A Taste of Okinawa

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

8-page pullout
FOOD TO PICK UP AT THE KONBINI

1. Calbee Jagabee
Calbee Japan makes many of the most popular Japanese crackers and chips, but Calbee Jagabee potato sticks stand out proudly among them. In contrast to Jagariko, a more brittle Calbee snack, Jagabee provides a heartier crunch and rich flavor reminiscent of its glory days as a real potato. I especially recommend my all-time favorite savory Japanese snack, the shoyu (soy sauce) butter flavor of Jagabee!

2. Seasonal Pocky
When you think of popular snacks in Japan, for many foreigners, Pocky naturally springs to mind! Pocky, Japan loves to innovate on the already winning premise of chocolate on a biscuit stick, so keep your eyes peeled for special seasonal varieties like heart-shaped cherry blossom in the spring, lemon in the summer, and even Japanese sweet potato in the fall. My top-tier flavor is Winter Butter Caramel Pocky (冬のきらめき), which is so addictive I’d pay Glico to keep it in stock year round!

3. Black Thunder
One of the lesser known snacks to buy in Japan is Black Thunder, a sleeper hit that’s bound to have you renewing your visa! Black Thunder is a chocolate-covered candy bar with a cocoa cookie base and Japanese rice puffs, forming a crispy chocolatey delight. Look out for the many twists on this old favorite available in the konbini! In my experience, the custard apple pie flavor and Shittori Premium made with fresh cream are the ones to beat.

4. Sandwiches
Japanese convenience stores are handy not only for their plethora of snacks, but also their quick and easy meal options when traveling. All konbini have a refrigerated section with perfectly triangular sandwiches, filled with quality goodies such as teriyaki chicken katsu, tuna and lettuce, egg, and even special offerings like blueberry jam and whipped cream from time to time!

5. Fresh hot food
The must-try Japanese convenience store foods include a variety of hot, fresh food kept in glass containers at the register. Here you’ll find treats such as the all-powerful Famichiki, FamilyMart’s beloved take on impossibbly juicy fried chicken, piping hot nikuman meat buns, and occasionally special Hello Kitty-themed cream buns. A pivotal part of appreciating Japanese junk food is having your world rocked by Famichiki, so I recommend ordering it at least once!

6. Baumkuchen
When it comes to Japanese sweet snacks, Baumkuchen takes the cake for me! Technically a German dessert that became disproportionately popular in Japan, Baumkuchen is many alternating layers of cake baked into a ring of soft deliciousness I didn’t know I needed. I constantly spot new spins on the classic cake in the konbini, so check both the regular dessert section and the refrigerated section to join my mission to try them all!

7. Limited time ice cream
No listing of konbini snacks would be complete without a ringing endorsement of Japanese ice cream! The goodies in the konbini freezers rotate within weeks, or even days, so check often for seasonal treats like white peach Coolish or custard ice cream melon pan. Whether it’s a hazelnut praline ice cream bar with black currant jam from FamilyMart (pictured above) or some other fleeting beauty gone too soon, you’ll want to stock up with haste if you find a favorite!

8. Limited time breads
Out of all Japanese convenience store food, the special breads are my oldest and fondest standby. While classics like melon pan and Japanese curry bread may be the saviors of any foreigner looking for a safe but yummy lunch, the bread aisle is often ripe with innovations! Keep an eye out for zany new varieties like kinako whipped cream bread or strawberry steamed cakes.

9. Wagashi
If you’re hungry for some traditional Japanese wagashi sweets, I especially recommend 7-Eleven Japan snacks! 7-Eleven’s original line of wagashi-inspired desserts ranges from matcha cookies to yomogi daifuku to red bean rice cakes, so you can sample a wide variety of unique Japanese confections for cheap.

10. Kirin strong chuuhai
Thirsty for some crisp alcohol to wash down all those Japanese snacks? For me, no trip to a konbini is complete without picking up a tall can of chuuhai, a popular Japanese alcoholic drink that comes in tons of fruity flavors. The seasonal flavors of Kirin Strong, like mixed berry and double ume (Japanese plum), score especially well in my book!

11. Wine/sake in a juice box
An honorable mention goes to these charming little juice boxes filled with one single serving of sake or wine, found in the alcohol section of some konbini. For the novelty factor, I recommend trying an Oni Killer box of sake, just to say you’ve washed out your inner demons!

Japanese konbini represent much of the wonderful aspects of Japan, filled with colorful novelties, unexpected flavors, and a special appreciation for the changing of the seasons. Whether you’re hunting for the perfect Japanese snack food to satisfy your cravings or in need of a quick but quality meal on the go, I hope the konbini brings as much joy to your life as it does to mine!

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!
Strikers Cafe, perfect place to satisfy your taste buds

Strikers Café is a hidden gem on the Kadena Air Base. Pizza, burgers, wings, sandwiches, soups and even tacos! Strikers Café serves up all your American classics and also brings some Asian faves to the table. From the ever popular chili cheese dog to the sensational beef taco rice, there is something for every taste and preference at the Strikers Café. Swing by this month for their Burger of the Month, the Four Cheese Bacon Burger! We can’t wait to serve you up some tasty good. We are located in the Emery Lanes Bowling Center, building 113.

Gen a real gem on Okinawa

Offering authentic Japanese and Okinawan cuisine at a reasonable price, Gen was recognized in Stripes’ Best of the Pacific 2013 as the best restaurant to experience the local culture on Okinawa. Owner and Head Chef Naoki Tsukayama highly recommends the “Fish Garlic Butter Combo,” a popular dish among American customers. Tsukayama and his staff make you feel at home, so stop by and enjoy a delicious meal. Gen is located across from Camp Foster’s fire station. Just look for shi-shi dogs on a traditional Okinawan tile roof outside Foster’s Fire Station Gate.
Japanese Condiments

Starting off with classic Japanese condiments, here is a comprehensive list of the most essential Japanese pantry items that your kitchen can’t go without when it comes to making Japanese food at home!

1. Soy Sauce

Made from fermented soybeans and wheat, soy sauce or shoyu is the number one Japanese pantry staple ingredient you should always keep stock of in your kitchen. Whether it’s just a splash served alongside your sushi, or it’s the main component giving your sweet sukiyaki hotpot a salty kick, you will find that soy sauce is used in almost every savory Japanese recipe.

Japanese soy sauce is lighter than soy sauce products from other countries, with a distinctively delicate yet clean and complex flavor to it. As it is used in almost all savory Japanese recipes, it is a good idea to buy a high-quality Japanese soy sauce.

2. Miso Paste

Miso is thick, fermented soybean paste that comes in different varieties including shiro (white), aka (red or dark), and awase (mixed). Each type of miso gives different flavors and intensities. Not just for making traditional miso soup, miso paste is used for lots of different sauces, marinades, and even dressings. It can be used in a range of Japanese dishes, such as making a broth for miso ramen or as a glaze for miso eggplant.

3. Toasted Sesame Oil

Toasted sesame oil is a rich, golden oil that gives a lot of Japanese dishes an intense, nutty essence and flavor. While it can be used for stir-fry dishes, often it is used as a finishing oil, like for adding extra flavor into a hot bowl of ramen. However, toasted sesame oil is used in many salad dressings as well.

4. Rice Vinegar

In comparison to Western vinegar, rice vinegar or rice wine vinegar is sweeter and milder in flavor with a significantly less punchy essence. It is a vinegar that is made from fermented rice, and it is generally used to season rice used for sushi or onigiri rice balls. Other common uses in Japanese cuisine are pickling, salad dressings, and sauces.

5. Chili Oil

Japanese chili oil (also known as rayu) is a spicy oil condiment that has been infused with chili pepper flakes. You will find it commonly used in Japanese-style Chinese dishes. You can pour some into your ramen to give it a bit of a spicy kick, or dip crunchy gyoza dumplings into it for extra flavor.

Check out these gyoza cooking classes in Japan and learn how to make your own Japanese dumplings from scratch!

Essential Dry Goods

So once you have your Japanese condiments sorted, you should arm your Japanese pantry with these essential dry goods as a basic foundation for Japanese home cooking.

1. White Rice

Sometimes labeled as “sushi rice,” Japanese short-grain rice is what you need to stock your pantry with. This type of rice is short and plump, with a sticky yet fluffy texture that is iconic when it comes to Japanese cuisine. It is used in sushi (obviously), or it can accompany almost any Japanese dish.

2. Bonito Flakes

Bonito flakes, or katsuobushi in Japanese, are finely shaved dried fish flakes. These are the wiggling brown flakes you might see sprinkled on top of takoyaki or okonomiyaki. Bonito flakes are used in broths and are a key ingredient for making dashi (Japanese soup stock) which is used in soups, sauces, and as the base of many other Japanese dishes.

Join the Dash Workshop and Katsuobushi Factory Tour in Kagoshima to see firsthand how this product is made!

3. Wakame

Wakame is a type of Japanese seaweed that is also an essential ingredient used to flavor various dashi soup stocks. Wakame can be bought as a dried product from your cupboard shelf and rehydrated for use in simmered dishes or Japanese soups. Shiitake mushrooms can be kept dry and used over and over again for use in simmered dishes or Japanese soups.

There are a lot of other types of mushrooms like shimeji or enoki which are commonly used in Japanese cuisine, but shiitake mushrooms are great as they are available both fresh and dried. Dry shiitake mushrooms can be kept dry on your cupboard shelf and rehydrated for use in simmered dishes or Japanese soups. Shiitake mushrooms can be kept dry and used over and over again for use in simmered dishes or Japanese soups. Shiitake mushrooms can be kept dry on your cupboard shelf and rehydrated for use in simmered dishes or Japanese soups.

4. Panko Breadcrumbs

Literally translating to “bread powder,” Japanese breadcrumbs panko are mainly used for crumbing deep-fried foods in Japan. The difference between more standard Western breadcrumbs and panko is that panko breadcrumbs are larger, lighter flakes, and they don’t absorb as much grease as standard bread crumbs as a binder in or on bakes.

5. Shitake Mushrooms

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6. Cooking Sake

Almost as essential as soy sauce, is Japanese rice wine (Japanese sake). Cooking sake is a lower grade of cooking alcohol that is used to enhance and intensify the flavor of a range of Japanese dishes. It is incredibly versatile as it can be used in soups and simmered dishes, as well as marinades for meat, fish, and even more heartily-flavored Japanese foods.

7. Mirin

More like syrup in viscosity, mirin (Japanese rice wine, also known as sake mirin) is a sweet condiment that is commonly used in Japanese cooking. It is part of the rice wine family, like sake is, but its alcohol content is lower and it is used more typically as a seasoning. It is used to help tenderize meat and seafood, and to add a distinct sweetness to some Japanese dishes. With its higher sugar content, mirin is often used in sweet Japanese pastries and desserts.

By Lucy Baker, byFood
Japanese pantry for foodies

Japanese ingredients being readily available at your nearest Japanese grocery store, you just need to know what to look for. To help you get familiar with what is needed for Japanese cooking, keep reading for our tips on how to stock a Japanese pantry.

To make your shopping list easy, you will find our Japanese pantry staples split up into two sections covering key Japanese condiments and essential dry ingredients.

1. Kombu

Kombu is another type of Japanese seaweed, a type of edible seaweed that can be bought as a dry pantry good. It is typically used as a soup stock ingredient and responsible for imparting a deep, indispensible umami flavor (derived from glutamic acids) in many Japanese dishes. A traditional accompaniment for any Japanese meal! Both homemade Japanese meal! Both

2. Green Tea

Also known as katakuriko, potato starch is used as a thickening agent to make Japanese sauces. This is often the case when cooking chuka-ryori (Japanese style Chinese food). It is lighter than wheat flours, meaning that potato starch makes for a great coating when making fried food like karaage (Japanese fried chicken), and it can also prevent sticking when making Japanese sweets such as chewy mochi. Cornstarch can also be used in a similar way but with varying textures.

3. Wasabi

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4. Nori

What a surprise, another seaweed! That's right, seaweed is very important in traditional Japanese food culture as it is nutritious and flavorful. In this case, dried nori seaweed can be in the form of either a sheet, shredded into strips, or as seaweed flakes (called sonori). Nori is the basis for sushi rolls, and nori, a classic top for tempura and okonomiyaki.

5. Shichimi Togarashi

Also known as “Japanese seven spice,” shichimi togarashi is another key Japanese pantry item to give a little spice to your homemade Japanese dishes. As its name, it is made up of a blend of seven dried aromatic spices that make it both hot in flavor and citrusy. This includes chili flakes, ginger, nori, sesame seeds, shiso, dried orange peel, and Sichuan pepper (with room for some other spice mix variants, depending on the brand).

6. Tonkatsu Sauce

Tonkatsu sauce is a thick, savory sauce with a distinctive and iconic Worcestershire-meets-barbecue sauce flavor. This flavorful condiment pairs perfectly with classic deep-fried dishes from Japan such as crispy tonkatsu (fried pork cutlets) or ebi furai (fried prawn cutlets). Just pour it on top or dip it, and voila!

7. Japanese Mayo

Creamy, morish, and distinctively wiggly when squeezed out of the tube, Japanese mayonnaise is an essential and delicious condiment that goes with a lot of Japanese dishes. For example, you will find Japanese mayo decorating steaming takoyaki balls and okonomiyaki pancake slabs. Or, it makes an irresistible dipping sauce for deep-fried karaage. Kewpie is the most famous Japanese mayonnaise with its white bottle and red cap.

8. Furikake Rice Seasoning

From the Japanese word meaning “sprinkle,” furikake rice seasoning is a rice topping made from a combination of dried chili pepper flakes, seaweed flakes, sesame seeds, and other Japanese spices. The ingredients are dried and mixed together and can easily be shaken over the top of your rice to give it some extra flavor.

9. Wasabi

As real wasabi is incredibly expensive and difficult to come by even in Japan, bright green wasabi powder or wasabi paste is the answer to getting a hit of Japanese horseradish in your hometown. Both wasabi powder and wasabi paste are imitations of fresh wasabi with just a small concentration of the real thing, however, you can still use it for adding to sushi or udon dishes.

Join a wasabi farm tour in Okutama, Tokyo to learn firsthand about the cultivation of one of Japan’s most expensive crops!

10. White Pepper

As opposed to black pepper which is more commonly used in Western countries, when it comes to Japanese cuisine, white pepper is used as an alternative. It’s a bit hotter on the tongue than black pepper, yet also milder in flavor to better suit the delicate nature of Japanese dishes. It can be used in dishes like Japanese ramen, fried rice and stir-fries, as well as for seasoning meat and vegetables.

So, were you wondering what is needed for Japanese cooking? For anyone who loves cooking Japanese food, these are the 23 most important condiments and dry ingredients that are essential for stocking a Japanese pantry. Plan on purchasing your Japanese ingredients like soy sauce, seaweed, sauces, and Japanese rice so you can create an authentic Japanese dish anytime!

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!
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

**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 sesames 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.

**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 seasoning. In a bowl 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 nasu recipe while still warm!

**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

### Nasu Donburi

**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!

**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.

**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 soy sauce
- Donburi (bowl filled with rice)
- 2 shiso leaves

### Dashi Eggplant Stew

**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!

**Let’s Cook**

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.

**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 something easy, healthy, and fun with your kids! This tuna okara sandwich contains a good amount of soy protein and fiber from okara (soy pulp that you can get from local supermarket at quite a reasonable price). Slicing the tomato just a little bit makes it easier to keep it on the bread. I kept the stem of the tomato to make antennae, but it will do without them.

STORY AND PHOTO BY RIEKO SUZUKI, METROPOLIS MAGAZINE

Servings: 2 sandwiches
Cooking time: 30 min [with kids]

Ingredients
- 2 pieces of french baguette (15cm long each) or any bread you like
- 40g of canned tuna (drained)
- 2 tbs of finely chopped onion
- 1 tbs of yogurt
- 1 tbs of mayonnaise
- A pinch of salt
- A pinch of pepper
- 1 tbs of butter
- 1 cucumber
- 2 mini tomatoes
- Small amount of hard cheese (for caterpillar’s eyes)
- 4 pieces of black sesame seeds (for caterpillar’s eyes)

Directions
1. Combine tuna, okara, onion, yogurt, mayonnaise, salt, and pepper, and mix well.
2. Slice bread if needed, and toast lightly. Spread butter, then the tuna okara mixture.
3. Place cucumber slices and mini tomatoes on tuna okara spread.
4. Put small pieces of hard cheese on tomatoes, then black sesame seeds to make eyes.

Caterpillar Sandwich

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Esparza’s Tacos and Coffee prides itself in original recipes and homemade tortillas and chips. We also serve a variety of delicious vegan items like our Chunky Chorizo in an effort to cater to those who are conscious about health, animal rights and the environment. Our menu boasts mouth-watering tacos, bowls, nachos, a selection of alcoholic beverages, and more! House specialties such as our homemade Ginger Ale, Ginger Latte, Steak Tacos, and Holy Guacamole Chicken Bowls are must tries! If you are looking for tasty Mexican cuisine, then Esparza’s Tacos and Coffee is the place for you!
Early in 2020, as COVID-19 made its sweep across the world, Disney closed all of its theme parks. As the closure was extended, Disney decided to share with its loyal fans the recipe to a crowd favorite – churros.

The recipe was a hit among YouTubers and food bloggers trying to bring a little taste of Disney back into their lives during quarantine.

Though now theme parks have reopened, there are times when theme parks in Japan are off-limits for the military community. Disney has since removed the churro recipe from their own website, but like everything shared online, this recipe, too, has taken a life of its own out of reach from Disney’s grasp.

I missed the initial Disney Churro craze but came across a video for it on YouTube recently. The video featured folks wearing Mickey Mouse ears while cooking and enjoying the treat, which motivated me to give it a try for myself.

It’s been a summer of instant noodles and donuts, so this didn’t seem like a smart choice for me, but one bite in and I am so glad I went for it.

The recipe seemed simple and easy to follow. I struggled a little bit with using a pastry bag. Some of my Disney Churros ended up taking on weird shapes, looking more like A&W’s super fries than churros. They were so delicious; I could hardly stop eating them.

And, while I may not be a Disney fan—the last movie I watched was Aladdin in 1992, the last time I visited a park was in early 2000s, not to mention how I am not crazy about how they’ve handled the Star Wars franchise—I do give them credit for this awesome recipe and their tasty churros.

These churros were so good, in fact, that I may be inclined to give the Toy Story and Lion King movies a chance.

**Ingredients**

- 240 cc water
- 120 cc butter
- 1.25 cc salt
- 3.75 cc cinnamon
- 3 eggs
- 360 cc vegetable or canola oil
- 100 g sugar

**Recipe**

1. Pour water in a pot over medium heat and add in butter, salt, half of the cinnamon (1.25 cc).
2. Change the medium heat to low.
3. Add eggs in one at a time as you knead the dough.
4. Place the dough in a pastry bag with a star-shaped piping tip. Prepare a plate with paper towels to place fried churros.
5. Pour oil into a frying pan or another pot over medium to high heat until the oil reaches about 170°C (338°F).
6. When the oil reaches the temperature required, squeeze dough into the oil in 2.5 cm-long portions.
7. Fry until golden brown, then transfer onto the plate with the paper towels.
8. Mix sugar and cinnamon (2.5cc) in a bowl.
9. After the churros have cooled and strained excess oil place into the sugar-cinnamon mix and coat.
10. After this, your churros are ready to devour. Bon appetit!