

The Origins of Wasabi

Wasabi is a pungent green paste served as a condiment with many Japanese dishes, particularly sushi and sashimi. It comes from the thick part of the stem, or rhizome (not the root, a common misconception), of the *Wasabia japonica* plant, native to Japan. Wasabi's eye-watering, tongue-tingling effects are powerful but short-lived.

Like other botanicals, wasabi is thought to have first been consumed for its medicinal properties, with records suggesting it was used as far back as the Asuka period (552–645). A book from the Muromachi period (1336–1573) introduced wasabi as a condiment for sashimi, and as such it was a favorite among the wealthy and powerful. By the eighteenth century, it had become a standard accompaniment to the increasingly popular sushi. Cultivation in the Azumino area only began some 140 years ago, around the middle of the Meiji era (1868–1912).

Other Benefits

The use of wasabi has expanded into the world of Western cuisine as well, to compliment dishes such as top-quality beef. But the flavor and spicy kick are not the plant's only pleasing effects. The ancients included wasabi in the *Honzo wamyō*, a dictionary of medical herbs compiled in the year 918. Today, many people believe that wasabi has antibacterial, anticancer, and anti-inflammatory effects and can be used to slow blood clotting and stimulate bone growth.