

WASHOKU

和食

Traditional Dietary Cultures of the Japanese

Itadaki-masu



MAFF

Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries



WASHOKU - cultures that should be preserved

What exactly is WASHOKU? Maybe even Japanese people haven't thought seriously about it very much. Typical washoku at home is usually comprised of cooked rice, miso soup, some main and side dishes and pickles. A set menu of grilled fish at a downtown diner is also a type of washoku. Recipes using cooked rice as the main ingredient such as curry and rice or sushi should also be considered as a type of washoku. Of course, washoku includes some noodle and mochi dishes. The world of traditional washoku is extensive.

In the first place, the term WASHOKU does not refer solely to a dish or a cuisine. For instance, let's take a look at *osechi-ryori*, a set of traditional dishes for New Year. The dishes are prepared to celebrate the coming of the new year, and with a wish to be able to spend the coming year soundly and happily. In other words, the religion and the mindset of Japanese people are expressed in *osechi-ryori*, *otoso* (rice wine for New Year) and *ozohni* (soup with *mochi*), as well as the ambience of the people sitting around the table with these dishes.

Food culture has been developed with the background of the natural environment surrounding people and culture that is unique to the country or the region.

The Japanese archipelago runs widely north and south, surrounded by sea. 75% of the national land is mountainous areas. Under the monsoonal climate, the four seasons show distinct differences. The average annual precipitation is as high as 1800mm. In such natural environment, the people are obtaining the wealth of seasonal foodstuff from the sea, mountains and fields. Japanese people respect and live with nature, which brings such blessings to people's lives. With belief in deities and ancestors, combined with foods, a unique food culture has been developed in this land.

Food culture in Japan has been developed by also incorporating foreign cultures from China, Korean Peninsula and Southeast Asia, and from West European countries in the modern era. As a result, delicious and healthy WASHOKU that Japan can boast to the world developed.

However, such tradition of WASHOKU is now disappearing from Japanese tables. While WASHOKU had been developed by using foodstuff grown in Japan, the food self-sufficiency ratio of Japan is now lower than 40%. Household consumption of rice is decreasing, and traditional local cuisines and dishes specially prepared for certain events are also disappearing.

In its long history, Japan has developed WASHOKU as something beyond mere cuisine but culture. Let us explore the history of WASHOKU, the traditional food culture in Japan, in this booklet.

WASHOKU

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[Editorial Committee] Principal: Isao Kumakura; Committee members: Ayako Ehara, Hiroko Okubo, Takuya Oikawa; Advisor: Shigeyuki Miyata; Edited by: Magazine House, Ltd.; Art direction and design: Kaori Okamura; Cover illustration: Kawanakayukari (tento)
Translation; MAFF (Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries)

* In this booklet, the traditional dietary culture of Japan is expressed as WASHOKU, and dishes with such tradition are expressed as washoku.

Foodstuff



Dishes



Foodstuff used in WASHOKU includes grains (mainly rice), vegetables, mushrooms, fish, shellfish and seaweed. Delicious *wagyu* beef is also used in recent years. There are two types of rice: non-glutinous rice and glutinous rice. The variety of vegetables ranges widely from indigenous varieties to Western vegetables that arrived in the Meiji period and thereafter. Fish is also an abundant foodstuff, and there are as many as about 4,200 varieties of fish around Japan.

What is WASHOKU?

Foodstuff, dishes, nutrients and hospitality; the occasion and style of eating are also important elements of WASHOKU

WASHOKU starts from selecting foodstuff. Then, the menu is composed by taking nutrition into consideration. Then, the dishes are served with a mind of hospitality. How to eat the dishes is also an important element.

WASHOKU. We use the term as a word expressing Japanese-style cuisine. However, does the term WASHOKU merely represent a single style of cuisine? For example, “*itadaki-masu*” and “*gochisou-sama,*” the phrases Japanese people say before and after meals, respectively, express thanks to not only the person who prepared the meal, but also to nature in which the foodstuff was grown, and to our ancestors and deities who preserved such nature.

Also, we pay attention not only to the dishes prepared but also the cooking method, the menu structure, plates and bowls used, and how the dishes are served on the table and how they are eaten. These also reflect the feeling and style unique to Japanese people.

In such context, WASHOKU refers not only to cuisine, but also to Japanese customs related to eating.

All tangible and intangible assets, including the wisdom and customs of eating that were generated and built by Japanese people, or the people who created such assets, are included in the concept of WASHOKU. Let's recognize

The basic structure of WASHOKU is “one soup and three dishes other than cooked rice.” Such structure comprises dishes that take full advantage of the deliciousness of the ingredients themselves. The key for every dish is *dashi* (stock). It may be prepared from *kombu* (dried kelp) or *katsuo-bushi* (dried bonito), or by cooking ingredients for a certain time. Deliciously prepared dishes are served in beautiful style.

the word as a collective term for the traditional dietary cultures of Japan.

WASHOKU is constantly changing over time.

The basic structure of WASHOKU is “one soup and three dishes,” which means eating cooked rice with side dishes, soup and pickles. This is a style developed to eat rice, the staple food, deliciously. It also generated the characteristic style of combining cooked rice and other dishes and tasting them at the same time in the mouth.

While WASHOKU had been inherited based on this style, it has been actively incorporating foodstuff, recipes and cooking methods from abroad and has been changing its content.

With the active introduction of Western culture in the Meiji period, WASHOKU experienced a further change. The taboo against eating meat was dissolved, resulting in the invention of various Western-style Japanese dishes such as *nikujaga* (stewed potatoes and meat seasoned with soy sauce), *sukiyaki*, *curry*

Nutrition



Traditional washoku that is low in animal fat ensures the necessary energy for living and an ideal nutritional balance for healthy life, including staple food and side dishes. Eating the main staple food and side dishes alternately, harmonizing the tastes within one's mouth, is a unique style of eating for washoku. By prioritizing umami, salt content and calories can be effectively controlled.

and rice and *tonkatsu* (Japanese-style cutlet). These are some of the new traditions of WASHOKU.

Nowadays, the dietary life of Japanese people is changing at an unprecedented speed. The style of cuisine has diversified through changes such as westernization, while handing down the culture of WASHOKU is diminishing due to an increase of people who are indifferent to what they eat, or a decrease of occasions for cooking and eating at home.

For this reason, it may be the time for us to reconsider what WASHOKU is.

What are the four elements comprising WASHOKU?

Now, what elements comprise WASHOKU?

The first is foodstuff. In Japan, the four seasons are distinctive, and the climate is temperate and rainy. Agricultural products harvested in such climate are wide in variety, including rice, vegetables, edible wild plants and mushrooms.

Japan is also surrounded by productive fishing ground, where the Japan Current and the *Oyashio* Current collide. An abundant variety of fish is hauled from sea, and various local fish-eating cultures were developed. While 90% of fishery yields in Norway, which is also a major fisheries country, comprises only eight varieties of fish, that of Japan comprises as many as 28 varieties. This fact shows how abundant the variety of fish in Japan is. The annual

Hospitality



Motenashi, the Japanese concept of hospitality, is not merely a service offered from the host to the guest. It also includes the entire attitude of people who eat at the table. For example, the hospitality of the host expressed in the decoration of the space for eating, or various ideas incorporated in dishes and plates, will be rewarded when the guests notice them. Precisely, WASHOKU is the representative culture of Japan.

consumption volume of fish is about 57kg per person, which is about twice that of the U.S. and 6th in the world. It shows that the blessings from the sea are important foodstuff for washoku.

The second element is dishes. Cooking methods capitalizing on abundant water resources such as steaming, boiling and stewing, cooking utensils such as Japanese kitchen knives that are suitable for processing various types of fish, and *dashi* stock improved so as to prepare delicious meals mainly using vegetables and seafood, are the pillars of WASHOKU dishes.

The third is nutrition. Washoku is relatively low-calorie and allows the easy intake of different nutrients in a well-balanced manner.

And the fourth is hospitality. The mindset of greeting guests with utmost care is not merely a service for guests. By tasting the dishes and appreciating the decorations of alcoves or tableware used, the guests also reward the host. "*Itadaki-masu*" and "*gochisou-sama*" are both words of thanks before and after eating, respectively, and it also makes those offering the hospitality feel satisfied as well.

The manner of using chopsticks, the people's behavior, decoration that expresses the season and feeling, and the attitude of appreciating them...the idea of understanding the manners and the intention of preparing the eating place, and the feeling of caring for one another, is the spirit of WASHOKU.

Living with nature: “Aenokoto” in Oku-Noto



The reason why

WASHOKU, developed in life with nature, is a part of Japanese culture

Japanese people lived with nature that shows different aspects by region and by season, and developed various different styles of dietary culture.

Let us look for the reason why WASHOKU is a part of the culture.

Nature not only brings blessings, but also shows harshness to people. The lifestyle of Japanese people used to be deeply linked to nature, by accepting the environment in terms of geography or climate.

1. Spiritual nature of WASHOKU

Back in the days when science and technology were not developed as is now, nature existed overwhelmingly over humans. People felt the existence of deities in such nature, and prayed for large hauls and good harvests. The joy and thankfulness of harvests developed into the form of festivals. The lifestyle nurtured the spiritual nature of respecting nature that brings blessings in the form of food.

2. Social nature of WASHOKU

Everyday household tables, celebrations, festivals and annual functions in the communities of villages and towns-WASHOKU has been inherited by

The tradition of “Aenokoto” is inherited in the Oku-Noto Region of Ishikawa Prefecture (such as Wajima City, Suzu City, Anamizu Town and Noto Town). The ritual invites the deities of rice paddies inside the house, and lets them stay there from December to the next February until the coming of spring. The deities of rice paddies are husband and wife. Therefore, the tradition prepares two sets of utensils used for the ceremony, including divine tables with dishes, goblets and chopsticks. People welcome the deities with the foodstuff harvested in the nearby region. The dishes offered to the deities include rice cooked with adzuki beans, cod soup, daikon radish, fish and *amazake* (sweet fermented rice wine). These dishes are given to children after the ceremony. It is one of the Important Intangible Folk Cultural Properties designated by the Japanese government, and is also included in the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage by UNESCO.

people eating the blessings of nature together. WASHOKU plays the role of the cornerstone of society, through family get-togethers, community gatherings and other parties.

3. Functional nature of WASHOKU

Naturally, food also has the functional nature of providing the stuff of people’s life. WASHOKU, which uses abundant natural blessings such as rice, vegetables, seafood and seaweed, also represents a healthy dietary culture with amazing nutritional balance. In addition, the dishes for celebration also have the “function” of wishing for health and longevity.

4. The regional nature of WASHOKU

WASHOKU differs widely among regions. Because geography and climate

Living with nature: In the case of Aomori Prefecture



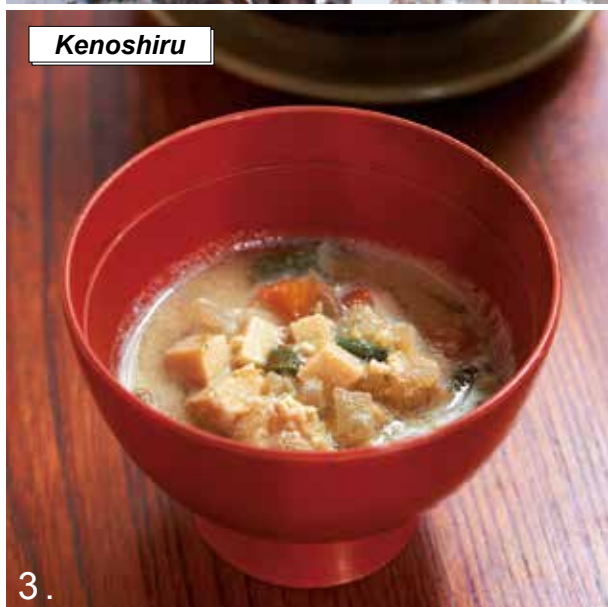
Winter-drying

1.



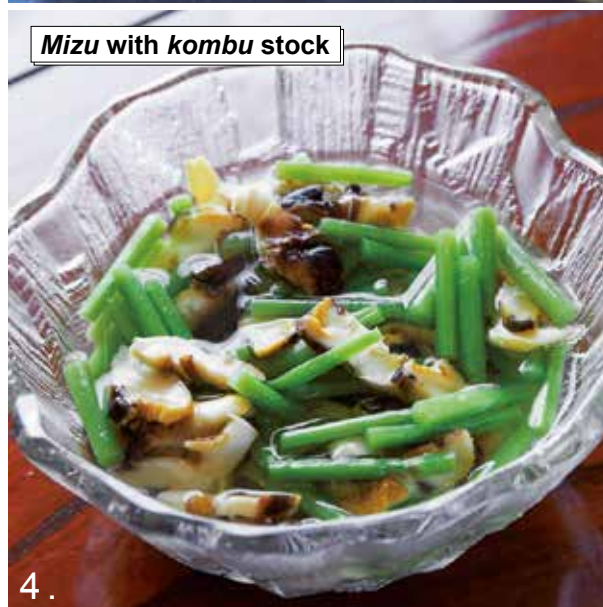
Family get-together

2.



Kenoshiru

3.



Mizu with kombu stock

4.

1. Spiritual nature

In this region, the entire family cooperates to make "winter-dried daikon radish" for a whole winter. Daikon radish is boiled, immersed in clear icy water, and then dried in cold winter wind. The process is the wisdom of life developed with the spirit of living with nature, capitalizing on the cold weather, rather than trying to resist the cold winters.

2. Social nature

In Sai Village, located at the tip of Shimokita Peninsula and with a population of about 2,500, holds the Yanonemori Hachimangu Festival every September. During the three days of the festival, all houses keep the doors open, and welcome any guests and have drinks together. Deities visits all the places in the village during these three days, and people share the table and strengthen the bonds among them.

3. Functional nature

Kenoshiru is a soup in the Tsugaru region that is prepared for the 15th of January as another new year's celebration, as a replacement of *nanakusa-gayu* (rice porridge with seven spring herbs) in other regions. Because the common spring herbs cannot be harvested in Aomori in winter, the dish uses root vegetables such as daikon radish and carrots, edible wild plants such as *warabi* and *zenmai*, and preserved foods such as freeze-dried tofu, to brighten up the New Year table in the harsh winter. The dish is prepared with the wish for maintaining health and soundness.

4. Regional nature

Mizu is a type of edible wild plant growing throughout the Tohoku Region. This dish is prepared by boiling *mizu* to remove scum, and immersing it in *kombu* stock together with steamed horned turban. It is interesting that blessings from the mountain and sea coexist in a single dish. It is a traditional dish for the Nishi-Tsugaru Region, where the distance of the sea and mountain is close, which combines the wealth of both mountain and sea in the same dish.

varies widely throughout Japan, much-diversified dietary culture had been developed among different regions. From Hokkaido to Okinawa, each region supplied the needs within the region, and was developing original dietary culture up to the early modern period. In other words, WASHOKU is the symbol of regional culture in Japan.

Let us take a look at "Aenokoto," a ritual inherited in Oku-Noto, Ishikawa Prefecture. This is an agricultural rite to thank the deities of rice paddies for the harvest of the year.

"Ae" means "hospitality," and "koto" means "festival." From winter to spring, the deities of rice paddies are invited and welcomed into the house. Abundant blessings from the mountain, sea and fields of Noto Region are offered to the

deities.

Another example is the dietary culture in Sai Village located in Shimokita Peninsula of Aomori Prefecture.

The dietary habit of using many preserved foods made of vegetables and edible wild plants was developed, and the tradition has been well-preserved until now, with the unique traditional dishes being inherited. *Osechi-ryori* (new year dishes) unique to the region is enjoyed at New Year's, wishing for health and soundness.

These examples show that a lifestyle of living with nature developed unique dishes and dietary habits in different regions in Japan, making up WASHOKU.



(1) Respect for nature

WASHOKU started from respecting nature and has continued to the present.

WASHOKU, supported by plentiful nature, especially clear water, blessed with rich foodstuff, and methods of cooking, utensils, and arrangement were developed.

That is why WASHOKU allows us to feel the seasons and reminds us of respecting nature.

Somei No Ido in Nashi No Ki Jinja Shrine in Kamigyo-ku, Kyoto City, is a spring that is familiarly known to local residents for its good-quality water. In every region in Japan, people were blessed not only with river water but also water from springs and wells, and lived thanks to such water.

Tofu



Fukiyose



Tofu
||
(Utilizing good-quality water)

Tofu, a food solidifying soy bean curd with a coagulating agent, has been widely eaten from ancient times. Tofu made in Japan is unique with its high content of water and softness. Because it is a bland-tasting food, the taste depends largely on the good quality of water used in the preparation process.

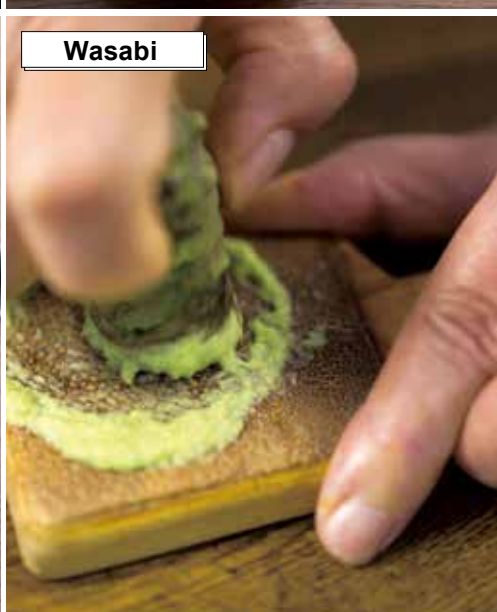
Fukiyose
||
(Expressing seasonal feelings)

WASHOKU takes in the feelings of the season in various styles. The dish called *fukiyose* expresses a scene in autumn where seasonal vegetables, ginkgo nuts and mushrooms all drift with wind inside a basket works.

Wanmono



Wasabi



Wanmono
||
(Using wood materials)

Soups are usually served in wooden bowls. Lacquerware made by wrapping cloths over a thinly-carved wooden core and finished with lacquer has been used throughout Japan. Because it is made of wood, it can be held in the hand without feeling the heat even if it contains boiling-hot soup inside.

Wasabi
||
(Functionality of nature)

Wasabi is a familiar relish for sashimi. Its stinging spiciness is caused by a volatile chemical substance called allyl isothiocyanate, which has strong antibacterial and sterilizing activities. Therefore, it is effectively used when eating raw fish. It is wisdom peculiar to WASHOKU, fully utilizing the efficacy of natural products.

In Japan, where people are blessed with rich products of nature, a mentality to worship and respect nature has been developed from ancient days. Festivals to wish for good harvests and large hauls for each season held throughout Japan express such mentality.

Spring, summer, autumn and winter – the four seasons in Japan are so uniquely distinguished in a way that is almost unseen in other places in the world. Washoku takes in various foodstuff that can only be enjoyed for the season.

The plates and bowls to serve the dishes are also quite unique. Lacquerware, using natural lacquer resin, is tableware invented with the knowledge of nature held by our ancestors, realizing beauty and a high mothproof effect and durability.

It is also characteristic that the season can also be felt with the eyes, such as expressing the season with plates and bowls or with garnishes, or decorating flowers of the season in an alcove.

In addition, one of the important blessings of nature is water.

Mellow soft water has large influence

Water is also an object to be religiously worshipped, and has played an important role in formulating food culture in Japan.

The average annual precipitation in Japan is as high as 1800mm. Water suitable for drinking is abundant, and also the water contains less minerals because it stays only for a short period underground. Thus, in contrast to hard water found in continents such as Europe, the water in Japan is soft water (WHO

standards: the content of calcium and magnesium is 120mg/L or less), which has a large impact on WASHOKU.

Cooking methods using mild-tasting and mellow soft water abundantly, and dishes accentuating the natural taste of the foodstuff itself, were developed.

One example is Tofu. Because *momen* or *kinu* tofu generally eaten in Japan is made by using a lot of water, the taste of the product depends largely on the quality of water.

It is the same with cooking rice. By rinsing rice several times with water, and by cooking with an adequate amount of water, the rice can be finished softly and without any hard core inside.

Other cooking methods using water abundantly, such as boiling vegetables and rinsing with water thereafter, removing scum with water, or firming the surface of soba noodles with cold water after boiling, are all quite unique and different from methods seen in other regions of the world. The good quality of water in Japan supports WASHOKU.

Also, soft water brings out the taste of *kombu* and *katsuobushi* effectively, which resulted in a cooking method that uses *dashi* stock. With the use of *dashi* stock, the unique taste of ingredients themselves, which are the blessings of nature, can be enjoyed.

Sensitivity to the changes of seasons lies within the spirit of WASHOKU. In other words, WASHOKU or food for Japanese people, developing emotions towards the four seasons from childhood, is precisely the expression of respect for nature.

(2) Uniting family and region

Gathering to connect ties among people; role of foods for events and festivals

People strengthen ties among them by eating together. Family get-togethers, celebrations, festivals of the region, annual events...
Food plays a central role in uniting people within the traditional culture of Japan.

(Table for family)

The occasion for family members and relatives to enjoy *osechi-ryori* at New Year's at the same table is an ideal situation for handing down food tradition of the region or family to the next generation. The photo below is a scene in Fukaura Town, located on the coast of the Sea of Japan in the western part of Aomori Prefecture. The "Fukaura Committee for Local Production and Local Consumption" is acting for several families to gather and teach local dishes inherited in the region to one another. The generation of grandparents tries to hand down the local tradition to the next generation by presenting dishes that only they know how to prepare.



Daily occasions of family members and relatives sitting around the table is an important situation for communication. By all the members showing up at the table and talking about what they felt or what happened each day while having meals, the bond of the family is strengthened. It is an important opportunity to teach children the manner of WASHOKU such as how to use chopsticks or how to hold bowls, or taste sensation and nutritional balance can be educated through dishes.

Aside from daily occasions, special dishes are enjoyed at annual events such as New Year, *setsun* (the day before the calendric beginning of spring) and New Year's Eve. Such custom is also useful for strengthening ties among family members and relatives. It also results in handing down the taste and tradition of the family to the next generation.

Being connected with people and region through foods

Other than family events, there are also annual events that unite the local community.



Food is also an important factor for festivals of local community. After rites at shrines, there is an eating and drinking ceremony called *naorai*. It is expected that the deities and people unite and people are blessed, by eating and drinking the food and wine offered to the deities. Nowadays, the ceremony also has the meaning of a party after the rite, and people drink together after the rite is carried out. This works to develop familiar feelings and reinforce the awareness as the same community.

Such parties can also be said to be a part of Japanese culture in terms of food.

There are also situations where the local community is united through the intermediary of foods, other than festivals. For example, *imoni-kai* (taro-cooking gathering) held frequently in Yamagata and Miyagi Prefectures in autumn is a

seasonal event where friends, colleagues or members of the local community are invited and gather at riverside. The pot-dish served on the occasion generally contains ingredients such as taro and beef and is seasoned with soy sauce in the inland parts of Yamagata Prefecture. On the other hand, in Miyagi Prefecture, taro and pork are cooked and seasoned with miso. Although there are such regional differences, there are common factors that people gather around a dish cooking regional foodstuff of the season in a large pot. It is suggested that exchange and the feeling of unity are strengthened not only by eating together but also by preparing the dish together.

The bonds of family, relatives, region and community are strengthened through foods. This is one of the characteristics of WASHOKU, its social nature.

(Foods for regional community and festivals)

Sharing the table as a part of rite is an important occasion for people who implement the festival to reinforce the ties among them. The photo below shows the table at a festival in Osaka Prefecture. Dishes served here included a pot dish of *hamo* (conger pike) and *matsutake* mushroom, and local eggplant pickles. On the other hand, *imoni-kai* (photos right) held frequently in Miyagi and Yamagata Prefectures in the Tohoku region in autumn is usually held not only by the regional community but also among colleagues, relatives and friends. By all participants bringing foodstuff and preparing the dish together, the feeling of togetherness is reinforced.



(3) Wish for health and longevity

Wish for health and longevity with dishes for special occasions

For example, *osechi-ryori* preserves the unique culture of different regions throughout Japan. While the content varies widely among different regions, the wish for health and longevity is expressed in every region by eating the dishes.

There are special ceremonial days in the life of Japanese people. One is an annual event as New Year, and another is milestone days in a person's life such as childbirth, coming-of-age, marriage or *kanreki* (60th birthday), which are called rites of passage. There is one thing in common in these special days: people eat special dishes to expel evil spirits, bad luck and disasters, and wish for health and longevity.

On New Year's Day, people celebrate the start of the year by welcoming the "deity of the year" to each household. It is an important annual event that takes place only once a year. *Kadomatsu*, which is a decoration set at the entrance of the house, is a mark for inviting the deities. On New Year's Day, family members gather and have meals together, wishing for happiness throughout the year. *Osechi-ryori* dishes are served on that occasion. *Osechi-ryori* dishes vary widely among regions: some



Osechi-ryori

The content of *osechi-ryori* varies among different regions. The above is a sample of *osechi-ryori* in Tokyo. The tier of food boxes (at the front) contains the three dishes for celebration, namely *kuromame* (sweet cooked black soybean), *kazunoko* (herring roe) and *tazukuri* (dried small sardines), which represent wishes for health, for the prosperity of descendants, and for good harvest, respectively. Other dishes for celebration include red-and-white (considered auspicious colors) *kamaboko* (minced and steamed fish), grilled shrimp representing a wish for longevity, and *tataki-gobo* (crushed and seasoned burdock) representing a wish for a good harvest. The content differs by region. A vinegared dish (in the small box at the left) and *nishime* (vegetables cooked with *dashi*) (in large box at rear) are also some popular dishes for *osechi-ryori*.