



Japanese Dining Unravelled



FACT FILE

If you would like to try a particular type of Japanese food or enjoy some of the dining experiences mentioned in Zoe's article, please call our Japan specialists on 01869 276 217. A 14-night tailor-made tour of Japan ranges from £1,950 - £3,800 and above.



In spring 2005 I travelled to Japan to witness the annual journey of the cherry blossom as it makes its way from south to north. The appearance of these fabled petals brings out the best not only in the scenery but also in the Japanese people, who celebrate the coming of spring with a 'bento' or boxed lunch washed down with generous quantities of sake or beer beneath the blossom trees. Dining Japanese style is often a seasonal affair; the winter brings hot stews made of sweet vegetables whereas in summer people prefer lighter tastes, seasoned with vinegar and salt. Eating in Japan can be anything from a relaxed occasion in an Izakaya or Japanese pub to a lengthy ritual, sampling small exquisitely prepared dishes in a kaiseki meal, a refined style of dining found in the more formal Japanese restaurants and ryokans. A strong sense of regional identity is also reflected in the local specialities that enrich any journey across the country. In snowy Sapporo steaming bowls of ramen soup noodles or thick 'nabe' hotpots warm cold winter's nights. Further south the town of Kobe is renowned for the quality of its beef, while the residents of Hiroshima take pride in their 'as you like it' okonomiyaki vegetable, meat or seafood pancakes, cooked on an iron platter in front of you.

Whether you are interested in fresh sushi and sashimi from Tokyo's enormous Tsukiji fish market, the huge King Crab in Hokkaido or playing Russian roulette with a bite of the deadly fugu fish in Kyushu, Japan has an enormous range of delicious seafood to sample. During the summer months Unagi or eel, served steamed with pickles and rice, is said to have aphrodisiac properties!

Japanese dining etiquette can be a source of trepidation for foreign visitors to the country but

it need not be intimidating. The Japanese are forgiving of the odd misdemeanour by well-intentioned foreigners, though there are a few simple rules to follow: when dining with others it is considered a little impolite to fill one's own glass at the table, instead you should fill those of your neighbours and they will then return the gesture. To fill one's own glass with beer is seen as a sign of alcoholism! Likewise it's considered bad form to stick chopsticks vertically in any leftover food as this is a custom associated with funerary rites. Cutlery is widely available in most restaurants for those who would prefer not to use chopsticks and your waitress will often provide a quick lesson in the art should you prefer to 'go native'.

Traditionally Japanese Buddhist monks eat a strictly vegetarian diet, and as a vegetarian myself I was excited to visit Mount Koya, the home of the Shingon Buddhist sect, on my recent visit. At the Tentoku-in, one of the temples that welcomes guests, I was served a veritable feast in my room including to my delight, a huge beer. Enthusiastically I tried each little dish, all served in beautiful crockery. I worked my way through all manner of dishes including radish stew, ginkgo nuts and steamed tofu, complemented by plenty of rice.

Whilst in Kyoto there is the opportunity to try your hand at creating some dishes yourself under the watchful eye of one of the local residents who have opened their kitchens to foreigners. You learn about the history of Japanese food and the regional specialities available before creating three dishes, all made with ingredients you can buy at home. Of course a thorough tasting is part of the afternoon.

Zoe Woods
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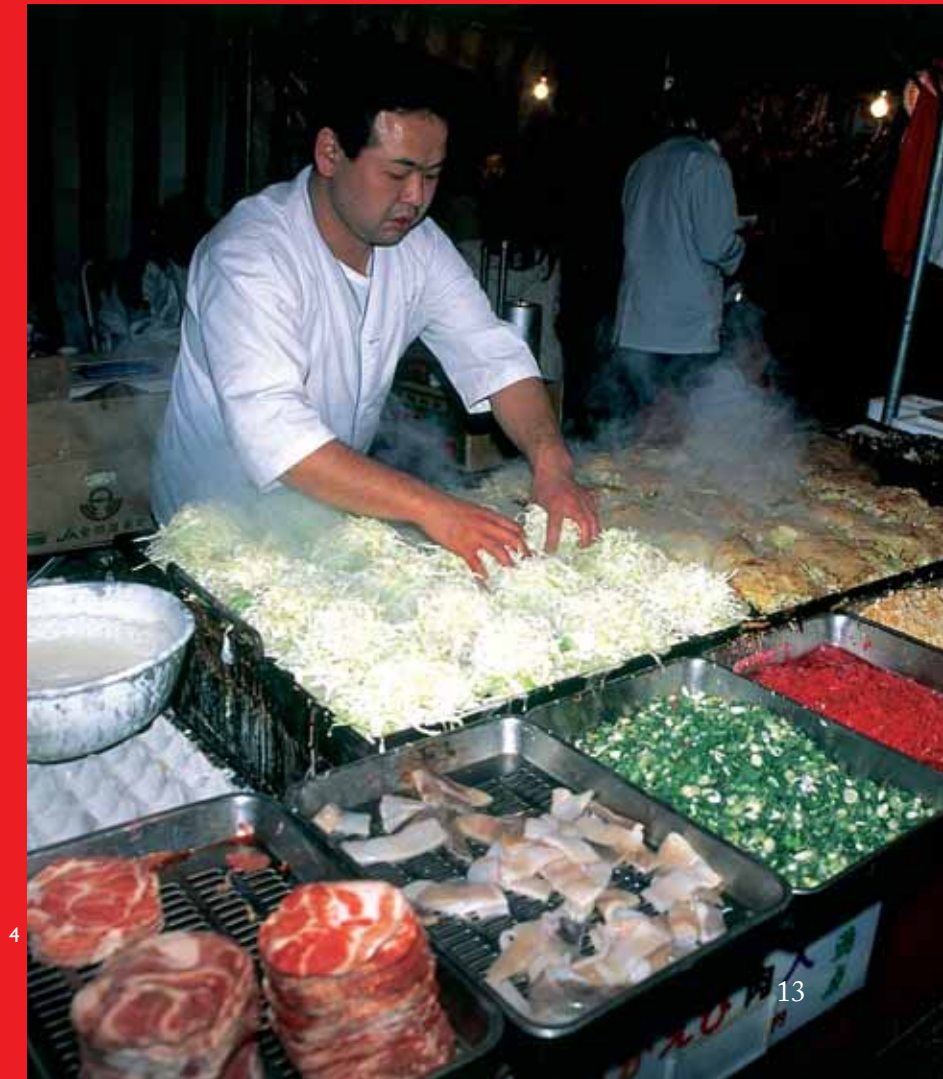


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- 1 Traditional enkai meal.
- 2 Market stall.
- 3 Restaurant in Takayama.
- 4 Okonomiyaki stall.



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