

# An Invitation to the Profound Taste of Japanese Cuisine

The greatest joy of traveling overseas must surely be coming into contact with and experiencing a different culture. Even though we now live in an age of effortless access to information, seeing is believing, in other words, it is important to actually visit the place and experience for yourself. When you travel to Japan and stay at the unique lodging facilities known as *ryokan*, you will be overwhelmed by the 'foreignness' of the culture, so different from others, and made up of so many diverse elements. In particular, through your encounter with Japanese cuisine, you will acutely perceive the uniqueness of our culture with all your five senses.

The most remarkable feature about Japanese food is that Japan is blessed with an exceptionally rich variety of ingredients. The country is a long and narrow arc of islands stretching from the subarctic zone in the northeast to the subtropical zone in the southwest, and has four distinct seasons as well as many mountains and rivers, providing ideal habitats for animals and plants. Moreover, the oceans surrounding the country are home to numerous fishing grounds, and all kinds of fish can be caught from both the warm and cold ocean currents. The fresh and bountiful products of the sea and mountains have greatly contributed to the development of Japanese food, allowing our own original food culture to blossom.

For a very long time, the Japanese people did not eat meat but ate mostly fish and vegetables due to the influence of Buddhism. Japanese food is unique among the cuisines of the world in that only small amounts of oils and spices are used. Furthermore, the availability of the freshest ingredients and abundant clean water have enabled the Japanese to develop unique techniques that rely on as little additional flavoring as possible and to bring out the original flavor of each ingredient. Japanese cuisine embodies a unique focus on seasonality, requiring proficiency at cooking seasonal ingredients and techniques for expressing the four seasons even in the actual arrangement of the food on the plates.

Even today, first-class Japanese food served at *ryōtei* and *kappō* restaurants looks beautiful, tastes delicious, and is perfectly balanced in nutrition. This healthy food could be described as the perfect cuisine.

As for the origins of Japanese cuisine, there are many interpretations depending on the perspective. Here, we will assume that Japanese cuisine originated in the food prepared for court aristocrats in the years preceding the Nara Period. However, the culinary techniques were very simple back then, and opinions differ as to whether the food was worthy of being called 'cuisine'. Nonetheless, food prior to this era had primarily been considered as merely a source of energy for sustaining life, and so it is possible to identify the roots of Japanese cuisine in the Nara Period. Since then, the techniques of Japanese cuisine improved significantly in each period, through wealth, power, religion. Initially, the influences of Buddhism gave birth to *shōjin ryōri* (vegetarian meals prepared for religious reasons) using foods processed from vegetables and soy beans. *Sadō* (the art of ceremonial tea) produced *kaiseki ryōri* (tea-ceremony dishes), and *honzen ryōri* (formal dinner served on trays with legs) emerged from the *samurai* society, which later developed into *kaiseki ryōri* (party dishes served on individual trays) served during *sake* feasts. At the same time, all kinds of *kyōdo ryōri* (regional dishes) developed in each locality. In the Kantō District (Edo), *nigiri-zushi* (hand-rolled sushi), tempura (deep-fried fish and vegetables), *soba* (buckwheat noodles) and *unagi* (eel) dishes were created, whereas in the Kansai District (Kyoto), *kaiseki ryōri* (tea-ceremony dishes) developed into refined dishes served at high-class *ryōtei* restaurants, and the foods of both districts spread nationwide. Later, all of the above foods started to adopt elements from one another, and eventually merged harmoniously, which explains the extensive diversity now seen in Japanese cuisine.

From the Meiji Period onward, the practice of eating meat spread, and a new form of Japanese cuisine, quite different from the genuine form of Japanese

cuisine, has been handed down to this day. Whether eating out or at home, meals combining Japanese and Western foods have become commonplace, and it is becoming increasingly difficult to draw a distinction between Japanese food and other foods for Japan has been incorporating the cooking methods of various countries worldwide. There is a prominent trend among Japanese consumers to seek rice, meat, vegetables and other ingredients sold under brand names. This can be positively interpreted as a reflection of the pursuit of delicious food made since ancient times by the Japanese who are used to adapting to things new.

In the contemporary Japanese *ryokan*, food is prepared by introducing elements of Japanese regional cuisines and foreign cooking methods while fundamentally adhering to traditional Japanese cuisine, producing *kaiseki ryōri* (party dishes) characterized by original touches added by each of the *ryokans*. Although this trend has taken root nationwide, some *ryokans* serve mainly *kyōdo ryōri* (local specialties), have adopted the buffet style, or are creating unique forms of Japanese cuisine under new interpretations.

For Japanese people who choose to stay at *ryokans*, the food is one of the most important factors for selecting a *ryokan*. The quality of the food is greatly influenced by the skills and sense of the chefs. That is why each *ryokan* strives to hire experienced chefs with first-class skills, and is committed to training younger chefs to ensure that these techniques are properly handed down.

After this lengthy explanation, it is our earnest desire that you will have the chance to relish the sumptuous dishes prepared by the *ryokan* laid out with pride before you on the dining table, and hope that they will suit your palate. But however much we describe the food, nothing can compare to experiencing Japanese cuisine for yourself.



バイキング形式のカウンター  
A buffet-style counter.



お弁当形式の日本料理（昼食）  
Japanese food (lunch) neatly arranged in a box  
in an *obento* style.