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A Taste of Japan

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Restaurants,
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8-page pullout

The origins of Japanese curry

The surprising international history of one of Japan's most beloved comfort foods

BY JAMES KRICK,
METROPOLIS MAGAZINE



From elementary school children enjoying their kyushoku (school lunch) to omae (elderly women) tending to their gardens, salarymen rushing between meetings, and university students cramming for their finals, Japanese curry is a ubiquitous feature of life for all Japanese people. It could even be considered a national dish with its many varieties nationwide – like soup curry in Sapporo and baked curry in Kyushu.

1. The origins of Japanese curry

Yet the dish's origins, as the name suggests, are not from Japan. The dish was, in fact, first brought to the country by the British from India during the Meiji Restoration. The British navy had recently adopted curry as a hearty meal for its sailors during the long voyages at sea. The navy also added vegetables and meat, making its curry thicker than the kinds found in India.

According to Dr. Merry White, a professor of anthropology at Boston University, Japanese curry was initially introduced by the British Navy in the late 19th century. Legend has it that a party of shipwrecked British sailors were rescued off the Japanese coast, and they came ashore with their rations, which included curry powder.

The British had adapted Indian curry to suit their own tastes, and shared this version with Japan. The curry was gloppy, saucy, mid-brown-orange, slightly sweet, reflecting British, rather than Indian, influences. This was a strategic dish for both the British and Japanese navies because it was easy to make in large quantities and had no regional biases within Japan, making it suitable for a diverse naval crew.

Whether the legend of the shipwrecked British sailors is true or not, what is clear is that through contact with the British navy, the Japanese Imperial Navy adopted curry as its own. It remains a key fixture on the weekly menu for all its serving members.



Curry House CoCo Ichibanya restaurant.
Photo by J_News_photo, stock.adobe.com

4. Modern Japanese curry chains

Its popularity internationally has also steadily grown, with Coco Ichibanya opening branches in several Asian and European cities as well as in the U.S. The importation of Japanese curry cubes has also drastically increased. Many specialty Japanese and Asian supermarkets worldwide now stock them for people to experiment and make curry at home.

Now seen as a national staple, the origins of Japanese curry follow a long and winding journey. The path leads all the way to its place in the country's collective heart. Despite its international and mysterious origins, one thing remains clear: The curry rice of today is a truly Japanese culinary delight.

2. American influence

The dish has also entwined itself with key figures from Japanese history. In 1876, William S. Clark, the U.S. agriculturalist who established Hokkaido University, modernized many critical aspects of Japan's approaches to agriculture and science. You can still find his statues dotted around Sapporo above his famous slogan, "Boys, be ambitious!". It was Clark who suggested adding potatoes to Japanese curry to supplement the meal during a rice shortage. However, it was not until the early twentieth century that curry made its way firmly into ordinary Japanese households. At that time, the establishment of restaurant chains serving Japanese curry, such as the now ubiquitous Coco Ichibanya, cemented the dish's popularity. It is so popular that, according to a survey, many Japanese people said they ate curry more often than Japanese classics like tempura or sushi.

William S. Clark, U.S. agriculturalist and founder of Hokkaido University.
Photo by ikuya © 123RF.com



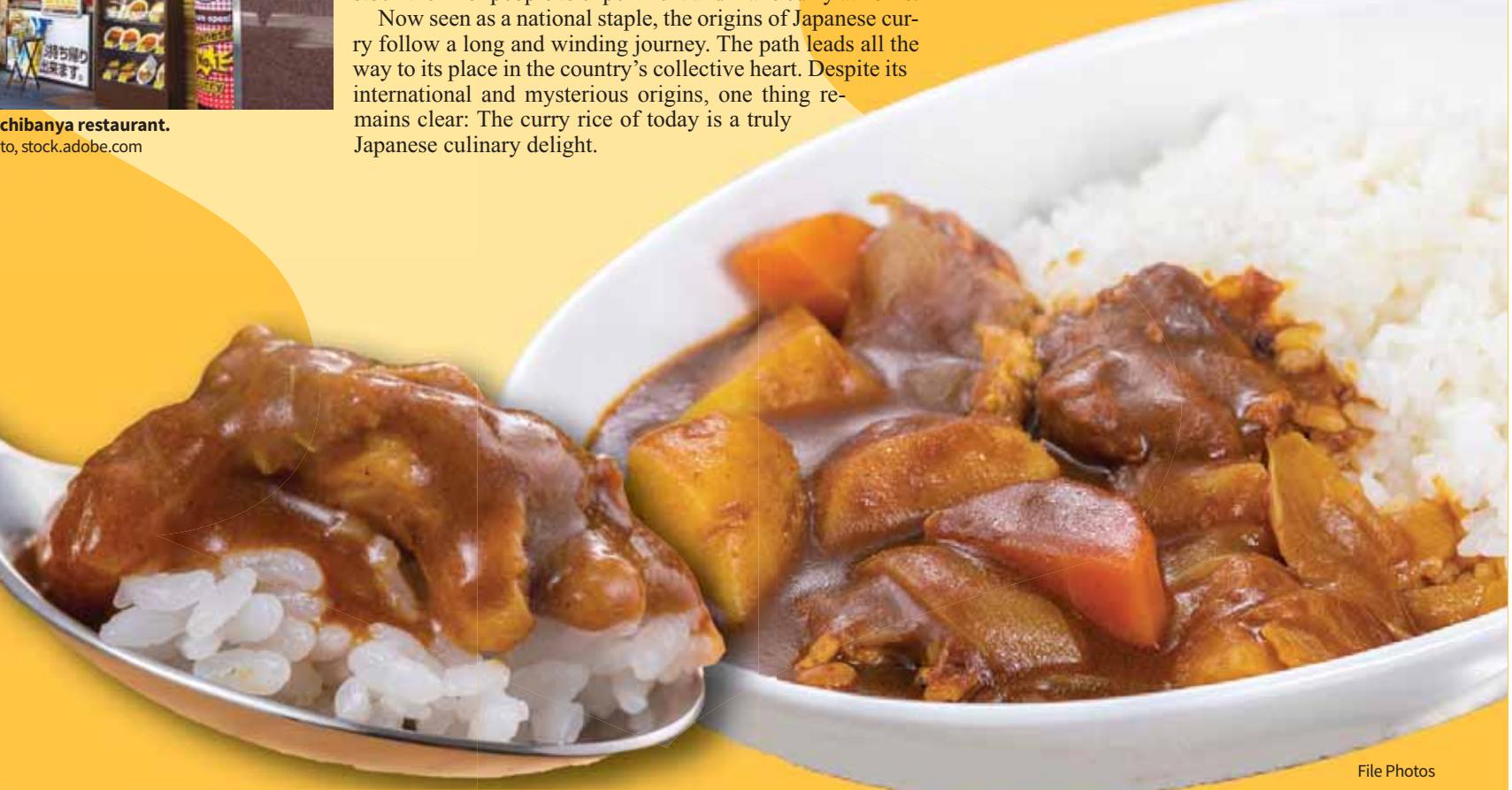
The most popular version of Japanese curry is katsu (cutlet) curry, accompanied by rice and bright-red pickled ginger. File Photo

3. Regional curries

What makes the dish uniquely Japanese is how regions have modified it to include various local ingredients and seasonal produce. This has led to various varieties, such as scallop curry in Aomori prefecture, black pork curry from Kagoshima, and even a nashi (Chinese pear) version from Shimane. However, the most popular version of the Japanese curry – both at home and internationally – remains the katsu (cutlet) curry. This dish is a true masterstroke and reflects the quintessentially Japanese cooking philosophy of a beautifully balanced meal. Its combination of deep-fried breaded pork loin, rice and thick curry sauce balances with the sharpness of pickled ginger.



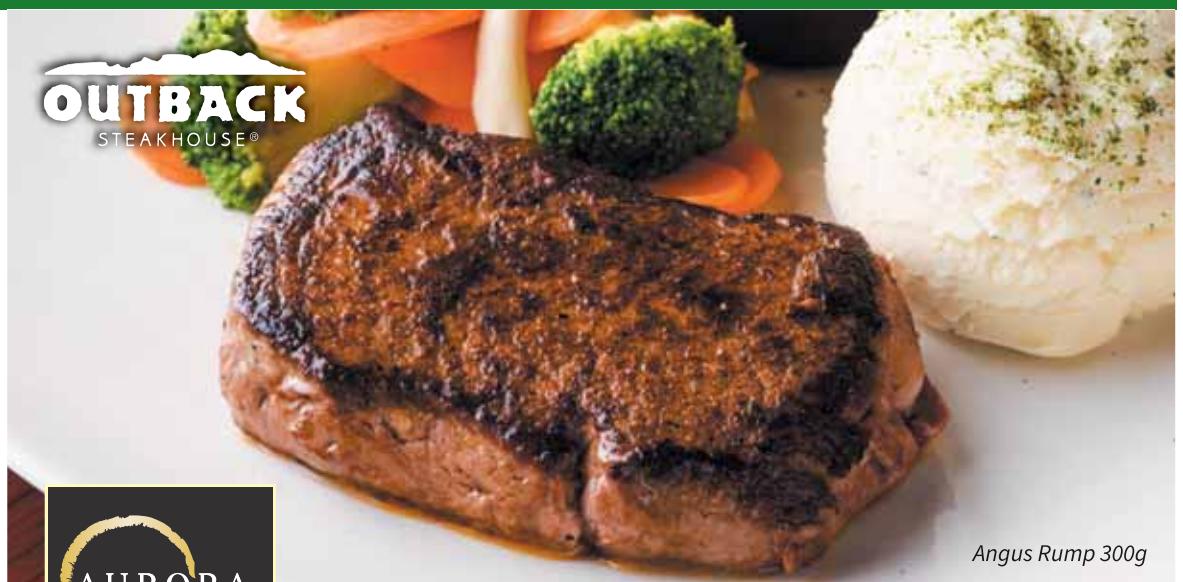
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RESTAURANT INFO



THE ULT GUIDE TO

STORY AND PHOTOS BY DANA KOHUT,
BYFOOD

Everyone loves a good barbecue - delicious meat sizzling on a hot grill, waiting patiently while the smokey goodness tickles your senses as you pair each bite with an array of condiments. Japan is no different in their enjoyment of BBQ. Called yakiniku, this Japanese bbq style is more hands-on and is a food experience everyone should try.


byFood



What is yakiniku?

So what even is yakiniku? Yakiniku is a Japanese grilling style where bite-sized pieces of meat are cooked over a charcoal grill or electric/gas griddle on mesh or iron plates. Everything is cooked together on the same grill, and rice is often served on the side along with cabbage and other raw vegetables. The fun part about yakiniku is that the meat is served raw and you cook it yourself. Be sure to pay attention though. There have been many times when I've placed a piece of meat on the grill, got distracted, and by the time I remembered, it ended up very... crispy.

Yakiniku is kind of a social activity within a meal as most of the time people go in groups with friends, family, or coworkers and you cook it together. I have many fond memories of being invited to yakiniku bbq parties and leaving them feeling full and happy after great conversation. Since you have to wait a bit for the meat to cook, it gives everyone time to chat and catch up.

In Japan, yakiniku can be eaten at home (using a small yakiniku grill), outdoors (some parks and beaches have dedicated grilling spaces), and of course in restaurants. Japan has no shortage of really good yakiniku restaurants with prices ranging from 1000 yen per person to some fancier places that will set you back a bit more. Wherever you go, you will definitely get your money's worth and probably won't be hungry for a while.

The history

Yakiniku has an interesting history in the western bbq style, but in the early 1900s, it was more like the Korean bbq style. It is where the yakiniku of today originated. In the 1920s, immigrants in Osaka and Tokyo introduced the style to the Japanese. It popularized the consumption of offal and organs that were often thrown away back then. Over the years, it evolved into what we know it as today. Unlike the Korean style, yakiniku is not often marinated and is cooked in Japanese bbq sauce, lemon juice, or just plain. It is also served with Korean-style meat like kalbi and bulgogi.

Types of meat used

Many different types and cuts of meat are used in yakiniku, though the word meat (niku) is in the name. Common cuts include fish, shellfish, and vegetables.

Beef

- Kalbi, short ribs usually served without the bone and marinated
- Harami, a meat from around the diaphragm, usually quite tender
- Misuji, shoulder meat
- Rosu, beef loin
- Tan, beef tongue

Pork

- Butabara, pork belly, very fatty
- Tontoro, meat from the neck and cheek

Chicken

- Momo, chicken thigh
- Bonjiri, chicken tail



LI-MEAT YAKINIKU

of yakiniku

In Japan, originally it referred more to howa era the meaning shifted to something we know today. In fact, it is said that it came from. Around 1945, Korean immigrants brought this style of restaurant to locals and even served other animal parts that would often be discarded. Japanese people adapted yakiniku like Korean bbq. Japanese bbq meat is served in bite-sized pieces which are dipped in a simple salted. However, you can find yakiniku in many restaurants.

Meats used for yakiniku

Meat are used for yakiniku, and even the name, yakiniku can also include



How to eat yakiniku

Once you sit down at a yakiniku restaurant, you'll be presented with quite a few choices. You can order things a la carte in some cases, but the most efficient and cost-effective way is to order a course. How big of a course depends on the number of people in your party, but menus usually state how many people each one feeds. Some places may even offer a tabehoudai aka an all-you-can-eat course.

Before you know it an array of juicy meats and colorful vegetables will be brought out to you, but how do you go about eating it? First, let the grill heat up before you put anything on it. Then choose a few pieces you would like to get started with. Usually, there

will be tongs and chopsticks provided to use only for placing the meat on the grill, so be sure to use those instead of the utensils you will be eating with. Everyone has their own method. Personally, I like to place a few thick cuts along with some cuts that will cook a bit quicker so I have an ongoing rotation of different meats ready to eat. You can also place a few vegetables on the grill, but be mindful that some cook quicker than others. The center of the grill is usually the hottest and where things will cook the quickest. The mesh grill will sometimes need to be replaced mid-meal, but just ask the staff and they will bring you a new mesh.

After a while, flip the meat to cook the other side, check on your vegetables, and when you think it's done, take it off the grill and dip it into your sauce of choice before eating it. Some meats, like kalbi or bulgogi, do not need any sauce as they are pre-marinated. For meats like tongue, a bit of salt and some lemon juice is enough to draw out the best flavor. For other meats, a Japanese bbq sauce is ideal - usually a mix of soy sauce, sugar, mirin (rice wine), and maybe some sesame oil and garlic. If you are feeling creative, you can try out your own original combination of meat and sauce - it's up to you!

Whether it's expensive or cheap, at a restaurant or at the beach, fire up the grill and give yakiniku a try. It's a hands-on, social dining experience you won't forget!

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!

Horumon Motsu (Offal)

- Gatsu, pork stomach
- Hachinosu, tripe
- Beef liver
- Hatsu, heart
- Horumon, intestines

Seafood

- Shellfish
- Squid
- Shrimp

Vegetables

- Mushrooms
- Bell pepper
- Pumpkin
- Onion
- Cabbage
- Garlic
- Eggplant
- Bean sprouts



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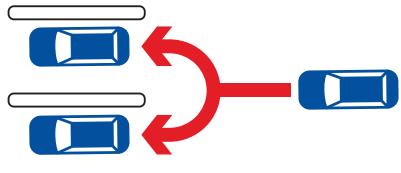
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RESTAURANT INFO

Taiyaki

Japan's fish-shaped sweet treat



BY ASHLEY OWEN,
BYFOOD

Japan is famous for its irresistible street food, from piping hot takoyaki balls to classic okonomiyaki pancakes. However, one of the country's most iconic – and photogenic – snacks is taiyaki.

These little fish-shaped treats are a traditional Japanese dessert that's somewhere between a cake and a waffle, typically filled with sweet red bean paste. Commonly sold fresh off the pan at festivals and street food stalls, you can also find modern versions filled with all kinds of delicious centers at specialist taiyaki shops. Keep reading to discover everything you need to know about this quintessential Japanese snack.



What is taiyaki?

Taiyaki (鯛焼き) is a popular type of Japanese street food, instantly recognizable thanks to its striking fish shape complete with intricate fins and scales. The snack takes its name from the words tai, meaning sea bream (鯛), and yaki, meaning to bake or grill (焼き).

Despite sounding like a savory Japanese fish cake, taiyaki is actually usually sweet. The exterior is a cross between a cake and a waffle, with a deliciously chewy batter that's crisp on the outside. Traditionally, the dessert is filled with sweet red bean paste (anko), however these days you can find varieties stuffed with all sorts of tasty fillings like chocolate, matcha, sweet potato and taiyaki custard. You can even get taiyaki ice cream cones!

Taiyaki stands are a common sight at festivals, however you can also find shops that specialize in taiyaki all across the country. To make them, the batter is poured into a special pan with little molds that give them their characteristic shape and imprint the cute features of a fish on the outside. Wherever you get them, they should be enjoyed straight away to ensure they taste their best and the texture is the perfect balance of crisp and fluffy!



File photo

The history of taiyaki

Although taiyaki is thought to have first been sold as a street food in 1909 in Tokyo, its origins actually date back to the Edo period. The snack is essentially a reimagining of imagawayaki, a thick round pancake filled with red bean paste that was popularized in the late 1700s. As time went on, vendors needed to come up with ways to refresh their product and attract more customers – one of which was to bake them in different shapes.

The fish-shaped version was a hit, and taiyaki quickly spread across Japan and later the world. Of course, the innovation didn't stop there, and new variations of batter flavor and taiyaki fillings continue to be developed to this day. You can even get frozen taiyaki to heat up and enjoy in the comfort of your own home!

You'll often find that the taiyaki fillings on offer will vary with the time of year, as people make use of seasonal ingredients. For instance, in spring you may see pink sakura taiyaki while in autumn you might come across taiyaki filled with chestnut paste. Some specialist stores also experiment with more unusual savory taiyaki recipes, so keep an eye out for interesting options such as:

- **Cheese**
- **Pizza**
- **Gyoza**
- **Sausage**
- **Curry**
- **Okonomiyaki**

Another way that shops create innovative new types of taiyaki is by altering the batter that they use to make them. For example, you might come across variations where the outside of the taiyaki is flavored with matcha, chocolate or sakura (cherry blossoms). There are even modern styles of taiyaki cooked with croissant pastry to give the snack a unique French twist!



File photo



Why is taiyaki fish shaped?

So, of all the different possible shapes this delicious dessert could be molded into, why was a seabream such a popular choice? Although we can't say for certain, there are several possible explanations.

During the Meiji era, seabream was an expensive dish that was only eaten on special occasions such as weddings. In addition, the fish has long been considered a symbol of good fortune in Japan. In fact, even the name tai is considered auspicious because it rhymes with the word medetai, which means joyous or prosperous. Thus taiyaki could be seen as an inexpensive way for ordinary people to enjoy this lucky fish.

Taiyaki has now become such a key part of Japanese pop culture that some people believe the way you eat yours can give an insight into your personality. For instance, if you bite into the head first you're an optimist whereas if you dig in from the tail end you're calm and romantic!



Types of taiyaki fillings



One of the great things about taiyaki is how many different types there are, each with a unique and mouthwatering filling to enjoy. Here are some of the most common:

■ Anko

Anko, or red bean paste, is the classic taiyaki filling. It's found in all sorts of Japanese wagashi sweets, and made by cooking, sweetening and mashing adzuki beans. You can adjust the texture to be completely smooth or slightly courser depending on your preference.



File photo

■ Chocolate

Chocolate and chocolate hazelnut spread are both popular and modern filling choices for taiyaki, and perfect for people who have a sweet tooth!



File photo

■ Sweet potato

A more unusual but equally delicious filling is sweet potato, which is mashed up and mixed with sugar to make a paste a little like anko.



File photo

■ Ice cream

One of the more recent creations is the taiyaki ice cream cone. It looks a little different to regular taiyaki, with the mouth of the fish left open to hold scoops of smooth ice cream that contrast beautifully with the crisp and chewy cone.



Photo by Elodie Agodor, Unsplash



How to make taiyaki

While originally intended to be enjoyed fresh off the grill at a festival, these days it's perfectly possible to find a taiyaki recipe online and make your own at home. The batter is relatively simple to whip up by combining cake flour, baking powder, egg, milk and sugar, and you can use absolutely anything you like as a filling. The only caveat is that you'll need a special pan to cook them in if you want to get the authentic seabream shape, which you can purchase online.

Alternatively, you could learn directly from the experts by joining one of our taiyaki-making experiences in Tokyo's historic Asakusa district. It's a great opportunity to practice making this iconic street food from scratch, plus experiment with some creative filling ideas!



Photo courtesy of byFood

Taiyaki is one of Japan's most recognizable and Instagrammable sweet treats, so be sure to tuck into one during your next trip! Which flavor do you want to try first?

■ Custard

Taiyaki custard is a slightly more modern filling than anko, and can give the snack an enticing vanilla flavor and floral scent.



File photo

■ Matcha

Matcha green tea is another quintessentially Japanese flavor, and works really well as a taiyaki filling. You can add the powder to a custard mix for a vibrant green color and taste that's not overly sweet.



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