

CHEF'S CHOICE

22 Culinary Masters Tell How

JAPANESE

FOOD

CULTURE

Influenced Their Careers
and Cuisine



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**22 Culinary Masters Tell How
Japanese Food Culture
Influenced Their Careers and Cuisine**

Saori Kawano & Don Gabor

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In the modern field of gastronomy, mastering Japanese cuisine is more than acquiring the fundamental cooking skills. It also requires a deeper understanding of the historical background of Japanese food culture.

— Yoshiki Tsuji, President of the TSUJI Culinary Institute in Osaka, Japan



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The Japanese Chef's Way of Thinking

If we don't talk about the fundamentals that inform the way a Japanese chef thinks, then we can't understand how we arrived at Japanese cooking today. It all starts with Japan's location and topography. Japan is made up of about 6,300 islands, including the four main islands of Kyushu, Shikoku, Honshu, and Hokkaido. Ocean currents encircle the islands, running from south to north on one side and from north to south on the other. A mountain range runs north to south along the spine of the islands. When the jet stream from the Himalayas hits the mountain range, it causes rain and snow, and with it the growth of many localized types of vegetation.

I've been living in the U.S. for more than 30 years. Looking from the outside, I can see that the ancient Japanese spirit and ways of thinking still exist in Japan, particularly among Japanese chefs.

The Japanese way of thinking—their outlook and indigenous religious beliefs—is called *Shinto* or *Shintoism*. It was born of the volcanoes, earthquakes, typhoons, and other natural disasters that are particular to this group of islands and topography. Shinto beliefs and ways of thinking are deeply embedded in the subconscious fabric of modern Japanese society, and include feelings of gratitude for all of the blessings that nature provides, as well as the constant fear of fires, floods, and earthquakes. Out of this physical environment came the Japanese people's deepest respect and honor for harmony with nature. They welcome Mother Nature's fury and her bounty. And they believe that all people, animals, plants, and living things are one with nature.

Japanese chefs perform special rituals out of respect for nature's ingredients. For example, by using every scrap of a fish without wasting any part of it, we treat nature's bounty with care. We say

itadakimasu (“I receive”) before eating. In this way, we acknowledge that something that was alive has terminated its life for us. There is an ancient Japanese cooking tradition of cherishing nature and taking great care with our ingredients. We constantly think about how to use every bit of an ingredient—handling it to its best advantage and always considering texture and its seasonality.

Around 1,400 years ago, Japan’s ancient ways of thinking about nature expanded with the integration of philosophies and religions that originated in China. Then, around 1333 AD, Dōgen Zenji, a Japanese Zen Buddhist teacher born in Kyōto and founder of the Soutou school of Zen, changed food preparation in Japan. After training as a monk in China, he brought back vegetarianism and other aspects of the *shojin ryori* Buddhist diet to Japan, then incorporated them into principles, or *tanmi*, for the Zen monks. Dōgen Zenji recorded them in his book *Tenzo Kyokun, Instructions for the Cook*.

Some of these principles explained in the book involved *washoku*, which means “harmony of food.” One principle of *washoku* is *takiawase*, sometimes called “kindled vegetables.” The vegetables are cooked separately and then assembled on the same plate. In Japanese cooking, *takiawase* expresses this spirit of unity.

Dōgen Zenji’s book also identified other elements, including tastes, cooking methods, and colors. The Five Tastes include salty, sweet, sour, bitter and umami (savory), plus *tanmi*, or the subtle natural flavor of the ingredient. The Five Methods of Cooking—raw, boiled, sautéed, grilled, and steamed—transform flavors. The Five Colors—white, black, red, green, and yellow—serve to balance nutritional content. The book also named five pungent roots to avoid, as well as harsh-tasting foods and strong-smelling foods that are too stimulating to the palate.

During this period, Japanese cuisine continued to change. It became the fashion, particularly in Japan’s Imperial Court. Because Japan was never invaded by outsiders and was closed off from the world, its cuisine remained virtually uninterrupted.

Seven hundred years ago, the importance of each ingredient was based on its nature. This reverence for ingredients became the cornerstone of today's *kaiseki ryori*, the traditional multi-course Japanese dinner. Today, specially trained chefs use only the freshest seasonal ingredients, which are prepared to enhance their flavor by balancing taste, texture, appearance, and colors. Dishes are beautifully arranged and garnished on handcrafted tableware, often with real leaves and edible flowers, and are designed to resemble natural plants and animals.

Buddhism also brought a new food culture, as well as utensils, to Japan. Because vegetables were the main dish, knives, tools, and cooking techniques were created as Japan's emerging cuisine developed. The Japanese *hocho*, an all-purpose kitchen knife, is a perfect example of this.

Originally, samurais were in charge of meals in the Imperial Court. They were responsible for the food, but their role also included that of protector. Because it wouldn't do for the emperor to be poisoned, samurais tasted all the food, and they were also in charge of identifying and verifying ingredients. To accomplish this, they read Buddhist texts and medicinal manuscripts and became experts in health, sanitation, and poisonous ingredients.

During the Heian Period (794–1185 AD), a master chef and poet, Yamakage Fujiwara, came to the Imperial Court. By order of the Emperor, he set down rules for using the *hocho* kitchen knife and the *manaita* cutting board and created the Shijo school. These rules established the knife ceremony and rituals, giving thanks for food and honoring nature's bounty at the Imperial Court. Once the Shijo school of Art established "the way of the knife," other schools began to teach the knife techniques, too, and the art of the knife spread from the Imperial Court to the warrior clans, giving those trained in the military arts even more authority. As a result, the head of the kitchen in each *daimyo* household was schooled in the way of the knife.

The cooks in the Imperial kitchen needed an underlying philosophy, especially when it came to kitchen and food safety. After all, their lives were at stake. If poison was found in the food or if someone became ill because of the food, they would have to commit *seppuku*, or ritual suicide, immediately. No profession at that time could have been more stressful. Being a chef then wasn't like it is today. Now when you make a mistake, you just say, "Oops!"

The powerful clans throughout Japan tried to attract master chefs, since they were a source of pride for a wealthy household. The fine cuisine, the way of the knife, and other cultural arts, such as ceramics, textiles, flower arranging, and the tea ceremony, began to spread across Japan as roads and highways made travel easier. The Edo Period (1603–1868) brought with it the extravagant meal, *rikyu's chakaiseki* followed by the *sado* (tea ceremony). These were later unified by the *ryotei* (guest house and restaurant) culture of Kyoto and the Yoshiwara (prostitution/pleasure district) *ryotei* tradition in Kanto, and eventually developed into contemporary *kaiseki* cuisine. The peak of *kaiseki* was during the years 1688 to 1704. This period, I believe, was the culmination of the complete arts of Japanese cookery that had begun with the Shijo school of Art.

The Edo Period was a warrior-based, feudal society with a caste system. The warrior was at the top, followed by farmers and artisans. Tradesmen were at the bottom. However, merchants prospered through the distribution of their goods to various destinations despite the limitations of their position in society. Their imagination and creativity with raw ingredients gave rise to *shoyu* (soy sauce) and *shottsuru* (a pungent regional Japanese fish sauce made from the brine of salt-pickled fish). They also made a thin soy sauce called *usukuchi shoyu* from the same brine used to make miso from soybeans.

All of these manufactured foods came to Kanto, the heartland of feudal power. Kanto included the central inland and western coastal region of Honshu, especially the Tokyo-Yokohama areas. Kanto was the dividing point between the cultivation of rice and wheat. The

richness of the Tama and Tone Rivers made Kanto a fertile region for growing wheat, which was used to make buckwheat soba noodles.

Originally, shoyu was made only with soybeans, but when shoyu was mixed with wheat, it created a stronger soy sauce that sold like wildfire throughout the Kanto district. In Kanto, there were many shoyu makers. An abundance of shoyu made it possible to develop dishes like *kabayaki* (grilled eel) and the dipping sauce for soba noodles. Wheat also changed how sushi was prepared. Until then, sushi had been pickled in barrels of fermented saké lees. However, by making less-costly vinegar from wheat and saké lees, the merchants of Kanto generated huge profits almost overnight and spread the sushi culture to other areas throughout Japan.

Ieyasu Tokugawa, the founder and first shogun of the Tokugawa shogunate of Japan, also contributed to food use and transportation in Japan. He built an amazing water supply and sewer system around the Tama River. Waterways were used to bring in large volumes of food products and other goods to Edo from all over Japan.

Tokugawa knew about food poisoning and was one of the driving forces behind the successful cultivation and use of wasabi in food as a way to kill bacteria. As a result, the Tokugawa family crest incorporated a plant that resembles the wasabi plant.

Another important product of the Edo period was *nori* (dried seaweed sheets). I believe *nori* originated in China or possibly Korea. The technique of making *nori* became popular in the late Edo period, and inlets along the coast near Edo were reclaimed for cultivation. *Nori* cultivation spread quickly to inlets of other areas. Then, during the Meiji Period (1868–1912), English scientist Kathleen Drew-Baker identified ways to increase seaweed production, and this led to a boost in the Japanese seaweed industry.

The custom of eating rice wrapped in *nori* (one of the world's first "fast foods") can be traced to the Ginza. During the Edo period, this area was home to many blacksmiths, who, because they were so busy, needed a quick yet nutritious meal. They ate *tekka-maki*. The name

tekka-maki (*tekka* means “red-hot iron”) was used for the rolled sushi that they could eat quickly and easily. A tekka-maki is just like makimono of today—easily made, filled with vitamins and minerals, and reasonably priced. As a result, tekka-maki grew rapidly in popularity.

Another ingredient that became popular during the Edo period was pickled ginger, or gari. Gari’s use was originally medicinal; it was considered a disinfectant for the mouth. Gari was also used to cleanse the palate, preparing it to taste the next dish much in the same way as vinegar, shoyu, and wasabi.

Food fermentation has been part of Japan’s food culture in large part because the warm and cold environments, abundant rainfall, humidity, and wide variety of vegetation allow many kinds of microorganisms, fungi, and bacteria to flourish. When chefs and farmers combined rice and soybeans with lactic acid bacilli, they found it was possible to produce miso, saké, shoyu, natto (a sticky soybean paste), tsukemono (pickled vegetables), and other types of fermented foods. The lactic acid bacilli that kill microbes are also used to reclaim clean water from sludge filled with nitrogen. Additionally, lactic acid bacilli destroy the deadly poison tetrodotoxin, which is found in the fugu blowfish liver and other parts of this fish. The liver can then be pickled into tsukemono—it’s delicious!

All of these concepts appear in Dōgen Zenji’s ancient book, *Tenzo Kyokun, Instructions for the Cook*. Nature makes food for us and no human hand has to touch it. We simply create the opportunity. I see it this way: A chef is like a mediator, or a go-between. What needs to be done in order to bring together this ingredient and that ingredient? It’s like matchmaking. I think that’s how Japanese chefs approach cooking. They work hard to best utilize each ingredient, often leaving it intact and drawing out the flavor.

I relate this concept to Japanese cooking today. There is a simmered dish called *takiawase*. You don’t simmer the ingredients all jumbled together, but one by one. If you have a potato, turnip, and

some bamboo shoots, you add some touches to each one, suited to the character of each, so that each ingredient is at its best when combined later. If there is a weak flavor somewhere, you add a little something to it. If something is too strong, you extract some of the flavor, using the concept of “if you add something—take away something.” The dish is finished by combining all ingredients together in one stock. I believe this concept of harmony is at the root of Japanese culture and cooking: putting each life to its best use, and treating ingredients with care. Drawing the best flavor out of each individual ingredient is, I think, the fundamental definition of Japanese cooking and at the heart of the Japanese chef’s way of thinking.



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