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A Taste of Japan



The 3 'R's to good eating –
Restaurants,
Reviews & Recipes

8-page pullout





Homemade pop tarts

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ALLIE WHALEN,
STRIPES JAPAN

I have learned through the past six years of homeschooling my kids that my favorite way to teach math is by cooking together. Kids get to master the basics like addition and subtraction and they also get to practice new concepts like geometry and fractions. Cooking and baking with kids also gives them life-long skills that will help them learn to take care of themselves. One of my most important tasks as a mom is to make sure that my kids know their way around a kitchen and can make healthy choices as adults.

Now for the fun part that you probably came here for - homemade pop tarts! We adapted this recipe from the “Baking Class” cookbook by Deanna F. Cook. This is my kids’ favorite cookbook when they feel like cooking something but they aren’t quite sure what to make. It has everything from sweet to savory and has the best step by step guide. “Baking Class” makes it easy for young bakers to help and it also makes it possible for older bakers to complete a project on their own!

The original recipe calls for homemade pie crust but we decided to use store-bought. You can use whichever crust you prefer, or whatever level of mess you want to clean up in the kitchen when you’re done!



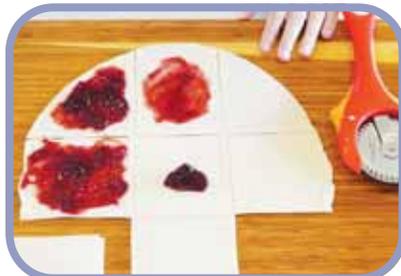
Here’s what we used for the adapted recipe

- 2 Pillsbury pie crusts
- 1/4 - 1/2 cup natural raspberry jam
- 1/2 cup Okinawa powdered brown sugar
- 1 tablespoon coconut milk
- Rainbow sprinkles

1 First, roll out the pie crust and cut the circle into 3 even-ish sections with a pizza cutter. Don’t worry too much about getting the shapes perfect. Sometimes it’s better to let your kids just have fun with it and let their creativity shine. As long as the pieces mainly fit together it’ll work out just fine!



2 Next, spread the raspberry jam onto half of the squares and triangles. If you use a circle pie crust you will have an uneven number of cut crust, but it’ll work out perfect when you cut the second pie crust.



3 After cutting out the pieces and spreading the raspberry jam on half, match up the halves with the closest-shaped piece of pie crust. Then crimp around the edges of the pop tarts to seal them. If you want, use a pizza wheel and trim the super thin pieces of pie crust so it won’t burn in the oven.



4 When all of the beautiful and imperfect pop tarts are crimped, put them on a parchment paper lined baking sheet and bake them at 425 F for 10-12 minutes.



5 Bake until the pop tarts are golden brown. We also used the leftover pie crust and cut out little sakura blooms to decorate the pop tarts.



6 Spread a thin layer of icing over the top of the cooled pop tarts. We used local Okinawan brown sugar but if you use standard powdered sugar the icing will be white. The Okinawan brown sugar really took the flavor of these pop tarts to another level! It had more of a molasses taste after using the powdered Okinawan sugar.



7 About half way through we learned that the icing dries quickly! So if you want to decorate with sprinkles, make sure you do it before the icing hardens.



These homemade pop tarts were a fun project to do together on the weekend. It wasn’t very involved and didn’t take much longer than an hour. If you really want to let the kids go crazy with decorating the pop tarts, give them free reign and let them get fancy! Whether you have kids or not, pop tarts are a blast to make! Scroll down just a little further to find the links to my favorite ingredients and baking tools that we used for this fun project.

Allie Whalen is a culinary artist and amateur photographer with a love for the outdoors. She shares her experiences online where she writes about simple and holistic ways to take care of yourself and the world around you. She is a military spouse based in beautiful Okinawa near Camp Hansen. Allie and her family enjoy the rugged, tranquil life on the northern parts of the island. You can find Allie’s blog at <https://www.alliemwhalen.com>, where she chronicles her adventures in learning and living by the sea.



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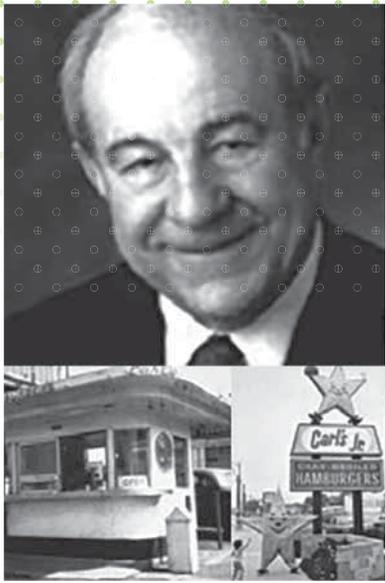
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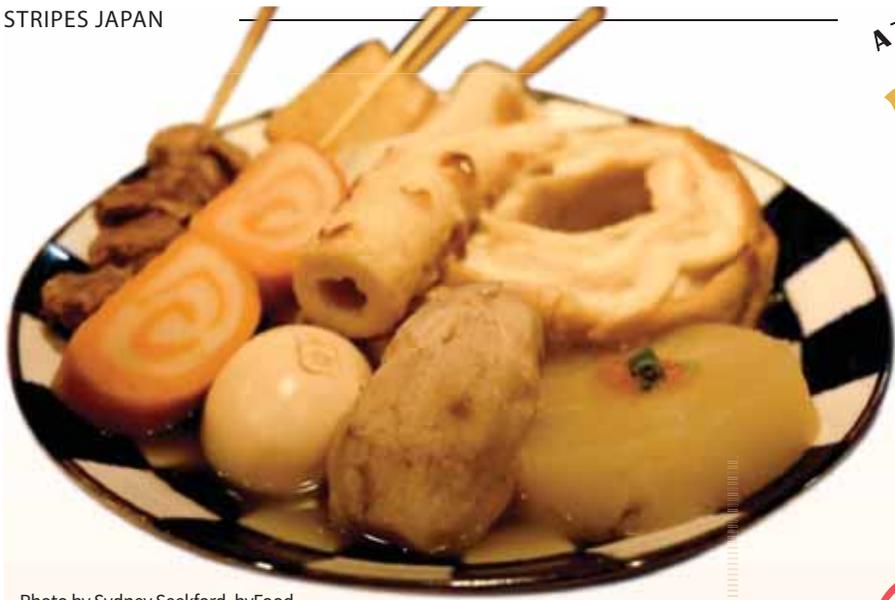


Photo by Sydney Seekford, byFood

What is it?

It's a dish that comes in the form of huge blocks of tofu and daikon wheels, mysterious balls, and edible tubes. I learned the hard way. In person, with many a boiled egg sloppily dropped into hot broth. I invite you to discover the history and particulars of oden from the safety of your screen first rather than throwing you right into the soup. Again...no pun intended.

Try oden for yourself on our Osaka Food Tour!



The history

In the 1400s, thick cuts of firm tofu were skewered, roasted/grilled, and served with a slather of miso. This came to be known as "tofu dengaku", because the skewers resembled the wooden pogo sticks used by dengaku street performers. Dengaku was written 田楽, and oden still uses the reading of this first character, "田". During the Edo period, dengaku was popularized and sold fresh alongside grilled dango and unagi eel at street stalls and stop-ins. At this time, dengaku expanded outside of tofu to include vegetables. In Osaka, blocks of konnyaku were prepared the same way and introduced as konnyaku dengaku.



Photo by Sydney Seekford, byFood

There are several stories tracing the origin of today's boiled oden, but the general consensus is that at some point in the late 1800s to early 1900s, various ingredients started to be boiled together in broth, leading to a delicious dashi soup and readily available street food.

For a long time, oden was limited to eating outside of the house, and many oden-ya only even catered to men who would stop by after work. In the 1950s, oden finally became a household product, thanks to economic recovery after the war. Markets could sell food that was ready to eat but difficult or time-consuming to make, like soup stock and surimi/fish cake. Thus, it was much easier to buy the ingredients and finish off the dish at home.

Oden is now available in supermarkets, pre-made at convenience stores, and easy to eat at an izakaya or specialty shops. Because it's a nimono (boiled food, like nabe or sukiyaki), it's traditionally eaten during the colder months, in the range of October to April.

What does oden mean in Japanese?

As mentioned above, the first iteration of oden was "tofu dengaku", named after its wooden skewers. When the dish was popularized in the Kantou region around the Edo period, the gaku was dropped. An honorific "o," the same one we see heading words like omiyage (souvenirs), was added.

In Kansai, boiled oden was called Kantou-boil, "Kantou daki", after it was introduced by chefs from Tokyo. The name evolved over time, but oden always refers to the ingredients boiled in broth and eaten individually rather than as a stew.

What is Oden?

Everything you need to know

BY SYDNEY SEEKFORD,
BYFOOD



It's Oden!
Oden is a wintertime favorite among Japanese people. The term oden encompasses many different ingredients and cooking styles but boils down to fish cakes and veggies in a pot with broth. No pun intended. Until I moved to Kanazawa and was thoroughly schooled, I always assumed that oden was its own word, with the emphasis on the "O" and a little den, probably officially spelled with the kanji for electricity or tradition.

The best Oden Restaurants in Tokyo



Ingredients

Japanese oden really only has two definite elements: broth for boiling and the ingredients that get boiled! In 2021, the most popular oden choices were daikon radish, boiled eggs, chikuwa, konnyaku, and hanpen rounding out the top five. Other widely available ingredients are mochi-purses (kinchaku), beef tendon skewers, and of course, tofu.

Konnyaku & Shirataki

Fourth on the list is an ingredient you may recognize for its recent popularization as a health food. Shirataki noodles and konnyaku are very firm jellies or "cakes" made of yam. They soak in the flavor of whatever they are prepared in, like daikon, but have a crunchy-bouncy-chewy texture likened to squid sushi or jellyfish.



Shirataki

Beef tendon & Tsukune

Gyuu-suji, or beef tendon, and tsukune (meatballs or meatloaf on a stick) are two of the popular meat options in oden. Gyuu-suji is skewered tendon boiled until soft and chewy. It is savory and delicious, not to mention pretty healthy, thanks to its high protein content!

Tsukune come in lots of flavors, just like meatballs: soy sauce, barbeque, etc. Cabbage rolls are popular too, featuring a hunk of meatloaf or other protein thickly wrapped in cabbage and cooked until the leaves soften in oden broth.

Kinchaku

Kinchaku are purse-shaped tofu skins named after small bags used in the Edo period for carrying one's personal belongings. They are often filled with mochi that softens during boiling. Sometimes shirataki or other small ingredients come in these tasty little sachets, but mochi is by far the most common.

Daikon

Thick rounds of daikon boiled over a long period of time are the perfect ingredient to enjoy the particular flavors of oden soup. The mild veggie softens as it soaks, making it easy to break into pieces with chopsticks and enjoy bite-by-bite. Daikon is an essential ingredient in a bowl of oden!

Hard-boiled Eggs

Peeled hard-boiled eggs were the second most popular oden. Their preparation is similar to the ajitama found topping ramen. Pre-boiled and then soaked during the oden-making process, hard-boiled eggs take on the tasty brown hue and flavor of the broth. They are filling, nutritious, and admittedly dangerous. One wrong move and that hefty member of the oden party will splash broth all over your shirt and the table. I rarely see it served skewered, but if you ask me...it would be a good idea!



File photos



Atsuage tofu

Oden? Need to know

What is that...
supposed
to be?

Hanpen & other fish cakes

Hanpen was the fifth most popular oden ingredient in 2021, and is said to be named after the chef who invented it in the Edo period (but I didn't come across any relation to it with oden at that time). Hanpen is white and spongy surimi with a fluffy texture.



Hanpen

Surimi fish paste, made into cakes or mixed with other ingredients, comes in many styles. There's Kagoshima's satsuma age which is fried and has veggies mixed in and dense slices of kamaboko that are found in ramen and regional oden.

Japanese fish balls and fish cakes come in all sorts of other shapes and flavors too.

Surimi fish paste



Chikuwa

Chikuwa

Chikuwa are a type of Japanese fish cake that looks like a brown and white tube and have a chewy texture that falls between a chicken nugget and tofu. The unique shape makes it fun to eat, and the mild seafood flavor is well suited to oden's broth. It's a uniquely Japanese and highly recommended ingredient if you want the full "oden" experience.

Tofu

Rounding out the bottom of the list is oden's original player: tofu! Atsuage tofu (thick-cut, fried tofu), simple boiled tofu, tofu with vegetables mixed in and fried...all kinds of tofu can be found in your typical bowl of oden. True to form, tofu absorbs the flavor of the oden broth, becoming more delicious the longer it soaks.

Regional cuisine

Japan is famous for its regional cuisine and the characteristic taste of each area. Thanks to a wide range of climates and natural resources across the nation, oden has adapted quite a bit to local preferences!

■ Tokyo style

The "original" home of oden, Tokyo-style oden relies heavily on fish cakes and fish-paste-based ingredients, and katsuo-boshi dashi broth. It has a light brown (beef-broth-looking) stock and a soy sauce-forward, sweet taste! Sometimes, oden is called Japanese fish-cake soup or fish-ball soup. This makes a lot of sense, considering the most widely available version relies on various shapes and flavors of fish cake for its unique look and taste!



Photo by Naoto Shimoda, byFood

■ Kyoto style

An even lighter broth than its Tokyo cousin, the broth of Kyoto oden takes its flavor from salt and kombu. Kyoto Oden's special ingredients are taro and simple, light-tasting tofu.

■ Nagoya style

Because it uses hacchou miso, Nagoya's version of Oden looks totally different! Its rich, deeply flavored broth soaks into roasted tofu and pork skewers.



File photo

■ Shizuoka style

Using ingredients like black hanpen and a dark, rich-tasting broth makes Shizuoka Style Oden stand out. All of the ingredients in this oden are skewered. Its unique features come from the beef tendon broth and dark-fleshed fish used to make it.

■ Kanazawa and the North

Between the Touhoku region, Hokkaido, and Kanazawa, the Northern regions of Japan enjoy the fruits of the Japan sea. Oden from these areas features fresh seafood like crab and shellfish. My own Kanazawa reports that its particulars are the high-quality crab, pretty sea snails, and fragrant soy-sauce broth unique to our oden. Hokkaido's claim to fame is a marriage of the flavors of land and sea, while those from Aomori top their boiled oden with a slather of miso like the old days.

■ Other unique offerings

In Okinawa, trotters and chilled summertime oden are common offers. There's even a sweets shop in Tokyo that served dessert oden with an oolong tea base! Osaka oden uses a chicken broth soup, and there are areas known for unique add-ins like chicken wings or gyoza-style fish cakes with dumpling filling. Overall, oden has a reputation for being healthy because of its low-fat content and filling, digestion-promoting ingredients like konnyaku, daikon, and fiber-filled gobo maki. In fact, it was even served and promoted at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics.



Photo by Naoto Shimoda, byFood

How do you eat?

The easiest way to get a steaming bowl of oden is to have it ladled out at one of Japan's convenience stores during the winter months. Simply point to what you want and watch as it gets politely arranged in a big styrofoam bowl, topped with a lid reading, "Please eat this soon!". They have free flavor packets to change the broth to your liking, like yuzu koshou for citrus brightness, shichimi for a little heat, and thick miso tare sauce. It's common to enjoy oden with Japanese karashi mustard, but be careful! Like wasabi, a little goes a long way.

In terms of physically eating the multitude of shapes you might find in an oden bowl, it really depends. Of course, chopsticks are the utensil of choice, but from there, you might un-skewer your oden and leave it to sit in the broth, carefully pinch and pull tofu into smaller pieces or just pick up the whole hunk and take bites. I will admit, eating oden is not a graceful affair. But it is delicious!

Abroad, oden-style fish cakes are easy to find in any East-Asian market. Pre-arranged oden sets with recommended ingredients and broth bases can be found in the frozen foods section of retailers like H-mart. Simply simmer the ingredients in your preferred Japanese-style konbu or dashi stock, miso soup base, etc., for a couple of hours (admittedly, I am lazy and usually cap out at about 30 minutes when making it at home...) and enjoy a healthy, unique taste of Japan!



Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons

A pun intended



Photo by Naoto Shimoda, byFood

"There's a sale? O! Den, I guess I'll have one of each!"

It's a joke, but not a bad option! Every ingredient is unique and has its own merits. Oden is one of the most fun, novel dining experiences you can enjoy in Japan, and taste-testing is exciting in itself. From ready-to-go

convenience store oden that pays homage to its street-food beginnings to specialty shops with broths boiled and concentrated for months or years, oden takes many forms and flavors. Plus, the regional variety will keep you coming back no matter where you travel! Next time you scroll through the emoji page, we hope you'll remember that little stick of goodies, "oden".

Eating oden at Miyuki

For this article, I took a trip to one of Tabelog's (like YELP!, but only in Japan) top 5k restaurants in the whole country: Miyuki in Kanazawa! While waiting for about 45 minutes in line outside, you could hear people calling out orders for nama-beer and oden. It was only about 30 degrees out, so perfect oden weather, although I was freezing!

The owners were kind enough to teach me a little about Kanazawa's oden, its uniquely light, unsweet broth that highlights the delicate flavors of seafood, and the sources of their products. Kaga lotus root, sea salt from the Noto peninsula, and local produce come together to make a delicious meal.

Miyuki's owners didn't just celebrate their own menu and innovation, they made a point to tell me about how great all of their sources were. One of their most popular menu items is a traditional eggplant dengaku, so you can enjoy the oden of today and its origins at the shop. I got really lucky too—their beef tendon is so popular that it sold out only 2 hours after opening, but the owners gave me the last one!

You can feel the masters' pride in their tightly packed counter space, which was filled with every type of customer (the other solo-dining woman next to me had brought her anime figures and was photographing them with her oden, it was awesome.). I was very thankful that they were so open to offering recommendations and letting me photograph inside!

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!



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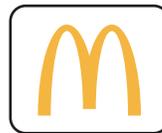
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