balanced with the tartness of the juice from the lemon that garnishes it. The *hijiki* and carrot dish, cooked in a sweetened soy sauce and finished with a nutty, faintly bitter accent of toasted sesame seeds, provides a welcome counterpoint to an otherwise savory meal. Textures and shapes are varied, too: silky cubes of *tōfu* in the soup, slender stalks of enoki mushrooms, crisp and succulent slices of pickled cabbage, which are spiced with fiery threads of *tōgarashi* chile pepper.



Not all food prepared in the *washoku* manner needs to be a multidish menu. Many simple single-dish meals benefit from the five-principles approach to preparing food. My second example, Rice Bowl with Three-Colored Topping (page 153), is a *domburi*, or a casual meal-in-a-bowl. The word *domburi* refers to both the bowl itself and the foods served in it. Typically, *domburi* are large, deep bowls filled halfway with cooked rice and then topped with a variety of foods.

When plated and viewed from above, this *domburi* appears to be a circle divided into three wedges. One is bright yellow with corn kernels, another green with small peas, and the third a rich auburn brown with braised chicken. Where these wedges converge at the center is a garnish of shredded red pickled ginger, or perhaps a cherry tomato, and a few squares of spicy, soy-simmered jet black kelp. As you eat, the white rice beneath the toppings becomes visible. Yellow, green, red, black, and white—a five-colored meal-in-a-bowl.

Steamed rice, skillet-braised chicken, blanched vegetables, pickled ginger, and simmered kelp demonstrate the multimethod approach to food preparation. The combination of soy sauce and sugar, used to braise the chicken and simmer the kelp, balances salty and sweet flavors. Though not as sour as some pickles found in the Japanese pantry (Red-and-White Pickled Radishes, page 221, for example), the red pickled ginger here hints at tartness, as would a cherry tomato. The kelp condiment is blanched in a vinegar-water solution before it is braised in the sweetened soy. Finally, touches of ginger and *sanshō* pepper provide spicy accents that help bring harmony to the meal.

I offer a third example here: a soup-and-sandwich lunch. This menu shows that *washoku* meals can be assembled with entirely non-Japanese foods. Imagine the following: pale and creamy potato-leek soup, nutritionally and aesthetically enhanced by a garnish of snipped chives and minced parsley,

A “one broth, three dishes” menu (clockwise from top left): Citron-Pickled Chinese Cabbage (page 218), Soy-Braised Hijiki and Carrots (page 187), Miso Soup with Enoki Mushrooms (page 117), Miso-Marinated Broiled Fish (page 229), and Rice with Mixed Grains (page 139)

alongside tuna salad spread on triangles of whole-grain toast, accompanied by a lemon wedge, several cherry tomatoes, crisp radish sprouts, and pitted black olives. As with the purely Japanese sample menus, this American lunch follows the color, flavor palate, and multi-preparation guidelines of a *washoku* meal. Because it adheres to the five principles, this soup-and-sandwich lunch also achieves nutritional balance and visual interest.

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Far from a rigid set of rules that constrict the creative process, the underlying principles of *washoku* provide a convenient framework for considering the many practical issues and aesthetic possibilities inherent in meal preparation. If you enjoy lavishing time and creative energy on preparing food for yourself and others, the *washoku* planning process will excite and energize you. When you feel pressed for time, a well-stocked *washoku* kitchen lets you throw together balanced meals—they do not have to be Japanese ones—in short order. The *Washoku Pantry* (page 10) will help you assemble a basic larder and answer questions you might have regarding unfamiliar ingredients called for in the recipes. A companion section, *In the Washoku Kitchen* (page 66), catalogs the techniques and tools you will need to transform foodstuffs into harmonious meals.

Although the *washoku* approach can be applied to any cuisine, specific *washoku* recipes emerged from a rich Japanese food tradition. The stories and legends associated with these dishes are acquired quite naturally by anyone brought up in a Japanese household. They are experienced, not taught, and are rarely shared across the cultural culinary divide. In recipe headnotes and sidebars, I have included historical notes to illuminate, and entice you to try, classic *washoku* fare. I was not concerned with being clever, trendy, or original when choosing recipes. Quite the opposite: from a huge *washoku* repertoire, I chose practical, typical dishes that would tempt you while I taught you, and build your confidence while I

nourished you. Suggestions on how to coordinate dishes to create *washoku* meals are offered in Kitchen Harmony notes that accompany many of the recipes.

Washoku as a notion, and in practice, compels those who prepare it to consider the total dining environment. After care has been taken in choosing foods that nourish both body and mind, preparing the *washoku* table excites the aesthetic appetite. Setting the Table, Setting the Stage (opposite) offers you ideas and inspiration, while smaller shards of practical advice on food presentation—organized as Harmony at Table notes—are scattered throughout the chapters. By being attentive to the impact of color, shape, texture, and motif at table, you can create an infinite variety of moods, thus satisfying your aesthetic, as well as physical, hunger.

Omakasé and Kaiseki Cuisines

I am often asked whether *washoku* applies only to home cooking, and what relationship exists between *washoku* and *omakasé* (“leave it to the chef” tasting menus served at high-end restaurants), or between *washoku* and *kaiseki* (both the *kaiseki* cuisine that traces its origins to the Japanese tea ceremony and the banquet-style *kaiseki* meals offered at elegant establishments). Although I have chosen domestic kitchens as the focus of this book, *washoku* should not be equated solely with home cooking. It would be misleading to ignore the principles of *washoku* as practiced by Japanese food professionals. They are as essential, and applicable, to the world of restaurant dining as they are to home-cooked meals.

Tasting menus that showcase the creativity of a chef are not unique to Japanese dining traditions. *Omakasé*, however, is more than just a meal: it is a relationship of mutual trust and appreciation between customer and establishment, guided by the principles of *washoku*. Those who plan and prepare the meal (the chef and other food professionals) take pleasure in considering the needs of those who will partake of it, and diners (guests, customers), in turn, agree to abandon themselves to the dining drama that unfolds at table. Rather than focus on

exotic foods flown in from faraway places, the *washoku* professional will seek out local products to showcase and celebrate *shun*, aware of the balance that needs to be struck between marine and terrestrial sources, color, cooking method, and flavor.

Two rather esoteric phrases, both coined by Sen no Rikyu, the sixteenth-century philosopher and aesthete credited with refining the world of tea and *kaiseki* cuisine served at the tea ceremony, express sentiments inherent in a *washoku* outlook. The first of these, *ichi go, ichi é* (one moment, one meeting), demonstrates the importance of creating a specific sense of time and place with each meal—a fleeting but magic moment of shared cooking and dining pleasure that can be fondly remembered but never re-created. In planning and preparing *kaiseki* meals, it is the *washoku* host who coordinates food-stuffs that highlight *shun* with culinary motifs and tableware that enhance *kisetsukan*. The goal is to create a unique dining experience for their guests, one that is mindful of seasonal and ceremonial considerations, while accommodating individual preferences.

The second phrase, *wabi sabi* (subdued elegance, charm of the ordinary), admires humility and values understatement. In the world of Japanese culinary endeavor, particular respect is afforded those who transform humble foodstuffs into simple, yet stunning meals.

A Note about Language

For more than thirty years, I have been writing about Japan and various aspects of its food and culture, hoping to inform and entertain my readers. Because I write for English-language publications, I struggle with how best to convey habits and notions that may be foreign to my readers, how to make seemingly alien procedures feel comfortable to them. What key bits of information should I offer to help them make sense of it all?

And what words should I use?

In taking on the challenge of communicating ideas, language becomes many things: a precious tool with which to

Setting the Table, Setting the Stage

Much of the exhilaration I feel when practicing *washoku* is the unabashed pleasure of matching food to vessel. At a *washoku* table, there is no concern for uniformity of tableware throughout the meal. Rather, the cook is encouraged to use containers fashioned from a variety of materials—lacquer, glass, paper, stoneware, and porcelain are a few of the possibilities—and of various shapes and sizes to enhance the food. He or she might even borrow bits of nature, such as wood, leaves, and shells, and incorporate the hints they provide into the display of food. By melding disparate flavors, aromas, textures, sounds, and images, the thoughtful cook engages all of the senses, achieving harmony at table.

Creating a sense of time and place is important as well. The season and occasion suggest certain color schemes and motifs borrowed from nature or folklore. After a long, blisteringly hot summer, I awake one morning late in September to an unexpected chill in the air. I happily reset my breakfast tray, replacing the delicate, blue-streaked porcelain plate that had suggested a refreshing stream during the heat and humidity of summer with a rustic dish shaped like a maple leaf. Savoring the air-dried, mirin-glazed mackerel on my autumnal plate, I anticipate crisp days ahead.

Pottery suits the Japanese temperament and table particularly well, I think, because it is a melding of natural forces with human endeavor. Clay is a wholly organic product of the earth that is taken and shaped by human skill and ingenuity. The process of glazing and

firing is again a blend of nature and man-made technology. A dramatic range of styles emerges: the crackled blue glaze of *seiji* ware, the rough-hewn bronze tones of the Shino kilns, the delicate and colorful *iro-é* patterns of which Kutani ware is perhaps the most famous, and the popular *somé-tsuké* blue and white underglaze typified by Imari ware.

Bamboo, in its natural form, is a hollow yet sturdy receptacle that is easily adapted to the needs of food storage and service. The Japanese preserve this natural capability and both increase its usefulness and enhance its beauty by shaping segments of bamboo into bowls, platters, baskets, and utensils. *Sasa*, the smooth leaves of bamboo saplings, are gracefully tapered, making them both lovely and useful: extended to display a grilled fish, or curved to enclose a soft rice-flour pastry. Long before plastic wrap or cooking parchment was invented, *také no kawa* (dried, mature bamboo bark) made excellent wrappers for cooking and transporting food.

Standing in my kitchen before the cupboard crammed with dishes, cups, trays, chopsticks, and other tabletop accessories, I feel a surge of creative power. This evening, I choose a Bizen ware platter from the shelf. It is deceptively simple: a dark slab of unglazed, unpainted clay no bigger than a sheet of paper. Yet its surface glows with soft russet and amber markings, some shiny and round as a full moon, others muted with blurred edges. On this wildly unique canvas, I paint a mental image: a random convergence of pearly white

chunks of steaming daikon interspersed with glistening bits of soy-simmered cod. Golden needles of fresh *yuzu* (citron peel) are scattered across the fish-and-vegetable stew, mimicking the platter's tawny freckles.

A closer look at the same platter reveals a mottled dab of ashen blue in one corner, and a showering of ocher flecks nearby. I now conjure up a deeply green tuft of parsley set at an angle against a haystack of pale cucumber shreds—the backdrop for firm but lushly ripe wedges of tomato at the center of the platter. To complete this imagined *otsukuri*, or “creative arrangement” of fresh foods, I mentally place a small russet-colored, rough-hewn saké cup to the side. I pour some pale, creamy mustard miso sauce into it to use as salad dressing.

At the back of the cupboard, I glimpse a boldly beautiful plate from Tottori Prefecture’s Ushinoto kiln—half black, half aqua green—that sets me off on my next culinary daydream. I picture Rice Curry (page 155) on the plate, a mound of snowy white, steamed rice at its center, partially covered by a tumeric-tinted, curry-flavored chicken stew. Several sweet-and-sour *rakkyō* bulbs (imagine sweet pickled pearl onions) and shreds of spicy, red *beni shōga* ginger nestle against the rice where it is met by the thick, golden sauce. In my mind’s eye, this dish is paired with a salad of soft lettuces and crisp, sliced cucumbers, mounded in a frosted glass bowl. Form and function are brought into harmony at table.

fashion images; a mirror in which culture can be both magnified and reflected; and, because so many words cannot be easily transliterated and translated, a source of frustration. Since no single, functional standard that everyone agrees on for transliterating and translating Japanese to English exists, I must devise my own system. Here, as in the past, I have given great thought to this problem.

Since the start of work on this book several years ago, many volunteer recipe testers and assistants scattered around the globe have shared their valuable opinions and offered helpful suggestions to me. My current system incorporates their collective experience and reflects their endeavor to integrate *washoku* into their non-Japanese households.

For the most part, spelling in this book follows the basic pattern of my previous books: my goal is to get speakers of English to pronounce the words as close to the original Japanese as possible. To that end, I use a modified Hepburn system, keeping the important macron, or “long mark,” that alerts speakers to an extended vowel sound. The difference between long and short vowel sounds are critically important in Japanese: *Ōba* is a broad-leaved herb (also known as *shiso*), but *oba* is my auntie.

I have borrowed a familiar accent mark from French to help you pronounce final e sounds as “ay.” *Agé* is pronounced “ah-gay,” not “age” (*g* sounds are hard, like good and great; soft *g* sounds are written with a *j*). The letters *r* and *l* and *m* and *n* are often used interchangeably, and there is no consensus among academics or editors. I have chosen *ramen* not *larmen* for Chinese-style noodles, and *kombu* not *konbu* for kelp, but not everyone will agree with me.

Whether to provide English translations of Japanese words is similarly fraught. I am delighted the Japanese word *nori* has finally entered the lexicon because I can now use that word, rather than the unappetizing and inaccurate “seaweed” (it is a cultivated aquatic plant, not a weed) or the puzzling “laver,” both of which still commonly appear on package labels. And thank goodness I no longer need to call *tōfu* “bean

curd” (it is really the solidified whey, not the curd of soybean milk), because it, too, has become entrenched in the lexicon. (Note, though, that I have modified the commonly encountered spelling, to include the important macron mark.) But what to do about the many different kinds of nori and tōfu, such as *yaki nori* and *ajitsuké nori*, or *abura agé* and *yaki-dōfu*? I decided to use a combination of English modifier and Japanese name. *Yaki nori* becomes toasted nori and *ajitsuké nori* becomes seasoned nori. *Abura agé* are fried tōfu slices, *yaki-dōfu* is a block of grilled tōfu, and so forth. In the case of some compounds, it is the Japanese word that modifies an English one: shiitaké mushrooms, soba noodles, and *kabocha* squash. My goal in all cases is to help you understand the relationship of these ingredients to one another, while providing a simple way of managing the words in the body of the recipe.

When dealing with more obscure foodstuffs like *konnyaku*, the cryptic translations “yam cake” and “devil’s tongue jelly” do not help you know, or come to love, this homely, funny-smelling, but quite marvelous ingredient. I wanted to wipe the slate clean and start again with the original, *konnyaku*, and try to build a new and positive image of the food. When I wasn’t sure whether readers would know enough about an ingredient to purchase the correct thing and use it properly, I provided a page reference to the discussion of it in *The Washoku Pantry* (page 10).

Some foods are so well known by their English names—sesame oil, soy sauce, vinegar—that to introduce the Japanese word in the text seemed burdensome. Should you want to know what the item is called in Japanese, refer to the pantry, where I have included the full and proper Japanese name in roman letters.