

Special Characteristics of Japanese Food

Washoku

Japanese cuisine, also known as *washoku*, was added to UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity list in 2013. UNESCO describes *washoku* as "a social practice based on a set of skills, knowledge, practice and traditions related to the production, processing, preparation and consumption of food." UNESCO highlights the dietary culture of Japan, which is seen during New Year celebrations. In preparation for the holiday, glutinous rice is steamed and pounded into mochi, and attractively arranged dishes are served to welcome the deities of the New Year. People enjoy the dishes together with family members and also within their communities. The ingredients include some with symbolic meaning, which may come from the ingredients used, the shape of the food, or the name of the dish. A well-known example is sea bream, which is often served during celebrations because the Japanese word for the fish, *tai*, sounds like *omedetai*, which means auspicious, celebratory, or happy.

A deep sense of respect for food and a conscious awareness of how precious it is has long been part of Japanese culture. The widely held belief that all things, including food, are imbued with the divine can be observed in many traditions. People begin every meal with the phrase *itadakimasu* ("I gratefully partake") before eating and end the meal with *gochisosama* ("It was a great feast"), while clasping their hands together in a prayer gesture. The gratitude expressed by the phrase *itadakimasu* encompasses the natural environment that has provided the food, the ancestors who have protected nature, and the gods who have blessed it. It also embraces the people involved in all stages of food production. The phrase *gochisosama* reiterates that appreciation for the hard work and resources that go into each dish.

The typical washoku meal is prepared according to the standard formula of one soup and three dishes. The three dishes are made from a variety of vegetables, seafood, eggs, soy products, and meat. Each meal is accompanied by a bowl of the staple of the diet, rice, and a small plate of pickled vegetables. Presentation is important, and each dish is served in its own specific bowl or dish. Seasonal garnishes and decorative touches are used to brighten the plate and make the food more appetizing.

Nutrition, flavor, and color are all considered when planning the *washoku* meal. The well-balanced meal should contain five elements: fat, protein, carbohydrates, vitamins, and minerals. It should incorporate the five flavors: salty, sweet, bitter, sour, and umami. It should also be visually appealing and include five colors: white, black, red, yellow, and green. Finally, each dish in a meal should be cooked in a different manner,

for variety. Common methods of preparation include boiling, grilling, frying, pickling, blanching, steaming, and serving raw. A good cook seeks to draw out the natural flavors of seasonal ingredients.

Washoku emphasizes the use of seasonal and locally sourced ingredients and sustainable natural resources. This shows the close relationship people have with the land and sea from which they obtain their food. In addition to seasonal foods, specific items are always served during special events and rites of passage held throughout the year. Many of these foods are recognized for their symbolic meaning; some are regional, reflecting how closely people are tied to their local food culture.

Washoku in Obama

Obama is blessed with natural resources that provide a broad range of ingredients. The mountains, sea, forests, and fields provide wide variety of foods, all produced locally. The regional climate includes cold and warm seasons, contributing to the diversity of the flora and fauna. Seasonal ingredients are readily available throughout the year, and traditional methods for preserving foods such as *heshiko* have been passed down through the generations, fostering a rich and greatly treasured food culture.