

WASHOKU

RECIPES FROM THE JAPANESE HOME KITCHEN

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Early on, I decided to recruit volunteers living outside Japan who would reflect my readership. In December of 2002, I sent out a call for help through my e-newsletter looking for those who wanted to try their hand at preparing meals to satisfy their aesthetic appetite, as well as physical hunger. My electronic missive reached perhaps a thousand people, many of whom had attended classes at A Taste of Culture, the culinary arts program I run out of my Tokyo home. Expecting no more than a few replies, I was overwhelmed by more than two hundred enthusiastic offers of assistance! Eventually, a smaller, geographically diverse group of *washoku* volunteers emerged, and a core of dedicated aides (living in Tokyo at the

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INTRODUCTION

Washoku, literally the “harmony of food,” is a way of thinking about what we eat and how it can nourish us. The term describes both a culinary philosophy and the simple, nutritionally balanced food prepared in that spirit.

My first encounter with *washoku* was nearly forty years ago when I suddenly, and serendipitously, found myself staying with the Andoh family on the Japanese island of Shikoku. My urban American sensibilities were challenged by more than the rural plumbing that first summer. Hunger forced me to be adventurous at table, where my curiosity grew, along with my appetite, for things Japanese.

I was particularly impressed by the rhythm and flow of activity in the Andoh kitchen. This was the cherished, domestic domain of Kiyoko Andoh, the woman who was to become my mother-in-law. From the start, she encouraged me to call her Okaasan (literally “mother,” it is also a term of endearment and respect for women who care for others).

Okaasan moved about her daily routine with determination and grace, feeding the Andoh household—children (and their friends), grandchildren (and their friends), workers at

the family-owned factory (and some of their family members), and foreign visitors (me) alike. Running such a large, busy home required not only consummate culinary skill, but also an understanding of the value of nutritious, wholesome food and a knack for balancing the budget.

Okaasan’s ability to integrate smoothly such practical considerations as getting meals on the table in several shifts (early risers, after-school lessons, and factory overtime needed to be accommodated) with a deep artistic sensibility (fashioning a flower from a carrot, or reflecting on the texture and shape of tableware) was remarkable. A fine cook for whom the ways of *washoku* were deeply ingrained and practiced daily, Okaasan never had occasion to doubt the wisdom of this time-honored approach.

Because I had no language skills at first with which to question or challenge, I merely watched the activity around me and tried to follow suit. I desperately sought to grasp the logic of it all, or at least discern some predictable patterns. Later, as I acquired fluency in Japanese and broadened my experience to include formal culinary training at the Yanagihara School of Classical Japanese Cooking, I fine-tuned my understanding of the principles and practice of *washoku*. It is those ideas and skills that I am sharing with you in this book.

Clockwise from top left: my husband, Atsunori, and I, c. 1969; my mother-in-law and my daughter, Rena, c. 1989; and the original Andoh home (no longer standing) in Shikoku, with rice field in foreground, c. 1967

Washoku: The Five Principles

The calligraphy for *wa* is used to refer to things indigenous to Japanese culture. In the realm of food, *washoku* distinguishes Japanese food from foreign-inspired cuisines, such as *yōshoku*, or Western-style food.

The philosophy and practice of *washoku* can best be summarized by a set of five principles that describe how to achieve nutritional balance and aesthetic harmony at mealtime. The first three principles—one each concerning color, flavor palate, and choice of cooking method—deal with the practical considerations of food preparation. The fourth principle defines the sensual nature of food—that is, the need for food to appeal to all the five senses, not just taste and smell. The final principle, which is more spiritual and philosophic, compels us to appreciate both human endeavor and the natural forces that provide for us.

The five principles of *washoku* are as follows:

Five colors, or *go shiki*, suggests that every meal include foods that are red, yellow, green, black, and white. (Often very dark colors, particularly deep purple—eggplant, grapes—and sometimes brown—shiitaké mushrooms—are counted as black.) Vitamins and minerals naturally come into balance with a colorful range of foods.

Five tastes, or *go mi*, describes what the Japanese call *anbai*, a harmonious balance of flavors—salty, sour, sweet, bitter, and spicy—that ensures our palates are pleasantly stimulated, but not overwhelmed.

Five ways, or *go hō*, urges cooks to prepare food by a variety of methods, simmering, broiling, and steaming being some of the most basic. By combining various methods at every meal, it is easy to limit the total amount of sugar, salt, and oil consumed, thereby avoiding excessive calories.

Five senses, or *go kan*, advises cooks to be mindful not only of taste, but also of sight, sound, smell, and touch (in this case, the texture of food as we eat it).

Five outlooks, or *go kan mon*, are rules concerned with the partaking of food and have a strong basis in Buddhism. Indeed, many Buddhist temples in Japan that serve vegetarian fare (*shōjin ryōri*) will have these rules written on their menus. They instruct us, first, to respect the efforts of all those who contributed their toil to cultivating and preparing our food; second, to do good deeds worthy of receiving such nourishment; third, to come to the table without ire; fourth, to eat for spiritual as well as temporal well-being; and fifth, to be serious in our struggle to attain enlightenment.

The five principles are not unique to Japanese foodways. Many Asian cultures share similar beliefs. Indeed, the ideas arrived from China by way of the Korean peninsula about a thousand years ago. In Japan, the five principles intertwined with indigenous Shinto beliefs, such as humanity's oneness with nature, and evolved into a broadly encompassing, deeply integrated culinary philosophy. A vocabulary emerged to describe various aspects of this distinctive Japanese food culture. *Kisetsukan* is what the Japanese call their keen appreciation for seasonal cycles and other rhythms of nature. The word *shun* is used to describe a point in time when a particular food is at its peak of flavor. *Shun* can last for several weeks or even months—or it can be as fleeting as a few hours or days. The notion of *meisanbutsu*, or “regional specialties,” holds locally produced foodstuffs in especially high regard. In Japan, where lakes, rivers, and the ocean provide abundant food to complement the harvest of the land, the phrase *umi no sachi, yama no sachi* (the bounty of the sea, the bounty of the mountains) describes the harmonious union of foods from both land and water sources.

As with other aspects of culture, such as language and dress, foodways settle in and are eventually taken for granted by the society that gave rise to them. Most Japanese today would have a hard time articulating *washoku* notions, and would not usually discuss among themselves the guidelines for assembling a nutritionally balanced, aesthetically pleasing meal. Yet

when choosing items from an à la carte restaurant menu, selecting prepared dishes to take home from a department-store food hall, or purchasing packaged food from a convenience store or supermarket, most Japanese will, by instinct, employ the five principles on some level to create culinary harmony.

Despite the pervasiveness of *washoku* in Japanese food culture, the word itself and the concepts associated with it are relatively unknown outside the country, even among aficionados of Japanese cooking. And although its origins are deeply rooted in Japanese culinary history and habits, *washoku* can be practiced and enjoyed outside Japan, by Japanese and non-Japanese alike. Selecting ingredients at their peak of seasonal flavor, choosing locally available foods from both the land and the sea, appealing to and engaging all the senses, using a collage of color, employing a variety of food preparations, and assembling an assortment of flavors—a *washoku* approach to cooking gives the creative and contemplative cook an opportunity to satisfy his or her own aesthetic hunger while providing sustenance and sensory pleasure to others.

Putting Theory into Practice

To demonstrate how *washoku* principles are applied to ordinary meals, I will guide you, step by step, through the planning, preparation, and presentation of three complete menus. Simple preparations, such as those in the first menu, are often set up on a tray and served together. Not every dish needs to fulfill all the considerations of five colors, cooking methods, flavors, and so forth. Rather, these elements can cumulatively meet the guidelines for a balanced *washoku* meal or, if served in progression, unfold over the course of a lunch or dinner.

The first menu follows a common meal plan known as *ichi-ju san-sai*. Literally, “one broth, three dishes,” the meal is actually composed of five dishes, not four as you might expect (rice is assumed to be part of every meal; indeed, the word *gohan* means both “cooked rice” and “meal”). Our nourishing *ichi-ju san-sai* menu (illustrated on page 4) is made up of a

soup (Miso Soup with Enoki Mushrooms, page 117), a featured dish (Miso-Marinated Broiled Fish, page 229), two side dishes (Soy-Braised Hijiki and Carrots, page 187, and Citron-Pickled Chinese Cabbage, page 218), and rice (Rice with Mixed Grains, page 139).

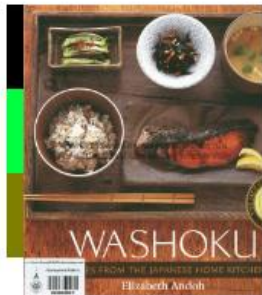
This sample *washoku* menu incorporates vibrant and soft hues, textured and smooth foods, and delicate and assertive flavors. Fulfilling the five-colors principle, we have green (*mitsuba*, floating in the soup, and pickled Chinese cabbage), red (salmon, carrots, and chile pepper threads), yellow (lemon with the fish), white (rice, tōfu, and enoki mushrooms in the soup), and black (*hijiki*). In addition to providing visual interest, the color range ensures nutritional balance: green vegetables are rich in vitamin A, carrots are packed with carotene, citrus are rich in vitamin C, white rice mixed with various seeds and grains provide many B vitamins, and black *hijiki* is an excellent source of calcium.

Each of these dishes employs a different cooking method: the fish is seared with heat (broiling, grilling, skillet braising, and pan searing all fall within the realm of Japanese *yaki mono*, or seared foods), the *hijiki* is briefly sautéed in oil before being simmered with carrots in seasoned sea stock, the lightly pickled cabbage is considered “raw” because it has not been treated with heat, and the miso-enriched soup is simmered. Steamed rice completes the menu. Intake of fats and oils, salt, and sugar is limited by varying the preparation methods.


When you begin to eat, you appreciate that the rich, salty flavor of the miso-marinated fish is nicely balanced with the tartness of the juice from the lemon that garnishes it. The *hijiki* and carrot dish, cooked in a sweetened soy sauce and finished with a nutty, faintly bitter accent of toasted sesame seeds, provides a welcome counterpoint to an otherwise savory meal. Textures and shapes are varied, too: silky cubes of tōfu in the soup, slender stalks of enoki mushrooms, crisp and succulent slices of pickled cabbage, which are spiced with fiery threads of *tōgarashi* chile pepper.

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