

The background is a rich, textured collage of Japanese culinary elements. In the top left, there are two small dark bowls filled with a light-colored liquid, possibly soy sauce or miso, next to a small dark teapot. To the right, a cluster of bright orange citrus fruits, likely mandarin oranges, is shown. Below the oranges, a black plate holds a piece of salmon topped with a green garnish. In the center-right, a wooden bowl is filled with white rice, with a pair of wooden chopsticks resting on top. The bottom of the image is dominated by a variety of fresh ingredients: several pieces of nigiri sushi (salmon and tuna) are in the bottom left; a basket of fresh green onions and other vegetables is in the bottom center; and a large, vibrant platter of assorted sashimi, including salmon, tuna, and various types of mushrooms, is in the bottom right. The entire scene is set against a dark, vertically-grained wooden background.

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RESTAURANT INFO



Traditional Sweets highlight food cultures of Japan

STORY AND PHOTOS BY TAKAHIRO TAKIGUCHI,
STRIPE JAPAN

If you have sampled the traditional sweets of Japan, you might have been surprised how different the tastes – and ingredients that include sweet potatoes, sweet beans and rice – are from Western sweets.

These sweets are not only savory, but generally extremely fancy and beautiful. They usually are served with tea and are used for temple ceremonies, offerings and gifts. They also have a deeper meaning to the Japanese.

The traditional sweets supply nourishment to the heart, according to Mitsuo Yabu, managing director of Traditional Japanese Sweets Association.

“As you know, food is necessary for a man to live, but sweets are not,” he said. “But they enrich and encourage our heart with their delicious tastes and elegant looks. I think this is very important.”

“Souls exist in traditional sweets,” said Masae Arakaki of the traditional Ryukyu sweets shop Arakaki Kashiten and descendant of the dynasty’s last royal chef, Arakaki Pe-chin Shukuku.

“I would like as many people as possible to be touched by these souls by enjoying these traditional sweets.”

Okinawa has its own group of traditional sweets called Ryukyukashi, developed under the influence of both Japanese and Chinese during the Ryukyu Dynasty (1372-1879). “Ryukyukashi is the fruit of a Ryukyu Dynasty aesthetic sense,” Arakaki said. “It is said that Ryukyukashi is 30 percent Japanese taste and 70 percent Chinese.”

According to Arakaki, existing documents from that era show there were more than 230 recipes of sweets during the Ryukyu Dynasty, although most have been lost. The Ryukyukashi available today are mostly baked sweets, which include the famous Okinawan Cookie, “chinsuko,” and “hanabo-ru,” cookies shaped like Wisteria flowers.

While Okinawan sweets are hundreds of years old, the first form of Japanese sweets,

wagashi, was developed about 5,000 years during the Jomon Period. During this time, people started making food out of nuts, according to Yabu. “Smashing oak nuts into powder to make “dango” (dumplings) after removing the bitterness with water are fundamental processes for making wagashi,” Yabu said.

Another important part of wagashi is mochi, a chewy rice cake. As rice can spoiled easily, ancient people invented a way

of preserving it by making mochi.

“Rice cakes can be preserved for a long time without refrigeration,” Yabu said. “And once you cook it over a fire, it becomes very tasty.”

These two ancient sweets, dango and mochi, are mainstream wagashi today, with many popular shops specializing in them.

Various ingredients are used in wagashi, including rice, flour, sweet potatoes, beans, millet, chestnuts, sugar, seaweed and various fruit.

“As wagashi is made mainly from cereals, rice flour, nuts, beans and potatoes, the smell is very faint,” Yabu said. “Japanese traditionally prefer a faint smell for sweets.”

And until about 50 years ago, wagashi did not include dairy products nor eggs. However, today “most wagashi shops use these animal products for some of their sweets,” he said.

The biggest difference between wagashi and Ryukyukashi is oil. While wagashi almost contain no oil, Okinawans use a lot of oil in their sweets.

“A majority of traditional Okinawan sweets use lard for baking and for flavor,” Arakaki said. “Chinsuko, for example, is a cookie using lard instead of butter, and that gives it a unique flavor.”

On the contrary, the use of oil is traditionally avoided when making wagashi, according to Yabu. “Adzuki beans are used quite often to make bean paste in wagashi, but soybeans have never been used because of the lipid,” he said. “An adzuki bean is only 2 percent fat while the soybean has 20 percent. The (vegetable) fat makes bean paste sticky and spoils the flavor, which is why our ancestors avoided it.”

Climate also plays a part in differentiating the two traditional sweets. In mainland Japan, the sweets are seasonal.

“We know spring has come when kusamochi (rice-flour cake flavored with mugwort) is available in February,” Yabu said, adding that the shapes and colors of the sweets also vary from month to month. “Summer is heralded by mizuyokan (soft adzuki-bean jelly) and kuzuzakura (cherry-leaf-covered kuzu bun filled with bean jam), and for autumn, there are persimmon and chestnut sweets.”

Since there are not four clear seasons on Okinawa, the same sweets are sold throughout the year. “But we often shape our sweets in accordance with the season,” Arakaki said. “We shape chinsuko in a cherry-like figure in spring, and star-like for summertime.”

So, exactly how popular are these traditional sweets?

When the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries conducted a nation-wide survey on Japanese sweets in 1978, Yabu said the data clearly showed a majority of younger people didn’t eat the traditional sweets, while those age 70 and older did. The data made those in the traditional sweets industry worry that their products would fade into history.

“However, when the ministry did the same research 28 years later, the data was still the same,” Yabu said. “The data clearly shows that people enjoy the traditional sweets as they grow older, which made us very relieved.”

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Wagashi Trivia – Do you take off the leaf?

When you eat “sakuramochi” or “kashiwamochi” sweets, do you remove the leaf wrapping, or eat it with the leaf?

According to Mitsuo Yabu, managing director of Traditional Japanese Sweets Association, a famed television announcer once told viewers that a true connoisseur of traditional Japanese sweets should eat them with leaves on, and many believed what he said.

“That is absolutely wrong,” said a notably perturbed Yabu. “It took me a long time to correct the public’s misunderstanding.”

According to Yabu, to fully enjoy these rice cakes, you should enjoy the faint aroma of cherry or oak leaves first, then remove the leaves just before eating it.

“The salty taste of the leaves remain on the rice cakes, making the sweets even sweeter with a delicate flavor.”





Popular Wagashi (Mainland)



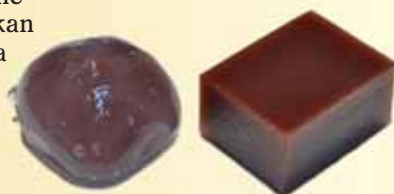
DANGO - A sweet dumpling that comes in an assortment of colors and is made from cereals and rice. Soy sauce and sweet bean paste are often used to flavor it. Applying sugar to a well-pounded dango can preserve it for long time.

MONAKA - A wafer filled with adzuki bean paste. The paste can be made from sesame seed, chestnuts or rice. Most wafers are square shaped in a square. Monaka is usually served with tea.



SENBEI - A Japanese rice cracker in various shapes, sizes and flavors that are usually baked or grilled, traditionally over charcoal. A typical senbei is flavored with soy sauce and mirin, and wrapped with a layer of seaweed. There also are salt- and sugar-flavored senbei.

YOKAN - The dark-colored sweets are one of the nation's most popular traditional sweets. Yokan is made from adzuki beans, sugar and agar, a natural gelling agent made from seaweed. Yokan derives from an ancient Chinese recipe for lamb stew. When the dish came to Japan, Zen monks substituted beans for the lamb because they were prohibited from eating meat.



Popular Ryukyu-kashi (Okinawa)



CHINSUKO - An Okinawan cookie that originated during the Ryukyu Dynasty. It is made from wheat flour, sugar, and lard. It is baked until an appealing exudes. Chinsuko is one of the most important traditional sweets on Okinawa.

CHIIRUNKO - Often called "Okinawan kasutera," Chiirunko is a brightly colored steamed cake topped with a smattering of peanuts that have been dyed red with citrus peels boiled in sugar syrup. The recipe includes plenty of eggs, which were scarce and thus highly prized during the Ryukyu Dynasty era. It is said that this cake was eaten only by nobility.



SENJUKO - A pretty lotus-shaped cake with pastry on the outside filled with a mixture of sesame and peanut butter and refreshingly fragrant kippin.

HANABO-RU - A cookie made from wheat flour and egg yolk and shaped like a Wisteria flower. This Ryukyu-kashi requires the skilled techniques of an experienced patisserie chef. The Portuguese introduced this sweet to mainland Japan in the 1600s, and later it was introduced to Okinawa. Today this sweet is enjoyed only on Okinawa.



- Masae Arakaki of Arakaki Kashiten

Kasutera – Western sweet or traditional Japanese?

In the 15th and 16th centuries, Spanish and Portuguese introduced Western sweets to Japan. A sponge cake was one of them. The Japanese digested it and remade it their own.

"Kasutera is one of very popular sweets in Japan and it really resembles Western sponge cake," said Traditional Japanese Sweets Association's Mitsuo Yabu. "But it is different. While Western sponge are made with baking powder, our ancestors made it by whisking eggs so that bubbles would make holes in the cake when baked."

Okinawans have their own kasutera called chiirunko.

"Different from Kasutera, chiirunko is a steaming sponge cake with plenty of eggs," said Masae Arakaki of Okinawa's traditional Ryukyu sweets shop, Arakaki Kashiten. "Like kasutera, we don't use

baking powder in chiirunko."

"When the Western food culture was introduced, our ancestors did not accept them as they were. They modified them," Yabu said. "I think their spirit is wonderful, and that shaped the core of our sweets, which has been passed down from generation to generation."



Popular wagashi shops near your base

The following are some of the most popular and highly-rated wagashi shops.



Kyofune – Misawa (Aomori Prefecture)

Kyofune is widely known for its chestnuts sweets. Taste the popular Michinoku Maron, a whole chestnut wrapped in dough and white bean paste.

Open: 9 a.m. - 6:30 p.m.

Location: 3-7-20 Chuo-cho, Misawa City (4-minute walk from "Chuo Sanhome" bus stop)

URL: www.kyofune.jp

For more information: call 0176-53-8111 (Japanese)



Yamaguchiya – Atsugi (Kanagawa Prefecture)

Since its opening in 1937, Yamaguchiya has focused on producing tasty sweet bean paste. The popular Renzan Monaka, a wafer filled with sweet bean paste is a must.

Open: 9 a.m. - 6 p.m.

Location: 3-30-9

Nakashinden, Ebina City (5-minute walk from JR Atsugi Station)

URL: <http://www.yamaguchiya.ne.jp/index.html>

For more information: call 046-231-0471



Aizawa Kashiho – Yokosuka (Kanagawa Prefecture)

Aizawa's most popular item is shikimando, a crispy wafer filled with coarse sweet bean. Another popular sweet, kaki-no-sato, is a dried persimmon with white bean that is only available between October and February.

Open: 9 a.m. - 8 p.m.

Location: 1-51 Higashi Hemi, Yokosuka City (4-minute walk from Hemi Station of Keikyu-line)

URL: <http://yokosuka-aizawa.jp>

For more information: call 046-824-4147



Tachikawa Iseya – Tachikawa (Tokyo)

Founded in 1956, Tachikawa Iseya has caught the attention of a wide-range of people with a sweet tooth. Daifuku Mika, Mame-Daifuku and Kuri-Daifuku are customer favorites.

Open: 9 a.m. - 7:30 p.m.

Location: 3-17-1 takamatsucho, Tachikawa City (An 8-minute walk from JR Tachikawa Station)

URL: <http://tabelog.com/tokyo/A1329/A132901/13067034/>

For more information: call 042-522-3793



Iwamiya – Iwakuni (Yamaguchi Prefecture)

Iwamiya is known for its popular iwami-manju, or steamed buns. They are often sold out by early afternoon, so place an order by phone and then pick it up

Open: Tue - Sat, 9 a.m. - 6 p.m.

Location: 1-7-22 Imadu-cho, Iwakuni City (7-minute walk from JR Iwakuni Station's west exit)

URL: <https://tabelog.com/en/yamaguchi/A3506/A350601/35005871>

For more information: call 0827-22-0235 (Japanese)



Kikuhodo – Zama (Kanagawa Prefecture)

Since its establishment in 1928, Kikuhodo has offered wagashi made using tasty mineral water and ingredients from Zama City. Odako Monaka and Sake Manju are the most popular items.

Open: Wed - Mon, 9 a.m. - 6:30 p.m.

Location: 1-3003-2 Zama, Zama City (10-minute walk from JR Sobudai-shita Station)

URL: <http://0462.net/shop/kikuhodo/>

For more information: call 046-251-0139



Shogetsudo – Sasebo (Nagasaki Prefecture)

Since its foundation in 1905, this shop has offered kasutera famous for its plentiful egg yolk and lam sugar.

Open: Mon - Sat, 9:30 a.m. - 6:15 p.m.

Location: 5-6 Kamikyo-cho, Sasebo City (3-minute walk from JR Sasebo Station)

URL: <https://www.syogetsudo.jp/webshop>

For more information: call 0956-22-4458



STORY AND PHOTOS BY SARAH HODGE,
STRIPES JAPAN

In these strange times, many of us are going back to our kitchens to rediscover long-lost domestic arts like bread baking (if you are lucky enough to find yeast and flour!), experimenting with fermentation, and making our own everyday staples – in my case, I’ve gone back to baking my own yeast bread, making tofu and fermenting my own yogurt and pickles at home.

One of the items that is in weekly rotation in my house is fresh Japanese tofu, but

if you don’t have access to Japanese grocery stores, you can make your own fresh soymilk and tofu at home with only two or three ingredients and some basic equipment. In fact, once you’ve tasted homemade tofu and soymilk, you may never go back!

My friends from Raw Rutes (www.rawrutes.com) were kind enough to send a review unit of their Sumo tofu press, which also doubles as a tofu maker. Raw Rutes manufactures a range of tools for harvesting, dehydrating and fermenting foods, including its line of Ninja tofu presses, which are both functional and attractive.

Quarantine Kitchen

Homemade soymilk and tofu

Tool



Made in the USA from polished stainless steel, the eye-catching press (weighing in at a hefty 6 pounds) removes up to 35% of the tofu’s total weight in water in as little as 15 minutes! The press also doubles as a mold for homemade tofu when lined with cheesecloth.

Ingredients



Homemade tofu requires only three ingredients: dried soybeans, water, and nigari, a seawater extract that causes the soymilk to form curds. Nigari can be purchased in dried form or liquid form and is usually sold concentrated, so you’ll need to mix it with water first before adding to your soymilk. If you don’t have access to nigari, don’t worry – lemon juice will also work!

Here is Raw Rutes’ recipe for homemade organic tofu:

- 1 ½ cups raw organic soybeans (a 300-gram bag is just the right size)
- 4 ½ cups filtered water
- 1 – 2 teaspoons nigari or lemon juice



See more featured recipe:
Black Pepper Tofu by Mob Kitchen
on next page

Directions

1. Soak soybeans in 4 ½ cups filtered water overnight.



2. Add soybeans and soaking water to a blender or food processor and blend until you have a foamy “milkshake” (I used the puree setting on my Vitamix).

3. Boil 5 cups of filtered water in a large pot and add the contents of the blender.

4. Bring to a boil and simmer on medium-low for 8 minutes, stirring occasionally.

5. Line a strainer with cheesecloth and strain this mixture through into a bowl. Push or squeeze out as much liquid out as you can. The resulting liquid is fresh, unsweetened soymilk. The solids are called “okara” in Japanese and can be stir-fried or mixed into baked goods to add moisture and fiber. Okara is low in fat and high in calcium, protein and dietary fiber, and is most commonly used in unohana, a popular and traditional savory side dish made by combining okara and chopped vegetables like carrots, burdock, negi (leek or green onion), shiitake mushrooms, shoyu (soy sauce), and mirin (Japanese rice wine).

Stop at this step if you only want fresh soymilk.



6. Now mix 1-2 tsp of calcium sulfate (gypsum), 1-2 tsp nigari flakes (magnesium chloride), or 1 ½ tablespoons lemon juice in one cup of filtered water and stir to dissolve.

7. Rinse the cooking pot, pour the soymilk in, and bring the temperature up to right around 150 degrees. Don’t boil it!

8. Turn off the heat, and add half of the coagulant mixture you made to the pot. Stir it around eight times in a figure eight motion. Stop stirring and let it settle. Then add the rest of the coagulant, and start gently stirring again eight times. Cover the pot and let it sit for half an hour.

9. After 30 minutes, the whey and curds should have separated. Now the fun part! Line your Tofu Ninja or Sumo Press with two layers of cheesecloth and spoon the curds in!



10. There’s going to be a lot of liquid (the “whey”) draining out. (It’s best to load your press up in a container with sides or in the sink for easier cleanup). Once the press is loaded up and the drainage slows to a trickle, press it for right around half an hour.

11. Then flip the press over, pop the tofu out and throw it in the fridge for a few hours to firm it up even more. Use it fresh or store it submerged in water in the fridge for up to 5 days.

12. Enjoy!





Black pepper tofu

Cooking Time (includes preparation time): 50 mins.
Feeds: 4 People

Ingredients

- 2 x 280g firm tofu (I used one block of homemade tofu)
- 2 Tablespoons Black Peppercorns (crushed)
- 2 Tablespoons White Sugar
- Large Knob Chopped Ginger
- 2 Garlic Cloves
- 4 Spring Onions
- 1 White Onion
- 5 Tablespoons of Butter
- 1 Red Chilli
- 400g of basmati rice or short-grained Japanese rice
- Cornstarch
- 5 Tablespoons of Dark Soy Sauce
- 5 Tablespoons of Light Soy Sauce

Method

This tongue-tingling black pepper tofu is the perfect vehicle for your homemade tofu!



1. Chop tofu into cubes. Pat with paper towels to dry, then coat in cornstarch.
2. Add some vegetable oil to a wok. Fry the tofu until browned and set aside.
3. Get your rice on (I used my Zojirushi rice cooker).
4. Clean wok. Place on heat and add a splash of oil. Add 4 tablespoons of butter followed by the onion, garlic and ginger. Fry until soft.
5. Add your peppercorns and sugar. Mix together. Once the sugar has dissolved, add your soy sauce. Stir again.

About the author

A contributing writer to the Japan Times Food page, Sarah Hodge has been a cookbook reviewer and recipe tester for over a decade. Sarah's blog BundtLust (www.bundtlust.com) features hundreds of reviews for a wide range of international cookbooks.

In addition to taking cooking classes around the world, she is admin of the cooking groups "Let's Explore Japanese Cooking in Yokosuka" and "Yokosuka Vegetarians and Vegans," active in a number of other cooking groups on Facebook, and specializes in Japanese vegetarian temple cuisine, shojin ryori, on which she has published a number of articles for BentoYa Cooking and Thanks for the Meal.

You can follow her food and travel adventures on Instagram at [@japantravelbug](https://www.instagram.com/japantravelbug).

6. Add 1 chopped red chilli and 3 chopped spring onions. Stir and then re-add your tofu. Mix it in, add 1 more tablespoon of butter, allowing it to melt. Remove from the heat.

7. Serve the tofu on top of a mound of steaming rice, garnish with chopped spring onion and enjoy!



– Recipe by Mob Kitchen / Ben Lebus, from "Mob Kitchen Veggie" cookbook

(available from Amazon Japan at <https://amzn.to/2xpR1CY>)

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