

LESSON NOTES

All About #7

Top 5 Japanese Dishes You Have to Try and Top 5 Dishes for the Really Brave!

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GRAMMAR

The Focus of This Lesson is Japanese Food

What comes to your mind when you think of Japanese food? Sushi, perhaps? Rolls containing various kinds of seafood and vegetables stuffed inside? Well, while you might find lots of sushi and rolls in Japan, they are merely the tip of the iceberg when it comes to Japanese cuisine - there is a whole lot more for you to discover!

Table Etiquette

Before we go on to the food, let's first talk about Japanese table etiquette. Before eating, it is customary to say *itadakimasu*, which means, "I will humbly receive," as a way to show gratitude for the meal.

When using chopsticks, it is important to remember a few things to avoid being rude. Don't stab your chopsticks into your rice and leave them there, and never pass food with your chopsticks directly to someone else's chopsticks, as both of these actions are related to funeral traditions.

When eating and drinking in a big group, wait for others to pour your drink for you, and then return the favor when you see someone's glass getting low.

In some Asian countries, such as Korea, it is unacceptable to pick up your rice bowl when eating, but in Japan, this is very common.

Regional Dishes

One of the most interesting aspects of Japanese cuisine is its vast array of regional delicacies. Each area of Japan boasts its own selection of specialty dishes that have become closely associated with that area. It is not uncommon for Japanese people from all over Japan to travel hundreds or even thousands of miles to try the different specialties in the place that they originally come from.

One of the most famous examples of regional cuisine is ***okonomiyaki***, which is a flat, pancake-shaped food. Cooked on a hot plate, *okonomiyaki* usually contains chopped cabbage, meat, and seafood. However, because the name contains the word *okonomi*, meaning "to one's liking," it is up to you to decide what goes into your *okonomiyaki*. Cheese, *mochi*, and even Korean kimchee ("pickled vegetables") are among some of the most popular additions to *okonomiyaki*. There are two regional variations of *okonomiyaki*: Osaka style and Hiroshima style. In Osaka style, which is considered the dominant style that you'll find all over Japan, the chef mixes all the ingredients together before transferring them to the hot plate. There, the chef cooks it and then tops it with dried seaweed, dried *bonito*, or fish flakes, and a thick *okonomiyaki* sauce. On the other hand, in Hiroshima style, the chef layers the ingredients one-by-one instead of mixing them together. It is very common to add noodles, and the amount of cabbage is anywhere from three to four times the amount usually used in Osaka-style *okonomiyaki*.

Other popular regional dishes include ***gōya chanpuru***, a stir-fried dish containing *gōya*, a very bitter gourd, from Okinawa; ***wanko soba***, buckwheat noodles from Iwate served in bite-served portions that keep coming until you say stop; ***basashi***, raw horse meat, from Kumamoto; ***gyūtan***, cow tongue, from Miyagi, and much, much more. If you have a chance to visit Japan, definitely try some of the local specialties!

Popular Dishes

Some of the most popular dishes in Japan are usually quite different from what people might imagine. If you were to look at the average Japanese person's lunch, what would you find? The most common Japanese lunch is the **bentō**. *Bentō* refers to a meal served in a box that is either prepared at home or bought at restaurants and convenience stores. Anything goes when it comes to the contents of a *bentō*, although white rice, fish, and vegetables are common elements found in many *bentō*. Visually, *bentō* range from very simple to elaborately arranged. There is even a kind of *bentō* called *kyaraben*, short for character *bentō*, where the food is arranged and decorated to look like people, animals, popular characters, and so on.

Other everyday Japanese foods include **o-nigiri**, rice balls wrapped in seaweed with various fillings; **curry**, usually containing potatoes, carrots, onions, and served together with white rice; **karaage**, Japanese-style fried meat, usually chicken; **rāmen**, a Japanese noodle dish that originated in China; and more.

Seasonal Dishes

The Japanese really love their seasons, and they especially love eating the different dishes associated with each season. When the cold weather sets in in the winter, people line up to eat **nabe** and **oden**, which are both hot stew-like dishes. *Nabe* is a hot pot that consists of a stew with assorted meats and vegetables. The host usually places the pot in the center of the table so many people can share it. *Oden*, on the other hand, is an assortment of vegetables and meat stewed in a light, soy-flavored broth. Common ingredients found in *oden* are *daikon* radish, boiled eggs, meat skewers, and fish cakes. You can purchase even *oden* at convenience stores, where you can pick and choose what goes into your *oden*.

In spring, along with the *sakura* ("cherry blossoms"), comes *sakura no shiozuke* ("salted cherry blossoms") and leaves that chefs use in various ways in Japanese cuisine, the most commonplace being **sakura-mochi**. *Sakura-mochi* is *mochi*, a sticky rice cake, wrapped in a salted *sakura* leaf and topped with a salted cherry blossom. The sweltering heat in the summer accounts for the popularity of cold dishes such as *hiyashi sōmen*, ("chilled wheat noodles"), and **kakigōri**, ("shaved ice"). In fall, *kuri*, known as chestnuts, come into season and chefs use them in many dishes, such as *kuri go-han*, which is cooked rice with sweet chestnuts.

Top Five Foods to Try in Japan

Sushi

Sushi is probably the most famous Japanese food. Make your way to Tsukiji Fish Market, one of the largest fish markets in the world, for some of the freshest *sushi* around. For a unique *sushi* experience, try *kaiten zushi*, which also known as conveyor belt *sushi*. In *kaiten zushi* restaurants, the chefs place plates of *sushi* on a rotating conveyor belt that makes its way through the restaurant, moving past every table and seat. Customers are free to pick and choose the *sushi* they want off the conveyor belt, although they can also place special orders.

Soba and udon

Soba, buckwheat noodles, and *udon*, thick noodles made from wheat, are two of the

most popular types of Japanese noodles. You can serve both hot or cold, and there are many different varieties in different regions of Japan.

Tōfu

Let's face it; tofu doesn't have the best reputation in the West. Even if you aren't crazy about tofu or just can't shake its bland, flavorless image, you're sure to find a *tōfu* recipe that will make you reconsider this Japanese delicacy. In Japan, there are innumerable ways to prepare tofu that give it tons of flavor. Some of the most popular include *agedashi-dōfu* ("deep-fried tofu"), *mabō dōfu* ("spicy tōfu," originally from China), and the aforementioned *gōya champuru*, a dish from Okinawa made with *gōya* and *tōfu*.

Shabushabu

Shabushabu is a dish that uses thin slices of meat dipped in boiling water or broth, which you then dip into a flavored sauce and eat. This dish is usually served with tōfu and vegetables.

Rāmen

Rāmen is a Japanese noodle dish that has its roots in China. It consists of a meaty broth, noodles, shredded meat, and vegetables. *Rāmen* shops are located all over Japan, with many regional variations available. Some of the most popular *rāmen* flavors are *miso* (a paste made from fermented soybeans), *shōyu* ("soy sauce"), *shio* ("salt"), and *tonkotsu* ("pork bone").

Top Five Foods for the Brave

Nattō

Nattō is a traditional food made from fermented soybeans, infamous for its bad smell and sticky consistency. So infamous, in fact, that one question Japanese people are sure to ask you is whether or not you have tried *nattō*. *Nattō* is usually eaten as a topping on rice.

Nama tamago

Nama tamago, or raw egg, shows up in a variety of Japanese dishes, including the popular favorites *sukiyaki*, where you dip meat into a bowl of raw egg before you eat it, and *tamago kake go-han*, cooked rice mixed with raw egg and a little bit of soy sauce.

Shiokara

Shiokara is Japanese fermented seafood that has a very strong flavor and is quite salty. It is definitely an acquired taste, even for many native Japanese people.

Reba-sashi

Reba-sashi is short for *rebā sashimi*, which is "raw liver." You can usually find this at *yakiniku* (Korean barbecue) restaurants in Japan.

Kusaya

Kusaya is a Japanese style salted-dried fish. The name comes from the word *kusai*, which literally means, "smells bad." You make *kusaya* by soaking fish into a "*kusaya* gravy" (that is used over and over again) and then leave it to dry in the sun. The smell of *kusaya* is very strong, but the taste is relatively mellow. While it is fairly well-known because of its bad smell, even among Japanese people, few have actually tried it.