

The Official
KANSAI
Travel Guide



KANSAI

*A visit to the home of Japan's
traditional dietary culture*

The food in Kansai is also definitely worth a mention. Kansai is home to a diverse array of areas including Kyoto—once the capital of Japan—and Nara, as well as Osaka, which was once a trading hub. The region is bounded by oceans on one side, elsewhere there are mountains, and everywhere there is a wealth of natural surroundings—and an abundance of delicious food that comes from the region. Here we will give you a peek into the inner world of Kansai food, not only by introducing unique dishes but also discussing the background behind them and the food culture and characteristics of Japanese cuisine.

FEATURES OF WASHOKU

*Using the diverse fresh ingredients
with full of natural flavors*

The foods used in Japanese cuisine mainly consist of rice, vegetables, mushrooms, fish, shellfish and seaweed. In recent years, Japanese beef has been added to this list. Kansai, washed by the Sea of Japan, the Pacific Ocean, and the Seto Inland Sea, and containing Japan's largest lake and many beautiful rivers, streams, mountains and fields, has a rich natural environment in which a rich array of ingredients can flourish. Since early modern times, products from various parts of the country have been brought to Osaka, giving it the name of 'kitchen of the world', laying the foundations of the Japanese food culture.

Kyoto

KYOTO VEGETABLES

Kyoto, also known as *Heian-Kyō*, was the capital of Japan for over a thousand years from 794. Here was to be found the cuisine of the aristocratic class, imperial court dishes, vegetarian cooking from Buddhist temples, multi-course *kaiseki* cuisine refined by the world of the tea ceremony, and the feasts that were part of the lives of the commoners. It is not exaggerating to say that Japanese cuisine developed in the center of Kyoto, it having such a long history as the capital city. The base for these various cuisines has been the vegetables of Kyoto.



The land of three mountains and three rivers: as the name suggests, the special vegetables of Kyoto are cultivated in a fertile valley surrounded by the Western, Northern, and Eastern mountains, in the middle of which flow the Takano, Kamo, and Katsura rivers.

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Kyoto

SHOJIN RYORI

(Buddhist Vegetarian Cuisine)

Passed down through Buddhist practice since the Kamakura era, this is a cuisine prepared and eaten by Buddhist monks. To avoid breaking the religious taboo against eating meat, it is made mainly with vegetables and soybeans.



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Hyogo

KOBE BEEF

One of Japan's three most famous *wagyu* (beef). The delicate, refined sweetness of the red meat melts exquisitely in the mouth and contains a fragrant and flavorful fat, delighting taste buds all around the world.



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Mie

ISE-EBI

(Japanese spiny lobster)

The king of lobsters, cultivated to perfection thanks to the rich seas of Ise Bay and the Kuroshio Current. The Ise Spiny Lobster enjoys a vibrant redness and excellent shape, making it a longstanding dish that symbolizes courage and longevity thanks to its exuberance. With its semi-transparent flesh and tender texture, this lobster is great whether it is stewed, grilled, or eaten raw.



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Tottori

NIJSSEIKI NASHI (Pear)

The *Nijsseiki* Nashi (Pear), which fruits in summer, has a crisp, tasty balance of tartness and sweetness. It has a cultivation history of over 100 years, and measured by volume, it is the largest export shipment from Japan.

Well-balanced and healthy diets

The origin of the fifth taste, *Umami*, is to be found in *dashi*. This is said to be at the root of Japanese food culture. As a culinary form passed down through history, Japanese food continues to follow the formula, 'one soup, three dishes'. It is a cuisine centered on broth and vegetables, with *kombu* (dried kelp) and *katsuobushi* (Cured bonito shavings) helping to provide the *umami* taste of *dashi* (Dashi stock), so essential to Japanese cuisine and an essential part of a unique culture, leading inevitably to the Kansai region.

Japanese cuisine, with its traditional foundation of *dashi*, brings out the best flavors of the composite ingredients without using too many fats or oils and is low in salt, making it appealing to those who have a healthy approach to food promoting a long life and preventing obesity.

DASHI STOCK



Osaka

KOMBU

Kombu (Dried kelp) began to be commonly used during the Edo period. As large-scale *kitamae* boats appeared, they rode through the Western passage opened up between Shimonoseki and through the Seto Inland Sea, reaching the production centers of Hokkaido and Tohoku. They were able to bring their products to Osaka in bulk, transporting their goods cheaply, quickly, and securely. The passage through which *kombu* was brought was called 'Kombu road'. Osaka and Sakai, as the last calling points, acquired the bulk of the transported kelp. *Kombu* processing industries such as 'Tororo Kombu' and 'Oboro Kombu' emerged, gaining a reputation throughout the country as large production centers. Later, the 'Kombu road' would extend to Edo, Kyushu and even to Okinawa Prefecture.

Wakayama

KATSUOBUSHI

(Cured bonito shavings)

The origins of *katsuobushi* (cured bonito shavings) are in boiling and drying bonito in order to preserve it for longer. A fisherman, Jintaro Kadoya of Inami, Wakayama Prefecture, devised a method of smoking and drying bonito on a wood fire, creating the product we have today. It has a fine flavour and beautiful fragrance and can be preserved for a long time. With Jintaro fishing from his base in Kochi Prefecture, others learned his method, such as Yahei Mori and Yoichi Innan from Inami. Later, it spread all the way westwards to Kagoshima and eastwards to Chiba and Shizuoka. Currently, Yaizu in Shizuoka and Makurazaki in Kagoshima are the two major centers of production, but their success came about from the efforts of Wakayama locals.





Osaka

UDON

Udon is a type of noodle made by kneading flour with water and cutting the dough into long, thin, strips. The noodles are then boiled in water and eaten warm with dashi broth, or, in summer, with dashi broth chilled with ice water. Kansai produces high-quality flour and kombu and since ancient times the populace has eaten udon. In the trade and industry hub of Osaka there used to be rows upon rows of udon stores. There are various types of udon, including the kitsune udon, which is presented with a sweet stewed aburaage (deep-fried tofu) on top, and the chikaramochi udon, which is topped with toasted mochi (rice cake).

KONAMON

Takoyaki octopus snacks and *okonomiyaki* pancakes, among others, are called 'konamon', Osaka's wheat flour-based soul food. The base flavor is the *kombu* (dried kelp) and *katsuobushi* (cured bonito shavings) *umami* coming from Osaka's soft water.

Osaka

TAKOYAKI



Osaka

OKONOMIYAKI



FERMENTED SEASONINGS AND PRODUCTS



Japan's hot and humid summers encouraged the development of a cuisine based on fermented foods. Utilizing the work of microbes such as those found in lactic acid and yeast, the level of amino acids (*umami* flavor) contained in foods increases. Japanese cuisine uses many fermented seasonings, with miso and soy sauce as representative examples. These seasonings and foods are attributable to the accumulated wisdom of our ancestors, who aimed to preserve food for a long time. Nowadays they flourish in every region.



Wakayama

SOY SAUCE

First developed in Yura town, Hidaka province, Wakayama Prefecture. In 1254, Hottō Kokushi, a Zen monk from Kokoku temple, returned to Japan from Koshōji temple in Song Dynasty China where he had learned how to make *na-me miso* (*Kinzanji miso*), and brought the recipe with him. It involves adding salt, then ripened vegetables and wheat, to *koji* yeast made from soybeans and other ingredients. Having refined it, he popularized the recipe among the villagers of Yuasa town in Wakayama. The top layer of liquid which rises to the surface is recognized today as *tamari joyu*, a rich soy sauce, which was further refined as the key ingredient.



Shiga

FUNAZUSHI (Carp Sushi)

Funazushi is a traditional dish where *Nigorobuna* is pickled in salt and then fermented in rice. This was considered a way of preserving fish, a precious source of nutrition, for a long period of time. A hint of cheese and a slightly acidic taste creates a deep and satisfying flavor.

Natural simplicity as the focus of beautiful presentation

Japan is unparalleled in the world for its four clearly defined seasons. Japanese cuisine adopts the use of seasonal ingredients. From the plates on which food is served, to the furniture or fixtures, service etiquette and the layout of the dining area, all are designed with the current season in mind. It is a special feature of Japanese cuisine that the experience is adapted to provide a sense of the changing seasons and the beauty of nature. Japanese confectionery, which delicately expresses seasonal change, is another essential feature of Japanese cuisine.

Kyoto

KYOTO'S CONFECTIONARY



New Year | New Year's petal rice cakes

A soft and moist confection of sugared burdock and white miso bean paste wrapped in red or white *mochi* or *gyūhi*.

Spring | Cherry Blossom rice cakes

A rice cake sweet made from steamed *dōmyōjiko* (coarse rice powder) formed into a soft dough which is then wrapped around *adzuki* bean paste and encased with cherry blossom leaves.

Summer | Minadzuki (sweet rice jelly triangles)

A confection of sweetened *adzuki* paste sprinkled on top of white rice jelly. Eaten at the beginning of summer, they originated with the *Nagoshinoharai* summer purification rites at which people in Kyoto would gather together to wish for good health on the 30th of June (according to the old calendar).

Autumn | Autumn Leaves

At the time of year when the autumn leaves are beautiful, sweets are arrayed in shop windows. Through their various shapes and colors and in all manner of ways they express the images of maple, ginkgo, and other leaves.

Food and celebration

Food and *sake* together widen our connections with others. New Year, seasonal festivals, annual events, coming-of-age ceremonies, weddings, and rituals which mark turning points in people's lives, local festivals and the celebratory parties which take place after social activities. With everyone sharing nature's bounties, the traditions of Japanese cuisine are passed on.

NEW YEAR

ZONI (rice cake & vegetable soup)

The *zoni* soup supped at New Year varies tremendously according to region. In Kansai it is common to eat *zoni* containing a round mochi to symbolize the spirit, as though consuming the power of the Gods.



Osaka

WHITE MISO ZONI SOUP

White miso mixed with a *dashi* broth made from *kombu* (dried Kombu kelp) and *katsuobushi* (cured bonito shavings), create rich flavors. The rice cake is circular in shape, with *kintoki* carrots, radishes, and shrimp-shaped *taro* cut as round as possible so as to avoid leaving any corners (a pun in Japanese meaning to avoid stormy personal relationships).



Tottori

ADZUKI ZONI SOUP

New Year's *zoni* in Tottori is usually sweet and contains a round rice cake which has been lightly boiled in *adzuki* broth. In the mountains, it is also common to find the round rice cake in miso or soy sauce-flavored broth.

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January 25th TENJINKO

Fukui

BAKED GAREI (Flathead flounder)

The death anniversary of the God Tenjin (the revered nobleman Sugawara no Michizane) is on the 25th of January and is called *Tenjinko*. At New Year, Tenjin images decorate the *tokonoma* alcoves in people's homes and baked flounder dishes are dedicated in his honor.



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FESTIVALS

FURUMAI RYORI (food as a treat)



Nara

PERSIMMON LEAF SUSHI

A summer festival feast dating to the mid-Edo period. Made with mackerel caught in local waters and pickled with salt, then wrapped in a persimmon leaf, which has a preservative effect.



Tokushima

TARAIUDON

Taraiudon is the local cuisine of Awa city. It is said to have its origins in the treats people had at the end of a day's work in the mountains of the Miyagouchidani river area, where forestry work was once a major activity. Handmade udon noodles boiled in a big pot are transferred to a large tumbler (*hanbo*), served and eaten in large quantities. The broth that goes with the noodles is made from river fish.

SAKE

The change from making unrefined *doburoku sake* to making what is called *sumizake*, similar to today's refined *sake*, went hand-in-hand with alcohol production moving from the court to the temples in the Muromachi period. Said to have originated either in Hyogo or Nara, in both places there are commemorative memorial stones. Nowadays, the two production centers of Nada in Hyogo and Fushimi in Kyoto between them brew together the 44% of the national *sake* production (as of 2016). Kansai is the country's largest producer of Japanese *sake*.

Kyoto

FUSHIMI



Water and rice: the key ingredients crucial for sake's flavor

Japanese *sake* is made of water and rice. Just as it is said that where there is good water there is good *sake*, mineral-rich underground water called *fukuryū-sui* is the main ingredient in the *sake*-making process. Kansai is the home of a large number of excellent local brews: fairly well-known, with underground water representative of Japanese taste, are Nishinomiya's *miyamizu* water, which contain the flavors of Nada Gogō and *fushimizu* water, which provides the base for Fushimi's *sake*. Kansai's abundance is attributable to the large mountainous areas in the middle of the region, such as Fukui's Hakusan range, Shiga's Hakodateyama range, Nara's Katsuragisan range, Osaka's Satsuki-yama and Hyogo's Chūgoku mountains, and also to various places famous for their water, such as Wakayama's Kino River and Tokushima's Yoshino River.

The rice, which forms the key ingredient for Japanese *sake* is called 'sakamai'. Depending on which type of *sakamai* is used, the taste of the *sake* changes: there are almost an infinite number of varieties. The most well-known *sakamai* in Japan is 'Yamada Nishiki', from Hyogo prefecture, a *sake* with a regal fragrance and full-bodied taste, which is the king of *sakamai*.

Hyogo

YAMADA NISHIKI



Hyogo

NADA



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Reference: Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries; Japanese food guide-book 'Japanese cuisine: Japan's traditional food culture'; Union of Kansai Governments website, 'Kansai's food culture'.

Experiencing food with all five senses

In Kansai, there are many opportunities to “experience” food—for instance, by trying dishes that take just a bit more time and effort, or visiting a workshop/eatery where it is possible to see how a dish is prepared. It is not just a matter of tasting : immerse yourself in the Kansai food culture by using all five of your senses to fully enjoy it.



Osaka

Kushikatsu (Deep-Fried Skewers)

Kushikatsu is Osaka comfort food made by skewering and deep-frying bite-sized portions of beef, vegetables, and seafood. It is eaten with a tasty sauce.

In Kushikatsu shops in Osaka the sauce is placed on the tables with a strict “no double-dipping” rule. Part of the fun of eating Kushikatsu is the experience of dipping it in the sauce yourself.



CUPNOODLES MUSEUM OSAKA IKEDA

The city of Ikeda in Osaka Prefecture, the birthplace of instant noodles—now a food enjoyed in space!—is home to the CUPNOODLES Museum Osaka Ikeda. The museum offers attractions such as My CUPNOODLES Factory where visitors can make their own original CUPNOODLES and the CUPNOODLES Drama Theater, which introduces the history and secret of CUPNOODLES on a giant screen. Discover the fascinating research process of Momofuku Ando, the creator of instant noodles, and learn about the history of instant noodles.



Wakayama

Umeshu (Plum Wine) Workshop

Umeshu is a fruit wine made by steeping plums and crystallized sugar in spirits such as ‘shochu’, and aging it over a period of time. Longer steeping is said to produce more body. There are some Umeshu that have been aged for ten years or more.

It is a Wakayama local specialty, and there are outlets that will allow you to try your hand at making Umeshu and plum syrup for yourself.

