

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 daidai (citrus), is shown. Below the citrus, a black plate holds a piece of salmon topped with a green garnish. In the middle 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 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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STORY AND PHOTOS BY SYDNEY SEEKFORD,
BYFOOD



Most people would agree that if you haven't tried tonkatsu, you're missing a big part of Japanese food. It can be found on just about every menu at home and abroad, alongside staples like ramen (hint hint). But just what is tonkatsu? Where did it come from? And more importantly, have you ever ordered it, expecting to get a crunchy, juicy plate of fried meat and been met with a table of soup instead!?

Keep reading. All secrets will be revealed.

What is tonkatsu?

Tonkatsu is best explained etymologically. That's to say, looking at the word itself since it is basically just a description. Like calling ketchup tomato paste, for example. The "ton" in tonkatsu is simply a reading for the kanji 豚, meaning pork. The katsu part is a little more complicated and gets really complicated later, but stay with me.

To katakana-ize the English word "cutlet," we get カツレツ "katsuretsu". Pull out the first part, 'katsu', and top it off with the pork 'ton', and you get 'tonkatsu'.

From here, you can probably figure out that tonkatsu is a pork cutlet.

Specifically, it's a pork cutlet that has been rolled in breadcrumbs and egg and double-fried for that extra-crispy, like-no-other texture. Abroad, the dish has taken on many forms and is occasionally double-named pork tonkatsu, but technically tonkatsu only refers to katsu-style fried pork to begin with.

You might be a little surprised to learn that the katsu part of tonkatsu comes from English, but its culinary origins are even more interesting than that!



Photo by Kai keisuke, Shutterstock

The history of Tonkatsu

The first iteration of tonkatsu was served in Tokyo's glamorous Ginza district in the 1890s under the simple moniker "pork cutlet." According to the Nihombashi Restaurant Association (whose authority, I believe, personally,) this took the form of a thin slice of pork served aside raw cabbage due to a lack of personnel and funds. It wasn't until 1929 that today's melt-in-your-mouth juicy, thick tonkatsu was born in a competitor's kitchen in Chiyoda, a few train stops away.

Clearly, tonkatsu came out of Japan, which doesn't explain the foreign name. In fact, plenty of Japanese apparently even debate the classification of tonkatsu as yoshoku (western-inspired Japanese food), because it is so entrenched in the country's food culture. Thankfully, there's an explanation for this as well.

About a quarter century before the first tonkatsu ever graced a heap o' cabbage, the Meiji restoration established policies to popularize Western culture. Along with this came cuisine, such as the French cotelette de veau. Without Europe's long history of incorporating rich animal products in their diet, the buttery, pan-fried veal of this French dish proved not only expensive but unsuited to Japanese tastes. Fortunately, the Japanese had developed the deep-frying technique of tempura, which wicks off excess oil on the second dip. In this way, Tonkatsu uses the original flour-egg-breadcrumb breading technique of French cuisine but Japanese frying methods to achieve its unique texture. Sounds perfect for something that came out of Ginza, right? Add to that readily available cabbage, a characteristic tonkatsu sauce with its own history, and you get the beloved tonkatsu of our time.

All about Tonkatsu the Japanese crispy pork

Tonkatsu vs. tonkotsu

At the start of this article, I asked if you have ever been unfortunate enough to witness this scene: Eagerly, you eye waitstaff coming around the corner, tonkatsu hopefully in tow. Then, in horror and surprise, that same waitstaff places before you or your dining companion a steaming bowl of soup instead of the requested hunk of meat.

The graphic scene I paint here is one that can only be born of experience. And shame.

On my first trip to Tokyo, I had the misfortune of ordering tonkotsu instead of my desired 'tonkatsu' thanks to a little language slip. Briefly, let's return to that etymology issue to explain.

We know that ton is pork. So obviously, I had ordered pork something. The kicker is that kotsu-katsu delineates. With a single letter, the whole menu changes.

Katsu, as we have learned, comes from cutlet.

Kotsu on the other hand comes from Japanese original, and means bone. What I had requested (and you may have too, had I not saved you from this) was 'pork bone', which naturally conveys a desire for pork bone soup, a common base for ramen and readily available at most Japanese restaurants alongside its fried, hammy companion.

In brief, tonkatsu is a fried pork cutlet dish. Tonkotsu is the name for the rich pork-bone broth used in ramen. Sound similar, very different. Should one order tonkatsu ramen outside of Japan, however, you will probably get tonkotsu soup and not noodles topped with pork cutlet, though that would probably be great.

Tonkotsu!



Variations of 'ton'katsu

Aside from the original tonkatsu combination of pork cutlet, cabbage, and sauce on a plate, other delicious takes on tonkatsu have been born of novelty and necessity.

Katsudon

Katsudon is a tonkatsu recipe that swaps out the crunch of cabbage and zing of vinegary katsu sauce for an easy-to-eat meal even young children feel at home with. Fried pork cutlet gets simmered with sweetened egg, onion, and sauce, then served over rice. It's a one-bowl meal popular across the world and brings together some of Japan's best cooking techniques.



Photo by Katie Thompson, byFood

Katsu Curry

Apparently, the product of a customer's whims, katsu curry is now a staple in katsu and curry restaurants alike. Slightly spicy, thick Japanese curry meets the crunchy savoriness of tonkatsu in a perfect harmony of texture and flavors.

Katsu Sando

Some genius came up with the perfect way to enjoy the classic katsu combination of katsu sauce, shredded cabbage and pork cutlet on the go. Pillowy shokupan style Japanese white bread soaks up the sauce to prevent drips and softens the prickly crunch of katsu panko. Served hot or cold, katsu sando are a delicious, discrete riff on tonkatsu.





File photo

Types of ‘but it’s not really ton’ katsu

Now that tonkatsu has become an international catchall word for katsu-style fried foods, let’s look at a few other members of the katsu-family you may come across in Japan or abroad.

Other Meats: Chicken, steak and tuna “rare” katsu

For the many reasons one might abstain from pork, there is torikatsu. It’s what you’ll be getting if you order chicken tonkatsu or chicken katsu overseas. I like to think of it as a katsu that was adapted for western tastes back again...

On the other hand, recently popularized rare katsu takes inspiration from searing to flash fry high-quality tuna or steak in a katsu-style panko breading. The mouthfeel retains the juicy quality and envelopes the rare morsels in crunchy katsu-style goodness. It’s the opposite of the humble katsudon and elevates katsu to the luxury dining sphere with wagyu and maguro. Are you drooling yet?



Photo by Eliska Sikulova, byFood



Kushikatsu

Katsu on a stick! Shove a yakitori stick through just about any bite-sized piece of food, fry it katsu-style, and you get kushikatsu. This style of katsu frying has become popular enough to have its own restaurant chains and is a great way to enjoy many different types of ingredients. Some especially fun takes on kushikatsu are mochi, cheese (mozzarella stick...on a stick. Excellent.), and quail eggs, plus tons of veggies! Kushikatsu is a popular food in Osaka, the city known as the nation’s kitchen.

Bento-box katsu: Menchikatsu and friends

Menchikatsu, a combination of mince-meat menchi and katsuretsu katsu, is essentially a hamburger or meatball that has been katsu deep fried. It is often billed as a “healthy” form of katsu because cabbage and onions are included in the patty. Other bento-box staples like ham cutlet get the katsu treatment too, and korokke use the same panko-frying technique to get their unique soft inside crunchy outside texture.



Photo by Toyakisphoto, Shutterstock



Seafood katsu: Ebi-fry and Aji-fry, etc.

Although the name is different, the prep method for making these seafood “fries” is the same as making katsu. Since dishes like ebi fry are made from whole shrimp, aji fry from fish filets, and ika fry from sections of squid, they don’t receive the cutlet-shaped delineation of katsu. If you want a lighter taste with the same katsu crunch, try a fry! As a side note, ebikatsu does actually exist - in the form of a katsu-fried shrimp paste patty. Yum!



Photo by Katie Thompson, byFood

Hirekatsu: Actually, this one is tonkatsu?

Hire(hee-ray)katsu uses leaner cuts and has a reputation for being popular with women since it’s a little more tender, less fatty, and higher quality compared to classic tonkatsu. The characteristic shape of tonkatsu is called “ros” or “roast” katsu, as opposed to hirekatsu. These are still made of pork but tend to come in a nugget or round shape instead of a slab and at a higher price point. The precise cuts for each classification vary depending on where you look, but fat-on pork katsu is usually ros, and lean is typically hire.



How to enjoy tonkatsu

The short answer is: However you like!
Even within Japan, people’s preferences for tonkatsu vary greatly. The classic tonkatsu recipe is simple. Serve a panko breaded and fried sliced pork cutlet with a pile of shredded cabbage and drizzle it with tonkatsu-sauce. In Hokuriku, sauce tonkatsu features a pork cutlet dredged in sauce and served over rice donburi style, sometimes omitting the cabbage altogether. Nagoya is known for its miso-katsu using sweet miso sauce, and of course, you can class the dish up or down as you please. The best thing about katsu, ton or otherwise, is that it is a super versatile and always delicious way to enjoy Japanese food. So go out and explore the wonderful world of katsu!

Fun facts about katsu

The official unofficial companion to tonkatsu is bulldog brand sauce, but plenty of restaurants make their own. On Bulldog’s English website they assert that it is indeed a form of washoku and not yoshoku. Rengatei, the inventor, calls it yoshoku, though! And so the debate continues...

Katsu sauce is based on British Worcestershire sauce, adapted to Japanese tastes. How’s that for cultural exchange?

Originally, julienned carrots and other root vegetables formed the sides of cotolette, but shredded cabbage was quicker to prepare and its antioxidant properties helped break down the oiliness of tonkatsu, so it won out.

Katsudon is similar to oyakodon made with tonkatsu instead of chicken! You can easily adapt an oyakodon recipe into katsudon at home.



Photo by Katie Thompson, byFood

A ton of information

The word tonkatsu, born of a combination of languages and lifestyles, has taken on a life of its own. In the modern day, Katsu has globe trotted its way to become one of the most recognizable Japanese dishes on the planet, no matter what form it takes. If you’ve ever wondered, “what is whatever-katsu? Is it the same as tonkatsu? Why did they bring me soup?!” hopefully, this article helped.

byFood is a platform for food events in Tokyo, with over 80 experiences to choose from and a fantastic resource for learning about Japan’s thriving food culture! What’s more, byFood runs a charitable outreach program, the Food for Happiness Project, which donates 10 meals to children in Cambodia for each person who books a food event through our platform!



SANGUWACHI GUWASHI

A great Okinawan treat for a beach picnic

STORY AND PHOTOS BY SHOJI KUDAKA,
STRIPES JAPAN

Much like Angadi how is dubbed the “Okinawan doughnut,” “Sanguwachi Guwashi (sweets of March)” should be called the “Okinawan financier” in my opinion. This Okinawan sweet has a rectangular shape and a smooth, sweet taste just like a French madeleine.

Searching for a perfect beach treat, I found this simple Okinawan recipe to try. Sanguwachi Guwashi has a close tie to the Okinawan tradition of beach picnics and, better yet, it only requires ingredients you might already have in your pantry like flour, sugar, and oil.

March 3 of the lunar calendar in Okinawa is Hamauri, a day to pray for girls’ health as well as one where women and girls visit the beach to be blessed by the seawater. Back in the day, men were not part of this tradition, but today it is more of a seasonal family event to celebrate the arrival of spring.

One thing definitely hasn’t changed: the picnic food and treats enjoyed at a refreshing beach picnic.

Much like other Okinawan traditions, locals would pack bento meals in stacked boxes called “jyuubako” or “ujyuu.” In the case of Hamauri, four bento boxes are often stacked under the name “Sanguwachi ujyuu (bento boxes of March).”

According to Kayoko Matsumoto, an expert on Okinawan cuisine, side dishes such as fish tempura and burdock rolled with meat are usually what go in the top box. In the second level, red rice balls. The third and fourth boxes are for Sanguwachi Guwashi and “Fuuchi-muchi,” which is rice cake mixed with artemisia herb.

If you have tried Andagi doughnuts, you’ll find many similarities with Sanguwachi Guwashi because both sweets share similar ingredients and cooking methods.

Still, there are some differences. First, Sanguwachi Guwashi is rectangular with two or three vertical slits, while Andagi is round shape. Second, Sanguwachi Guwashi is thought to be crispier as it is thinner than

the Okinawan doughnut.

Though I knew about the difference between the two sweet treats, the Sanguwachi Guwashi I made looked more like Andagi. Molding the dough was a challenge. I also added too much baking powder, making each piece thicker than the recipe called for. Nevertheless, my first try at Sanguwachi Guwashi did render a lightly sweet, slightly crispier cake than Andagi.

This year, March 3 of the lunar calendar falls on April 22. With about two months to go before the Hamauri day, I’m thinking about taking another shot at the recipe. Give it a try yourself, it’s sure to make your beach picnic sweeter!

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INGREDIENTS

(for 8 pieces)

- Egg (1 piece) • Sugar (70g) • Oil (10cc)
- Flour (140g) • Baking powder (2g)
- Flour to be sprinkled on the dough and a cooking board (appropriate amount)
- Oil to fry the dough (appropriate amount)

DIRECTIONS

(Based upon recipe by Kae Izena, a cooking expert)

- 1 Sieve flour (140g) and baking powder (2g) together.



- 2 Put a beaten egg in a bowl and stir it with sugar (70g). Be careful not to let the mixture bubble.



- 3 Put the mixture of flour and baking powder in the bowl of egg and sugar. Stir until ingredients are about 80 percent combined. Add oil (10cc) and mix again until the dough becomes hard (and soft) enough to be slit with a knife.



- 4 Wrap the dough with plastic wrap and let it cool in the fridge for about 30 minutes.



- 5 Sprinkle flour on a cooking board. Stretch the dough with a rolling pin or hands into a rectangular shape of 7 cm in width and 1 cm in thickness. Slice the dough into pieces 3.5 cm in length. Create two or three slits on each of them.



- 6 Heat oil in a frying pan to 170°C (338°F). Place pieces of dough in the oil with slits facing up. Flip once the pieces float up in the oil. Fry until golden brown. Take the pieces out of the pan after they crack open with the slits and their inner parts are heated through.



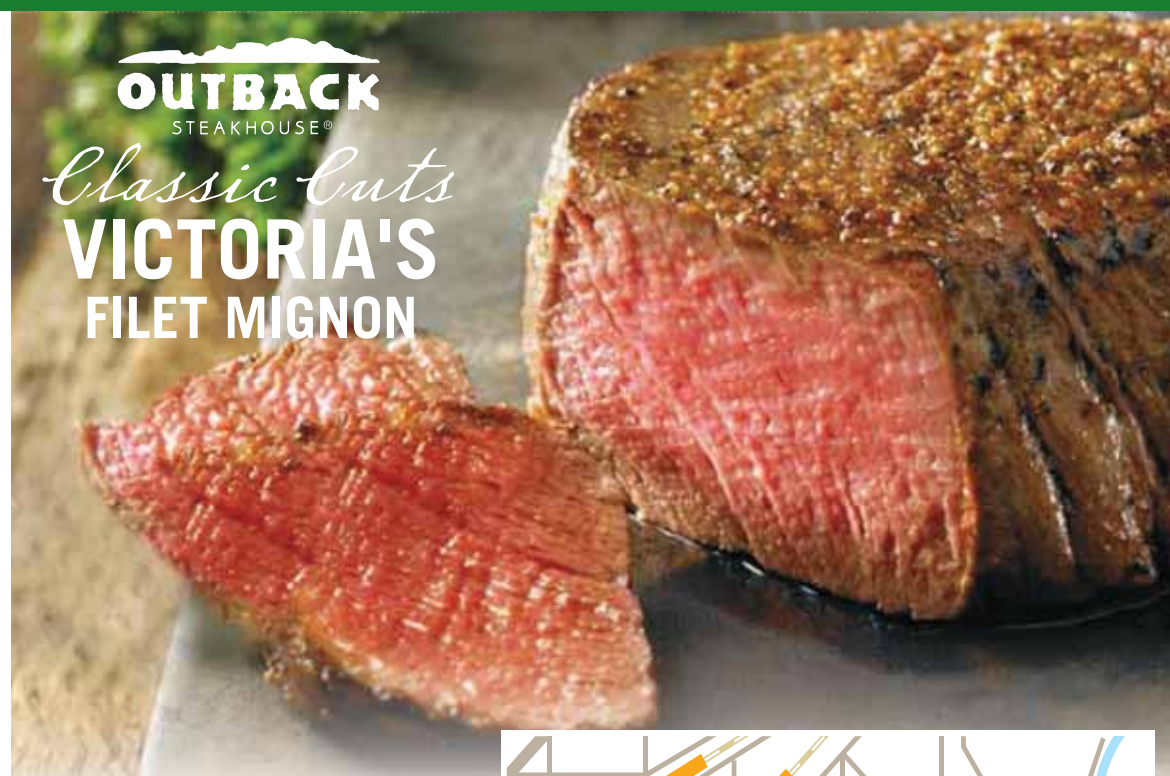
- 7 Let excess oil strain from cakes on paper towels.

- 8 Enjoy warm or cool at your picnic.



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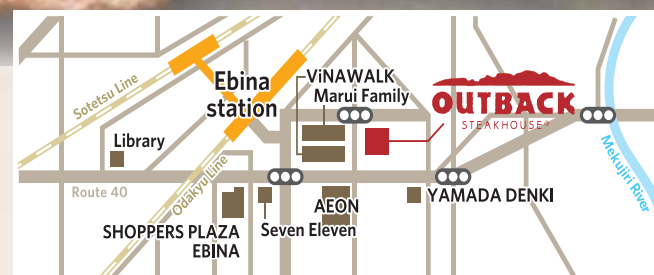
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Recipes by DeCA

German Pancakes

Ingredients:

- 4 eggs
- 1/2 cup flour
- 1 cup milk
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- 1 teaspoon vanilla



Directions:

1. Place a 10-inch cast iron or heavy oven-safe frying pan in the oven and preheat to 425 degrees.
2. Beat eggs and flour together; add milk, salt, sugar and vanilla and beat again.
3. Grease hot frying pan with butter or margarine.
4. Pour egg mixture into pan and bake for 15-20 minutes until puffed and golden brown around the edges.
5. Remove from oven and cut into wedges. Serve immediately with butter and syrup.

Yields: 4 servings

Breakfast Burritos

Ingredients:

- 4 large eggs
- 2 tablespoons milk
- Scant 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 1/4 teaspoon ground black pepper
- 2 slices American cheese
- 3 tablespoons salsa
- Salt and pepper
- 6 (6-inch) flour tortillas, warmed



Directions:

1. Break eggs into a small bowl, add the milk, salt and pepper and beat with a fork until egg yolks and whites are combined and the milk is well blended.
2. Spray a skillet with cooking spray and set over medium-low heat until warmed.
3. Pour in the egg mixture, and use a metal spatula or spoon to gently lift and fold the mixture until eggs are almost set.
4. Tear the cheese slices into pieces and fold into egg mixture until melted; stir in salsa and cook until mixture is heated through.
5. Divide egg mixture evenly among the six warmed tortillas, placing it in a column down the center of each. Fold one end of the tortilla over the egg mixture to form the bottom of the burrito, fold in one side and roll to opposite side to secure.
6. Serve with additional salsa if desired.

Yields: 6 servings

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RESTAURANT INFO