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# A Taste of Okinawa

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Restaurants,  
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**4-page pullout**

File photo



# GOYA

## 3 easy Japanese bitter melon recipes for summer



STORY AND PHOTOS BY ELEONORA BADELLINO, BYFOOD

It's time to take a close look at an iconic Japanese summer vegetable, goya (bitter melon) which is known for its special flavor and texture. Here, you'll learn how to tame goya's bitter flavor and prepare it in three simple Japanese bitter melon recipes.



### Have you ever heard of goya (Japanese bitter melon)?

Grown mainly in southern Japan, (Okinawa prefecture accounts for more than 30% of the goya harvest), goya is also known by the name "bitter gourd" or "bitter melon" and is considered an extremely nutritious ingredient.

### What is bitter melon good for?

Rich in vitamin C, which is effective in cooling body temperature, goya has been recognized as a healthy vegetable to prevent summer heat fatigue, and over time, its use has become more popular and diverse.

With color and shape similar to a cucumber, and a thick skin full of bumps, what makes Japanese goya truly unique is the bitter taste that can be experienced from the first bite.

### But why is it so bitter? Is bitter melon poisonous?

Goya's bitterness makes it the kind of vegetable that you either love or hate, and while many people are addicted to it, others can't really appreciate Japanese bitter melon.

The reason behind its flavor is momordicin, a compound located in the thick skin of goya, known for its ability to lower blood sugar levels in the body.

So, we should all appreciate its taste, but with a little caution. According to a 2015 study by the World Journal of Emergency Medicine, doctors have reported the suspicion of toxicity in the red seeds located in the pulp, which must be removed before cooking.

Besides that, bitter melon has long been used in traditional Chinese medicine due to its detoxifying and purifying qualities. In particular, it works on kidney stones and the liver.

### How to reduce goya's bitter taste

If you feel that the bitterness of goya is too strong, here are some tips that can help you attenuate it and make it more palatable in the Japanese bitter melon recipes below.

First of all, when buying goya, always select the dark green ones, as they are said to be less bitter.

Before cooking, cut them into wedges and sprinkle the surface with salt. Let them rest for 30 minutes and rinse under flowing water, rubbing them with your hands to remove the remaining salt.

Salt helps draw out moisture from the goya slices, thus reducing those phenolic components characterized by the bitter taste.

A quick and easy mod for an assured result!



### Goya chanpuru

Goya is a vegetable that adapts to different preparations. It can be found in stews, miso soup, tempura... but the most popular bitter gourd Japanese recipe is undoubtedly goya chanpuru.

The term "chanpuru" comes from the Okinawan dialect, and can be translated as "something that is stirred."

Goya chanpuru is a stir fry dish that involves the use of various ingredients including goya, tofu, animal protein, eggs, and other vegetables.

#### Ingredients

- 200g thinly sliced pork belly
- 1 pack of tofu
- 2 eggs
- 1 bitter gourd
- 2 tbsp salad oil
- 2 tbsp sesame oil
- 2 tbsp soy sauce
- Salt & pepper

- 1 Wrap tofu in kitchen paper and let it rest for 15 mins. In this way, we will draw out the excess water and the tofu will become more dry and dense.
- 2 Cut bitter gourd in half lengthwise, remove seeds and guts with a spoon, and cut into 4mm pieces. Place in a bowl, add salt, and mix. Let it rest for 30 mins and then wash with water until all the salt is gone.
- 3 Cut the pork into bite-sized pieces and sprinkle with salt and pepper.
- 4 Crack the egg into a separate bowl and mix.
- 5 Heat the salad oil in a frying pan, add the tofu, and cook over medium heat, turning the tofu over and over until the surface begins to brown. Take the tofu and put it aside.
- 6 Heat sesame oil in the same frying pan, add Japanese bitter melon, and fry over medium heat until soft. Add the pork and stir-fry until the meat turns golden brown, then add the tofu.
- 7 Pour in the egg and fry it until the egg is half-cooked. Mix everything together, add two tbsp of soy sauce, and place in a bowl to serve.



**Meat-filled goya**



I had the opportunity to taste this dish at a local izakaya during my first summer here in Japan, and I fell in love with the flavor of this Japanese bitter melon recipe. The sweet teriyaki sauce made of mirin, sugar, sake, and soy sauce is perfect in combination with the bitterness of goya!

It is also possible to make a vegan version by substituting the pork with vegan minced meat.

**Ingredients**

- 180g minced pork
- 1/2 tsp grated garlic
- 1 tbsp sesame oil
- 1 bitter gourd
- 1 tbsp sake
- 1 tbsp soy sauce
- 1 tbsp mirin
- 1/2 tbsp of sugar
- 2 tbsp potato starch
- Salad oil

- 1 Cut bitter gourd into 8 equal pieces. Remove the seeds and pulp with a spoon. Place in a bowl, add salt, and stir. Let stand for 30 minutes and then wash with water until all the salt is gone. When dry, cover evenly with potato starch, making sure the inside is also coated.
- 2 Mix meat with garlic, 1/2 teaspoon potato starch, and sesame oil until the mixture gets sticky. Divide into 8 equal portions and fill the bitter melon.
- 3 In a frying pan, heat 1 teaspoon of oil. Grill the filled goya until browned on both sides, turning halfway through cooking. Add 4 tablespoons of water, cover, and steam for another 3 to 4 minutes.
- 4 When the meat is cooked, turn the heat down, add the seasoning (sake, mirin, soy sauce, and sugar) and cook until the sauce becomes sticky.
- 5 When ready, serve on a plate and eat while still hot.

**Goya tea**

For a concentrated version of the beneficial nutrients of goya, you can also enjoy it in tea form.

It is said that the bitter component of goya, with its excellent anti-inflammatory properties, along with its high amount of vitamin C, capable of strengthening the immunity of the skin, make it a drink that helps promote a healthy and young body.

Bitter gourd tea can be easily prepared at home.

Do not expect to drink super strong tea. You will find that its bitterness is milder and is characterized by a slight sweetness and richness similar to hojicha.

Although bitter melon is famous for its bitterness, even if you have a sweet tooth, I highly recommend giving it a try! In addition to its health benefits, it's a unique ingredient that your taste buds will have a hard time forgetting.

- 1 Cut the bitter gourd in half lengthwise and remove the insides with a spoon. Do not throw away the seeds, but simply separate them from the insides. Cut the goya in half again, and slice it into pieces that are 1mm wide.
- 2 Spread the bitter gourd and seeds on a plate and place them in a sunny, well-ventilated place for 1-2 days until dry.
- 3 Once ready, toast them with the seeds in a toaster oven until they turn a light brown color, and you're done. Remember to store them in a sealable container to prevent them from absorbing moisture (I suggest keeping them in the refrigerator).



*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!*

**A Taste of Okinawa**



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