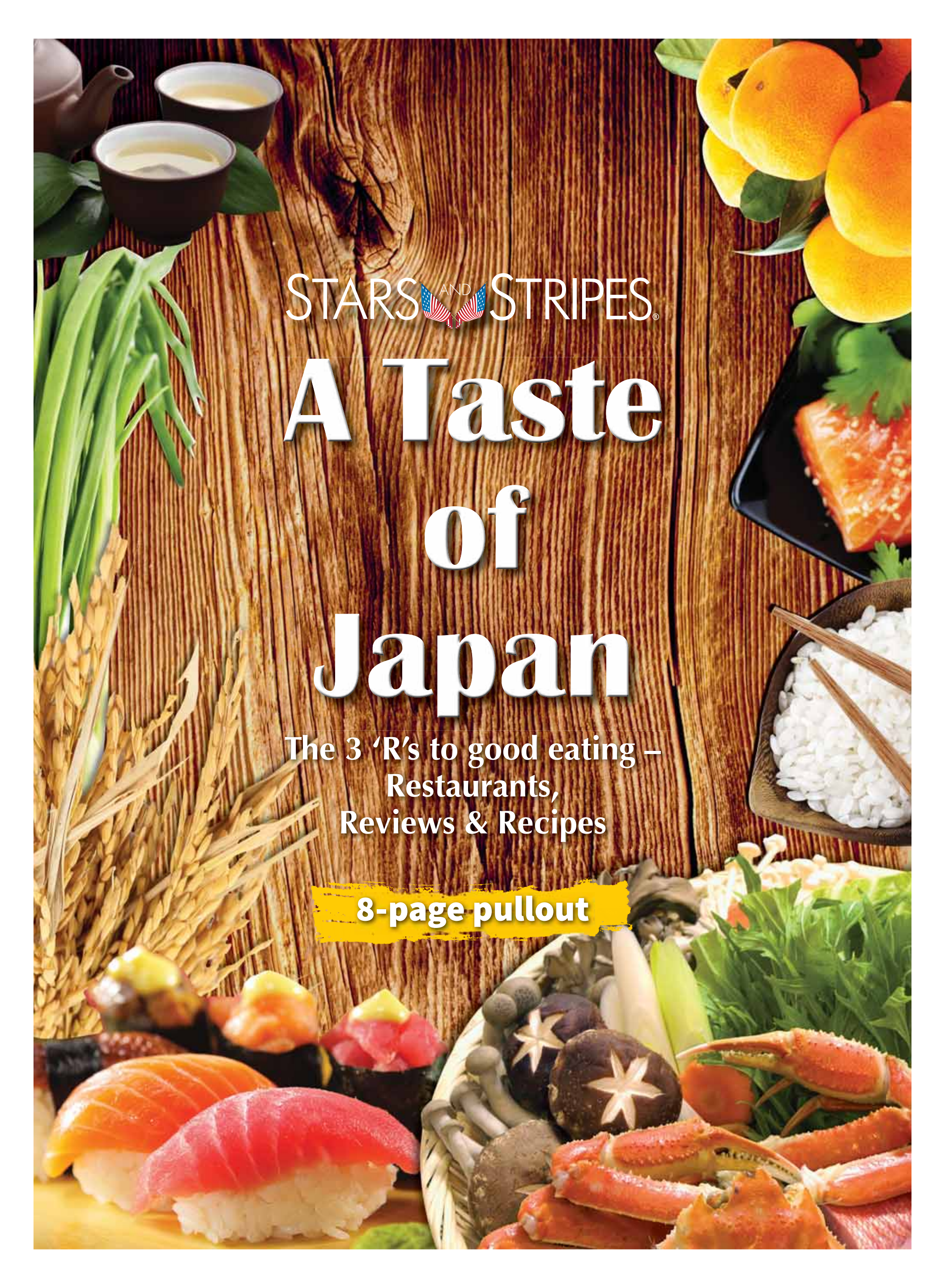


The background is a rich, textured collage of Japanese culinary elements. At the top left, there are two small dark bowls filled with a light-colored liquid, possibly soy sauce or miso, next to a small brown teapot. Below them are fresh green scallions and a bundle of dried, golden-brown rice stalks. On the right side, there are several bright orange citrus fruits, likely daidai (citrus), and a black plate with a piece of salmon sashimi garnished with green herbs. In the lower right, a wooden bowl is filled with white steamed rice, with a pair of wooden chopsticks resting on top. The bottom of the image features a variety of sushi, including nigiri with salmon and tuna, and a larger platter with crab legs, mushrooms, and other seafood. The entire scene is set against a dark, vertically-grained wooden background.

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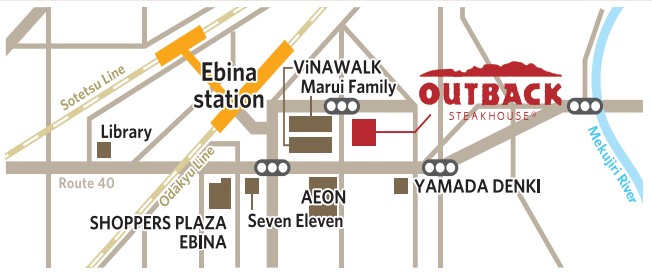
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A Taste of Japan



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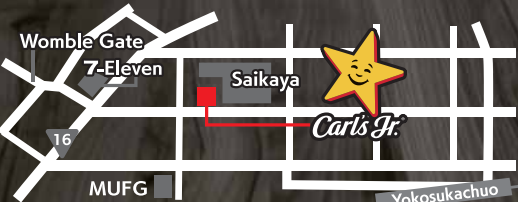
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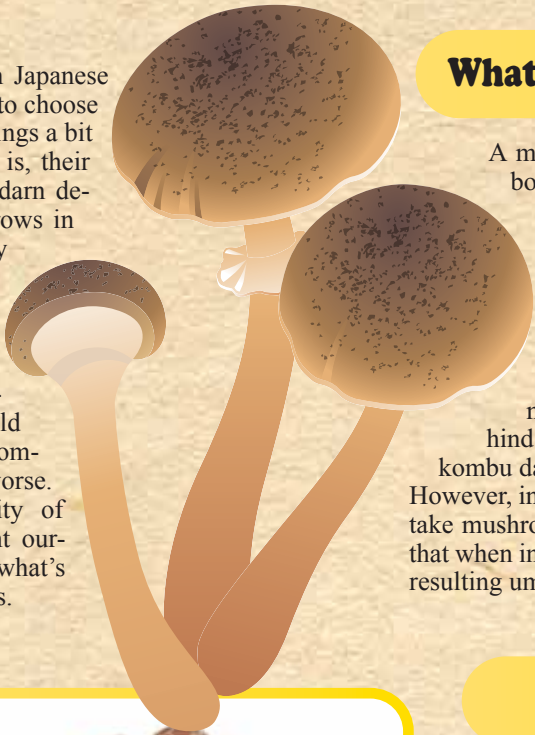
JAPANESE MUSHROOMS

An umamitastic world of endless flavor

TOFUGU.COM

Mushrooms are an essential ingredient in Japanese cuisine, and there are so many varieties to choose from. Hopefully this guide will make things a bit easier on you. It will tell you what a mushroom is, their types and uses, as well as what makes them so darn delicious. I couldn't cover every mushroom that grows in Japan, but I tried to cover the types you can usually find for sale. But before we start:

Warning: Do not go foraging for mushrooms unless you know what you're doing. That means you have lots of experience learning first-hand from another expert. There are lots of tasty mushrooms out there, but there are also many that could give you a stomach ache or worse. The vast majority of us should content ourselves with what's available in stores.



What are mushrooms and why are they so yummy?

A mushroom is, of course, a fungus. More specifically, it is the fleshy, fruiting body of a fungus. All mushrooms are fungi, but not all fungi are mushrooms. Mushrooms sometimes usually have stems and caps, and typically have gills. Those are the little frills you see on the underside of a mushroom's cap. Those gills produce spores that, in turn, produce more fungi. The mushroom is connected to more fungal structure embedded in its food source, whether that be the soil, a tree, or something else.

A big factor in the flavor of many mushrooms is their umami. Umami basically means "deliciousness," but was applied by scientist, Ikeda Kikunae, to mean a sort of rich, savory flavor. Ikeda was studying the science behind the flavor, and discovered that glutamate was the cause. Ikeda mainly used kombu dashi for his studies, and subsequent studies also looked at dried bonito flakes. However, in 1957, Kuninaka Akira discovered that the ribonucleotide GMP found in shiitake mushrooms also gave an umami flavor. Based on that research he later discovered that when ingredients rich in glutamate are combined with those with ribonucleotides, the resulting umami is stronger than each individual part.

Buna-shimeji (Hypsizygus tessellatus)

Buna-shimeji are fairly small mushrooms with white, long, often-curved stems and tan caps. They taste bitter when raw, but this is replaced with a nutty flavor when cooked. They have a firm, slightly crunchy texture. They are good for most recipes.



File photos

Eringi (Pleurotus eryngii)

Eringi have many names in the West, perhaps most common being the King Oyster Mushroom. Unlike most of the fungi in this article, it is not native to Japan. It was mass cultivated there in the early 1990s and has become quite popular since. Eringi are rather large, with long, thick, meaty white stems, and relatively small tan caps. They don't have a lot of flavor raw, but when cooked the umami comes forward. I find them particularly good when grilled. Keep it simple and cook them over flame or in a pan with a bit of salt and pepper.



Enokitake (Flammulina velutipes)

Enoki mushrooms are named after the tree on which they grow, which is known as the Chinese hackberry in English. However, they also grow on other trees, like mulberry and persimmon trees. In the supermarket, they are easily recognizable as dense clumps of small, white mushrooms with long, slender stems. Cultivated enoki are grown in a dark, carbon dioxide-rich environment to keep them white and encourage long stem growth, respectively. Wild enoki tend to be dark brown, with shorter, thicker stems.

Enoki don't have a strong flavor, so they probably aren't the best mushroom to take center stage in a dish. They do have a relative crispness to them. For these reasons, plus their small size, they are often used in soups and stews. They could also be used in some side dishes or salads.



Nameko (Pholiota nameko)

Nameko are small and amber-brown. They have a nutty flavor and a thin layer of gelatin on their caps, which forms a sort of glaze when cooking with them. They are often used in miso soup, nabemono, and stir-fries.

Long popular in Japanese cuisine, nameko have recently gained notoriety in another field. A trilogy of smart phone games called "Nameko Saibai Kit," has become quite popular. The goal of the game is to raise various types of anthropomorphic cartoon nameko. Of course, with popularity comes merchandise, and you can find plenty of stuff featuring these cute little mushrooms.



Maitake (Grifola frondosa)

Maitake translates to "dancing mushroom." They don't look like your stereotypical mushrooms. They grow in a dense cluster and the stems flow into the frond-like caps, giving the whole cluster an appearance something like a head of cabbage. The clusters can get quite large: over 40 kilograms (100 pounds)! They have a woody, smoky flavor, but it isn't as meaty as some other mushrooms. They can be used in stir frying, simmering, roasting and other applications.



**Matsutake
(Tricholoma mastutake)**

Matsutake form a symbiotic relationship with the roots of certain tree species, most notably the Japanese Red Pine, hence the name matsutake (“pine mushroom”). Matsutake have long, thick stems and knob-like brown caps. Due to the difficulty in finding them, they are quite expensive. The average price is about \$90 per kilogram, but matsutake found in Japan at the beginning of the season can go for up to \$2,000 per kilogram! Matsutake grown in the U.S. can be had for a much lower price sometimes. If you get the chance to try them, one of the best ways to show off their flavor is in a simple rice bowl dish (matsutake gohan).

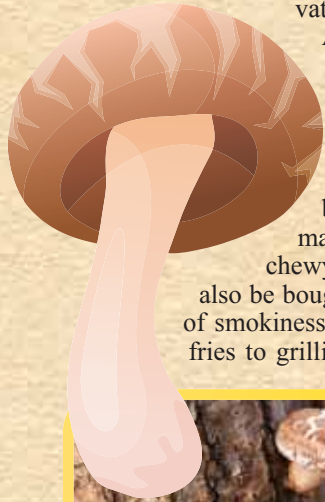


Mushroom medicine

Some mushrooms have been used in traditional medicine for centuries. For example, the fungus from maitake has long been used in China and Japan for enhancing the immune system. Modern research has indicated that the entire maitake may be useful in this regard. In addition, a 2009 study by Sloan-Kettering showed it to have anti-tumor effects. It may also have hypoglycemic effects. Shiitake mushrooms have also shown some promise in the fighting both cancer and viruses, but studies have not been conclusive. Still, as long as you’re enjoying some mushroom cooking, it’s nice to think they might be helping you too.

**Shiitake
(Lentinula edodes)**

Shiitake are named after the tree on whose dead logs they commonly grow, the Castanopsis cuspidate. Shiitake is probably the most popular Japanese mushroom, both at home and abroad. Who knows how long people have been collecting them in Japan, but somewhere along the line they discovered a method for cultivating them.



A shiitake bearing log would be placed next to freshly cut logs, allowing the fungus to spread to all of them. They even found that damaging the bark of the new logs would improve the efficiency of mushroom multiplication.

It’s easy to see why shiitake are so popular, as they are both flavorful and versatile. When cooked, they are aromatic and have a nice rich, woody flavor. Due to this and their chewy, dense texture they make a great meat substitute. Shiitake can also be bought dried, which actually intensifies their flavor and adds a bit of smokiness. The applications of shiitake are many and varied, from stir fries to grilling, from simmering to soups and nabemono (and that’s just in Japanese cuisine). I love making a shiitake nimono: simmering the mushrooms in dashi and soy sauce until the liquid reduces to almost nothing. You’ll have a bowl full of concentrated umami.



Kinoko no yama

Okay, so obviously these aren’t real mushrooms. However, they have been a popular snack ever since Meiji launched them in 1975. Their part milk, part dark chocolate caps sit atop crunchy biscuit stems, and make for an excellent combo. No list of Japanese mushrooms is complete without them.



How to choose and store your mushrooms

When selecting mushrooms at the store they should be dry, but not withered. If they come plastic-wrapped, look out for condensation. When storing them, sealing them in a paper bag is a good way to keep them from getting too wet or dry. If you keep them in a plastic-wrapped tub, poking a few holes in the plastic is a good idea. At any rate, you should use them within a few days. You shouldn’t wash them until you’re about to use them. Some say they shouldn’t be washed at all for fear of waterlogging them. Brush them instead. A brush is fine, but time consuming, so a light wash should be fine. If you don’t see any dirt on them, there shouldn’t be a need for either.



Magic mushrooms

Some mushrooms can have psychedelic effects on those who consume them. There are a number of such mushrooms, but the most popular by far are from the genus Psilocybe. They cause hallucinations due to two different chemicals: psilocybin and psilocin. Japan is a country that tends to take drugs quite seriously (apart from alcohol and tobacco), so it’s surprising that before 2002 magic mushrooms were legal. You could buy them in head shops, and apparently even in vending machines. In 2002 they were made illegal, perhaps because of the World Cup that was played in Japan that year. It’s thought that Japanese leaders changed the law in anticipation of an influx of foreign fans getting high and causing trouble.



Psilocybe mexicana - Jalisco, Mexico
Photo by Cactu, Wikipedia

Let’s put a cap on this

What more is there to say? Mushrooms are some tasty and versatile fungi. Go forth and try as many kinds, in as many ways as possible!



The season of miso

BY JOAN BAILEY,
METROPOLIS MAGAZINE

Every January, after the New Year celebrations end and the decorations get put away, Yayoi Minowa turns her attention to miso. Once a week, from January to March, she will boil beans, measure salt, stir in koji (mold grown on rice that is essential for making miso), smash the beans, and stuff the mixture into 18-kilogram barrels. These will, in turn, be stored in a cool dark place to while away the spring and summer months. Come October the contents have gone a ruddy brown with the fermentation process. They are then hauled out again to be eaten as soup, dip, or any other delicious thing imaginable.

“We usually end in March because we start seeding around then,” Yayoi says before bending to peer at the gauge of one of the three giant pressure cookers, which are perched over blue gas flames on this bright February morning. The whole process, she explains, takes three days.

“On Monday, we steam the rice and mix it with the koji. It’s ready by Wednesday so we start soaking the beans. By Friday they are ready to be cooked, and we

can make the miso,” she explains.

The beans in use are koitodaizu, a local or heirloom variety of soybean from the Matsuo area of Chiba where the Minowa family have lived and farmed for generations. The beans are small and pale with a sweet flavor that locals believe make a perfect miso.

“The amount of salt used depends on the area,” Yayoi says, opening the lid of one of the giant pots. She presses a single bean between her thumb and pinky, and nods as it easily squishes. This is a sign that they are fully cooked. “In the North, the miso is saltier, but in Kyushu it tends to be sweet. Although,” she reflects, “that may be because they grow their koji on wheat there.”

Steam rolls out as she lifts an inner pot that looks like a giant strainer. The beans are spread in a large pan in which they are allowed to cool while the process is repeated with the other two pots. Once lukewarm, Tomohito, Yayoi’s son, adds the rice-koji-salt mixture to the beans and begins to blend them by hand. Outside, the sun waves through the branches of bamboo nearby, moving in the spring breeze.

Fifty years ago, miso was made

outdoors in a big pot over a fire pit. It took about half a day, Yayoi says, and the beans were mashed using their feet. “Every farm made miso for their own family,” she said.

The Minowas do not press the mixture with their feet, but use something akin to a meat grinder to smash the beans. Yayoi watches as Tomohito pours the beans into the top and then grabs handfuls of the bean-koji-salt mixture as it emerges. She quickly shapes it into a ball and throws it into the barrel she lined with coarse salt.

“Throwing knocks out the air,” she tells me between tosses, which would make any baseball team proud. The smack of their landing resounding through the kitchen. She continues this until the barrel is full, pressing firmly on the top and smoothing it before placing the lid securely in place and starting the next one.

Local governments began to set up community kitchens in the 1960s to encourage rural women to create cottage industries around their traditional food skills. Over time though, as the exodus from the country to the city continued, these kitchens and the traditional

knowledge they supported are beginning to disappear.

The Minowas hope to change that. Their annual miso-making workshop brings people together to learn how to do it for themselves and build a little community in the process. A renewed interest in traditional foods and practices has brought people together to make it, to learn, and to socialize. In exchange for a fee that pays for the ingredients and kitchen rental, participants get a hands-on lesson in miso-making and by October, a tasty share of the bounty.

“What is harvested from this land is suitable for making miso in this land,” Yayoi says as the last barrel is filled and capped. Words to eat by, if you ask me.



File photo



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Supported by Yokosuka City

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