

The Evolution of Japanese Food

Since the latter half of the 1970s, the image of Japanese food as 'healthy' has gained currency throughout the countries of the world, and now it can be appreciated in many regions. Allow me to introduce exactly what kind of cuisine Japanese food is, and how it has evolved to date.



Seasonal summer vegetables, including sweet corn, eggplant and pumpkin.

Japanese food refers to the traditional food, flavourings and cooking methods found in Japan. The prevailing characteristics include the flavours of the fresh ingredients themselves, delicate seasonings which are utilised to maximum effect, and the appearance of the meal, which is also considered to be an essential element in Japanese cooking.

Why are these aspects so important? Well that primarily has to do with Japan's climate. Japan's summer is very hot, with an extremely high level of humidity, and

the winter temperature drops low enough for snow to pile up outside your windows. With four definitive seasons, the foods that can be freshly plucked from the fields and the sea vary according to the time of year. Because seasonal produce not only tastes better when it's bought in season, but also has a higher nutritional value, people are very conscious of the seasons when they choose food supplies. A style of cooking was created to maximise the natural taste and nutritional value of fresh produce, in which it was considered better not to add strong flavours or cook food to excess. The custom of eating raw eggs and fish comes from this premise.

In Japan there is the notion that food is savoured not only by the mouth, but also by the eyes. The sense of the seasons is conveyed in the



Sliced raw fish presented on a glass vessel to represent coolness in the heat of summer



Serving suggestion using prominent food manufacturer Kewpie's Retort Pasta Sauce: 'Chilled chicken breast and cod roe spaghetti.'

Photo: © Kewpie Corporation



A Japanese simmered dish, with soy sauce, Japanese sweet Sake and rice wine; *Niku-jaga* (Meat and potatoes.)

flavour and cooking style, as well as in the arrangement and colours of the meal. Summer meals use ingredients such as vinegar and raw produce, served in glass vessels which convey a refreshing sense of coolness. In winter, on the other hand, simmered dishes are presented in stately earthen pots and other dignified, heavy bowls, as visual interpretations of warmth. Additionally, in order to appear delicious and thus whet the appetite, food is arranged in a precise and elegant way, which is a demonstration of the chef's skill, or, in the home, is arranged in accordance with the cook's natural sense of aesthetics.

In this way Japanese food had evolved through prioritising fresh seasonal produce and aesthetics. But it has also been affected by the recent wave of globalisation, and has again undergone a transformation. Food, condiments and culinary methods procured from other countries have been embraced and altered according to Japanese taste and the availability of ingredients, to produce innumerable new creations. For example, spaghetti is served with salted cod roe pesto and butter sauce, with dried seaweed as a topping. This is known as *Tarako (cod roe) Spaghetti*, and it surely appeals only to the Japanese. Another (more palatable) example was originally adapted from a beef stew recipe. Meat, potatoes, carrots and onion are simmered in soy sauce, Japanese Sake, and sweet cooking wine, to make the very popular *Niku-jaga* (meat and potatoes). Initially, professional chefs invented these dishes, but now they are eaten extensively in ordinary households in everyday life.

At the same time, there are excellent examples of Japanese food overseas evolving in its own right. The California roll, with the addition of avocado and mayonnaise, is a new style of Sushi designed in the United States, a country unaccustomed to raw seafood and dried seaweed. In Japan, too, the well-known Teriyaki is often made with yellowtail, but overseas chicken is more commonly used, possibly because of taste preference, or the availability of chicken over fish.

Food is an expression of the geography, climate, and culture in which it is created. Japanese food culture borrows from foreign countries, or is borrowed by foreign countries, and is modified to harmonise with the food of the area and the tastes of the local people. Japanese cuisine is, at this very moment, continuing its evolution. 