

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 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 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

JAPANESE MUSHROOMS

An umamitastic world of endless flavor

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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 mushroom 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.



Source: Andy

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.



Source: David Loong

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.



Source: Wendell Smith

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



Source: ferrie=differentiel & Jöran Maaswinkel DailyM.net

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.



Source: Brain Liolla

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).



Source: 挪威 企鵝



Source: dbaronoss

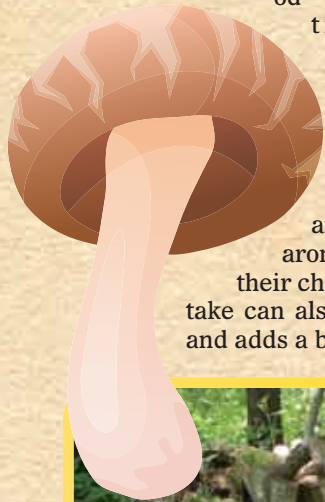


Shiitake
(Lentinula edodes)

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



Source: tup wanders



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.



Source: Brian Liloia

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.



Source: Scott Darbey

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.

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.



Source: Robyn Lee

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



Source: Chiot's Run

few holes in the plastic is a good idea. At any rate, you should use them within a few days.

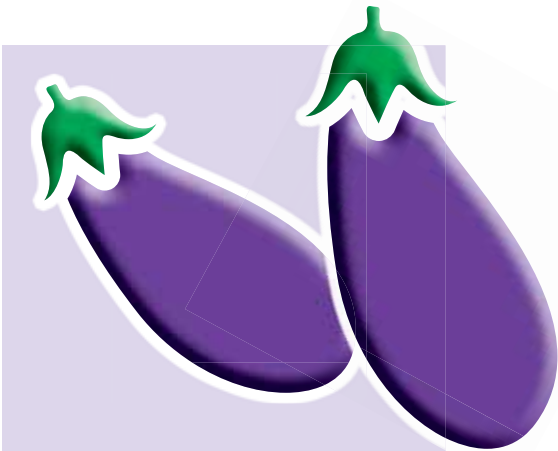
You shouldn't wash them until you're about to use them. Some say they shouldn't be washed at all for fear of waterlogging them. Brush them instead. A brush is fine, but time consuming, so a light wash should be fine. If you don't see any dirt on them, there shouldn't be a need for either.

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!



Source: Wendell Smith



STORY AND PHOTOS BY
ELEONORA BADELLINO,
BYFOOD

Characterized by a rich and juicy pulp, and a mild sweet taste with a delicate bitterish aftertaste, eggplant is undoubtedly one of the most outstanding ingredients during the summertime. Known for its versatility, which makes it the star of many traditional summer dishes around the world (such as the Italian parmigiana or baba ganoush from the Middle East), its use in cooking is popular in Japan as well.



Eggplant biodiversity

Up until now, if your choice of eggplant has fallen on the usual eggplant with a rounded shape, slightly “fat” and with a dark purple color, (I am referring to the “American” variety, the most common one) know that, in reality, the biodiversity of eggplants goes beyond imagination.

Walking through a farmer’s market, you’ll observe that its shapes and colors are variegated. You will find eggplants with white or green skin, Indian eggplants characterized by a small shape and a dark purple color, “Sicilian” eggplants, distinguished by white streaks on the skin (which disappear during cooking), and Thai eggplants, easily recognizable by their small shape and dark green color.

Among all of them, even in Japan, there is an autochthonous variety, which among all the eggplants previously described, it will not be difficult to identify. The Japanese eggplant, called nasu, is known for its elongated and thin shape, dark purple color, and pulp that’s almost seedless, which reaches a creamy and soft texture once cooked.

The Japanese eggplant has a very delicate flavor, less bitter than other varieties (for this reason they don’t need to be salted before cooking them) but thanks to the spongy pulp, they can easily absorb flavors when seasoned with the right ingredients.

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!

NASU
3 Japanese eggplant recipes to try at home

Here are three of my favorite Japanese eggplant recipes, which are also among the much-loved staple dishes of izakaya bars and Japanese home cooking!



Nasu Dengaku
(なす田楽)

Nasu Dengaku is a simple dish, delicious to eat both hot and cold as well as a perfect accompaniment for rice, or a snack with sake. Its preparation involves cooking the eggplant in a pan with sesame oil and glazing with a red miso-based sauce. With its soft texture and rich sweetness, this Japanese miso eggplant is a perfect treat for summer.

Ingredients

- 2 Japanese eggplants ■ 3 tbsp sesame oil
- 2 tbsp red miso ■ 1 tbsp potato starch
- 3 tbsp sugar ■ 3 tbsp sake ■ 2 tbsp mirin

Let’s Cook

After washing the eggplant, cut the skin into strips. In this way, we will facilitate the cooking of the flesh. Next, divide the eggplant into two equal parts vertically, and make incisions in a grid pattern.

(Be careful not to make incisions too deep or you will risk that the heat will ruin the shape of the eggplant).

Soak the cut eggplant in water to remove the lye and set it aside.

While they are soaking prepare the miso sauce. In a pan mix all the ingredients of the sauce (Miso, sugar, sake, mirin) and cook over medium-low heat. When the mixture begins to boil, turn off the heat and continue stirring

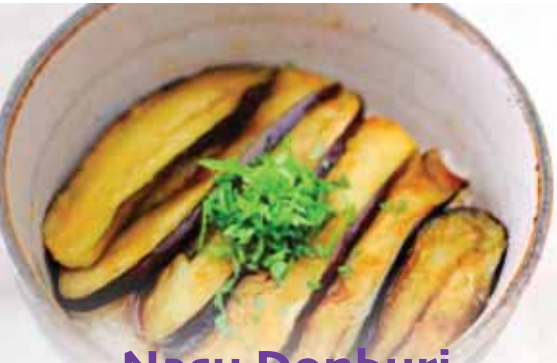
with a spoon for 3 to 4 minutes, making sure it does not stick to the bottom. Set aside and let cool.

Take the eggplant and remove excess water with kitchen paper. Cover the surface with potato starch being careful not to overdo it as we only need a light coating on the outside.

Heat the sesame oil in a frying pan and cook the eggplant for 3 minutes per side.

Once cooked (they should be tender), place them on kitchen paper to wipe off excess oil and coat them with the miso sauce.

Sprinkle some sesame seeds and enjoy your miso Nasu recipe while still warm!



Nasu Donburi
(なす丼)

Nasu donburi is perhaps one of the few vegan donburi available on the menus of izakaya here in Japan (but I suggest you ask for confirmation before ordering it). What characterizes this dish is the strong umami flavor and creamy texture of the eggplant, which blankets the delicate rice bowl, and the garnish of shredded shiso leaves that gives a final fresh touch to the dish. Absolutely a Japanese eggplant recipe that you must try!

Ingredients

- 2 Japanese eggplants ■ 1 tbsp sake ■ 2 tbsp mirin ■ 1 tbsp sugar
- 2 tbsp soy sauce ■ 1 tbsp ginger, finely chopped
- Potato starch (enough to cover the surface of the eggplant)
- 4 tbsp salad oil ■ Donburi (bowl filled with rice) ■ 2 shiso leaves

Let’s Cook

Remove the top part from the Japanese eggplant, and cut them into slices of more or less 1 cm in width (try to make them all similar sizes).

Soak the cut eggplant in water to remove the lye. In the meantime, prepare the seasoning. In a bowl mix sake, mirin, sugar, soy sauce, and ginger. Mix well and set aside.

Take the eggplant and wipe off the water with kitchen paper. Sprinkle the surfaces with potato starch, taking care not to put too much on, as we just need a thin layer.

Pour the cooking oil into a frying pan, heat it over medium heat, add the eggplant and cook on both sides for 3-4 minutes each.

Add the seasoning to the pan and cook for 2-3 more minutes and then turn off the heat after the seasoning starts to bubble. The sauce will get thicker and will be absorbed by the eggplant fast, so take care not to burn it.

While still warm, put the eggplant on top of rice and enjoy your nasu donburi with shiso leaves and white sesame on the top as a final touch.



Dashi Eggplant Stew
(なすの煮浸し)

Don’t let the term stew scare you. This simple Japanese eggplant recipe can be eaten either hot or cold, and the longer the eggplants are allowed to simmer in the fridge in contact with the dashi broth, the more intense and flavorful they will be!

Ingredients

- 2 Japanese eggplants ■ 1 tbsp of salad oil ■ 100ml of dashi soup
- 1 tbsp grated ginger ■ 2 tbsp of mirin ■ 2 tbsp soy sauce

Let’s Cook

Remove the top of the eggplant and cut it first in half vertically and then into three equal parts. Make diagonal cuts and soak in water.

Meanwhile, add all the seasonings to a bowl (dashi, ginger, mirin, and soy sauce) and mix well. Take the eggplant and wipe off the water with kitchen paper.

Place oil in a frying pan and cook beginning with the skin on medium heat. When it turns slightly brown, cook the other side the same way (it will take 2-3 minutes per side). Add the dressing to the pan and let it sit on low heat for a few minutes, until you will observe that the eggplant has absorbed some of

the broth. Serve on a plate and top with spring onion or grated daikon.





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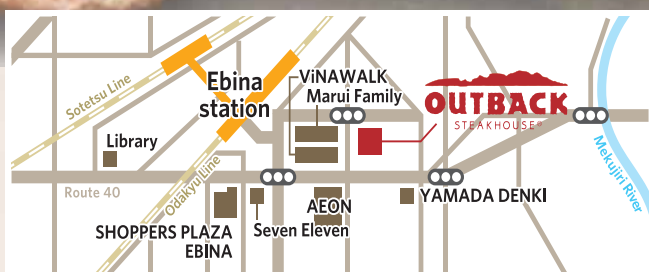
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