

Fact Sheet: Food & Culture in Japan

TRADITIONAL FOODS & DISHES

In Japanese culture the traditional diet is called Washoku. Washoku is:

- Made up primarily of fish and soybean products
- Characterized by low amounts of animal fat and meat
- Listed in the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage category and
- Defined primarily by the presence of rice.
- Common additions are soup and side dishes, including pickles.

The basic overall structure of Washoku is soup, cooked rice and three side dishes made with dashi stock alongside the rice. Umami, known as the fifth basic taste and identified in the English language as “savory”, is used to increase palatability in certain foods.¹

There are two major religions in Japan named Shinto and Buddhism. Shinto is a religion of early Japan² and focuses on ritual as a way to connect Japan’s past with its present day, focusing both on current local community practices as well as larger structured state ceremonies.³

Harae, a purification ritual involving offerings of fruit, fish and vegetables (Shinsen), salt (shio), rice (gohan), rice cake (mochi), and rice wine (sake), affects food consumption in Japan on a daily basis.³ In Buddhism, vegetarianism is often practiced out of respect for life but is not required. However, if meat is eaten the animal

should be killed by a non-Buddhist according to Buddhist religious code.²

The Japanese Diet

Staple Foods: Grains, Rice (noodles or glutinous rice)

Soup: Miso Soup (seaweed, shellfish, vegetables)

Main Dishes: Fish, seafood, meats (less often)

Side Dishes: Vegetables, wild plants, mushrooms, seaweed, shellfish¹



TRADITIONAL EATING PATTERNS

Traditional eating patterns in Japan are still followed by many of its citizens.

Meals are typically eaten three times per day using chopsticks out of wooden bowls known as “wan”. The main dish is eaten with side dishes that are consumed together at the same time. Due to the use of chopsticks, eating is done through small bites and portion sizes are generally

small. Overall, eating is intended to be a sensory experience such that the participant experiences a diversity of sights, smells and tactile sensations during a meal.⁴

4 Elements of Taste

- **Preserving the Naturalness of Flavors** through the use of dashi (dried fish or kelp stock), shoyu, miso, sake, salt, miren, and vinegar.
- **Quick Preparation** of foods including suschi, menrui (noodle dishes), onigiri (rice balls)
- **Absorption of Foreign Foods** like tempura and tonkatsu (fried pork cutlets). Rice is a common component of many dishes that have been adopted into Japanese culture and become part of the cuisine.
- **Food for Decoration and Display** which is influenced by ancient rites and rituals originating in China. One example of this is Hocho-Shiki, a samurai-period knife ceremony.⁴

TRADITIONAL HEALTH BELIEFS

Traditional Japanese medicine, called Kampo, has been integrated into modern medicine.

- Originated in China and was introduced to Japan through Korea⁵
- Dates back 1500 years⁵
- Natural and material-based medicine
- Introduced into medical education in 2001⁶
- 148 herbal formulations can be prescribed through Japan's national health insurance system⁵
- Wholistic and therapeutic approach to medicine⁵

While traditional medicine has largely been incorporated into the larger health system in Japan, there is one particular tradition, dating back centuries, that is famously known.

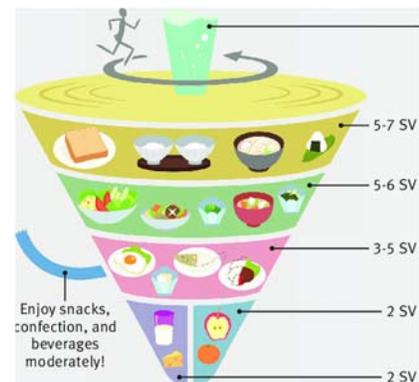
Gargling has been considered a preventative remedy for upper respiratory tract infections. At least one study has been conducted with inconclusive results.⁷



CURRENT FOOD PRACTICES

The Dietary Guidelines for Japanese was published in 2000 to educate the people of Japan about what makes up a healthy daily diet.⁸

The Japanese Food Guide Spinning Top was later released in 2005 to help the people of Japan implement the dietary guidelines.⁹



One current issue in Japan is the country's increasing reliance on food produced in other countries. In 2010, only 39 percent of calories consumed came from food produced in the country, leaving 61 percent from imported goods.¹⁰

A declining rural population has damaged Japan's agriculture industry, and consumers have begun to change their preferences to include more Western-based foods.