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JAPAN

QUICK GUIDE

WHAT TO EAT & DRINK IN JAPAN

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JAPANESE FOOD & FLAVOURS: A TO Z

Effortlessly modern yet steeped in tradition, Japanese cuisine is a seamless blend of flavours, textures, and rituals. From its delicate *kaiseki* meals to artfully prepared sushi, Japanese gastronomy is widely regarded as one of the best in the world—its influence can be found in Michelin-starred restaurants across the globe, from Paris to New York. But nothing compares to experiencing authentic Japanese cuisine in its birthplace, where every region offers its own culinary treasures.

Below, find an A-Z guide of must-try dishes and drinks that will pique your palate and deepen your appreciation for one of the most revered cuisines in the world.

JAPANESE FOOD

AJITSUKE TAMAGO

Ajitsuke tamago (marinated soft-boiled eggs) are a popular Japanese snack, often found in bento boxes or as a ramen topping. These eggs have perfectly set whites and creamy yolks that soak up the umami-rich flavours of the marinade.

To make *ajitsuke tamago*, eggs are briefly boiled for a slightly runny yolk, then chilled to stop cooking. They're soaked in a marinade of soy sauce, mirin, and water, sometimes with added seasonings like sake or *dashi*. Marinating anywhere from several hours to a few days gives these soft-boiled eggs a perfect balance of sweet and savoury flavours.



ATSUAGE

Atsuage is a type of deep-fried tofu commonly used in Japanese cuisine, made by frying a thick block of tofu until the outside becomes a crispy golden-brown while the inside remains soft and fluffy. Unlike *aburaage* (which is thinly sliced and deep-fried tofu), *atsuage* retains more of its original tofu texture, making it heartier and more substantial—a great fulfilling option for vegetarians and vegans. It is often served with soy sauce, grated ginger, and scallions or with toppings such as miso, bonito flakes, or grated daikon. While it can be eaten as is, it's common to find it added to soups, stews, and stir-fries.

DAIFUKU

Daifuku is a traditional Japanese confection made of soft, chewy mochi stuffed with sweet fillings—most commonly a semi-sweet red bean paste (*anko*). Typically round in shape, *daifuku*'s pillowy exterior is crafted from glutinous rice that has been steamed and pounded into a smooth, elastic dough. Other popular variations include *shiro-an daifuku* (filled with a white bean paste), *ichigo daifuku* (filled with a whole strawberry), and *matcha daifuku* (infused with matcha green tea to add a flavour contrast with the sweet filling). Modern twists may see the inclusion of whipped cream. *Daifuku* is a popular Japanese treat, enjoyed during teatime or as a celebratory sweet for special occasions.



DANGO

Dango is a popular Japanese sweet consisting of soft, chewy rice flour dumplings, skewered on a bamboo stick. Small in nature, they are typically grilled for a slight char. While the classic version is made with glutinous rice flour, regional varieties may incorporate different ingredients such as potato or millet flour. Some variations are flavoured with green tea, sweet azuki bean paste, or black sesame. Dating back to the Jomon period, when ground nuts were used to make an early form of *dango*, this confection has evolved into numerous distinct styles. Keep an eye out for *Hanami dango*, which are pastel-coloured dumplings enjoyed during cherry blossom season.

MITARASHI DANGO

A variation of *dango*, *mitarashi dango* features skewered rice dumplings coated in a sweet soy-based glaze. The dumplings are lightly grilled, giving them a caramelized, smoky flavour that pairs beautifully with the glossy, umami-rich glaze. They're a favourite among festival-goers and tea ceremony enthusiasts alike.



DASHI

Dashi is the umami-rich broth that forms the foundation of Japanese cuisine, used in miso soup, noodle dishes, and simmered foods. Traditionally made by simmering *kombu* (dried kelp) and *katsuobushi* (bonito flakes), it has been a key ingredient since the Edo period (1603–1868), enhancing flavours without overpowering them.

DONBURI

Donburi refers to a bowl of rice topped with various ingredients, such as tempura, beef, or raw fish. It's a versatile and comforting dish, often served as a quick meal. The word "*donburi*" literally translates to bowl in Japanese, emphasizing its simplicity and accessibility.

FUGU

Fugu (pufferfish) is a rare delicacy known for its potentially lethal toxin (tetrodotoxin). Only licensed chefs can prepare it safely, requiring years of training. Often served as paper-thin sashimi (*tessa*) or in hot pot (*fugu nabe*), *fugu* has been enjoyed since the Edo period (1603-1867). Those looking to try should consider visiting Shimonoseki, a city renowned for its expert preparation of this delicacy.

GOMA DARE

Goma dare is a creamy sesame-based sauce with a rich nutty flavour. Commonly served as a dipping sauce for hot pot dishes like *shabu-shabu* or used as a dressing for salads, it adds depth and complexity to simple dishes. Its smooth, savoury taste complements a wide variety of foods.

GYOZA

Gyoza are iconic Japanese dumplings with roots in the traditional Chinese *jiaozi*. While inspired by their Chinese counterpart, *gyoza* have been adapted to suit Japanese tastes, featuring thinner wrappers, a more finely chopped filling, and a crispier texture when pan-fried. Crescent-shaped, these dumplings are typically made with a delicate wheat-flour wrapper, with a savoury filling inside. The most common combination includes pork or chicken, cabbage, chives, garlic, ginger, and scallions, though regional variations incorporate unique ingredients. *Gyoza* can be prepared in multiple ways—pan-fried (*yaki-gyoza*), steamed (*mushi-gyoza*), or boiled (*sui-gyoza*)—but the traditional crispy-bottomed pan-fried version remains the most popular.



GYŪDON

Gyūdon (which translates to beef bowl) is a classic staple of Japanese fast-food consists, consisting of thinly sliced beef and onions served over a bowl of steaming rice. The beef and onions are cooked in a savoury-sweet sauce made from soy sauce and mirin, a type of Japanese rice wine.

Gyūdon is a staple in specialized restaurants known as *gyūdon-ya*, where diners can customize their bowls with condiments like pickled red ginger (*beni shōga*) or chili flakes—*gyūdon-ya* are typically open 24 hours and popular with students and workers looking for a quick yet satisfying meal.

IKURA

Ikura are salmon roe—bright orange and briny, with a slightly sweet flavour—that pop in your mouth, releasing a burst of umami. Unlike *tobiko* (smaller flying fish roe), *ikura* is marinated in soy sauce and mirin, making it a popular topping for sushi and rice bowls. Though the word “*ikura*” comes from Russian word for caviar, salmon roe has been a part of Japanese cuisine for centuries.



KARAAGE

Karaage is Japan's take on fried chicken—strips of marinated chicken that are lightly coated in potato starch and fried to golden perfection. The marinade often includes soy sauce, ginger, and garlic, giving the dish a wonderful depth of flavour. Served with a lemon wedge or mayonnaise on the side, *karaage* is a staple at *izakayas* (Japanese pubs) and a favourite in bento boxes.

The name *karaage* also applies to a Japanese cooking technique that involves lightly coating ingredients in starch before deep-frying, resulting in a crispy outer layer while retaining moisture inside. Though various proteins and vegetables can be prepared this way, *karaage* is most commonly associated with fried chicken.

KARĒ (JAPANESE CURRY)

Japanese curry—*karē*—is a staple comfort food that differs significantly from its Indian counterpart. Introduced by the British during the Meiji period (1868–1912), *karē* initially remained a luxury dish but gradually became one of Japan's most popular meals. Compared to Indian curries, Japanese curry is milder, thicker, and slightly sweet, thanks to the addition of flour or roux as a thickener. *Karē* is commonly served one of three ways: with rice (*karē raisu*), over thick udon noodles (*karē udon*), or inside a deep-fried bread roll (*karē pan*). A popular and versatile dish, *karē* is a staple in Japanese households, and served anywhere from casual family dinners to local curry shops.

KARĒ PAN

A beloved Japanese bakery item, *karē pan* is a deep-fried bread roll stuffed with savoury Japanese curry. The fluffy bread is coated in panko breadcrumbs, giving it a satisfyingly crispy exterior that contrasts beautifully with the warm, flavourful curry filling inside. This snack is a popular grab-and-go treat, perfect for satisfying any mid-day craving or indulging in a quick bite.



KATSUDON

Katsudon is a hearty Japanese rice bowl dish, topped with a crispy deep-fried pork cutlet (*tonkatsu*) that's simmered in a savoury-sweet broth made with soy sauce, *dashi*, and sugar. The cutlet is often combined with beaten eggs and sliced onions, served over steamed rice, creating a hearty and flavourful dish. First mentioned in 1921, *katsudon* has since evolved into multiple variations including *torikatsu-don* (which uses chicken instead of pork), *miso katsudon* (features a miso-based sauce), and *Sauce katsudon* (topped with a Worcestershire-style sauce).

KASUTERA

Kasutera, or Castella cake, is a light and fluffy Japanese sponge cake introduced by Portuguese merchants in the 16th century. Made with simple ingredients—flour, sugar, eggs, and honey—*kasutera* is known for its light texture and subtle sweetness. Modern variations include flavours like matcha, chocolate, and brown sugar, keeping this centuries-old treat relevant in Japanese cuisine. Its golden brown top and uniform crumb make it not only delicious but visually appealing as well.



KOROKKE

Korokke is the Japanese adaptation of the French croquette, introduced to Japan in the late 19th century, during the Meiji period. This crispy, deep-fried *yoshoku* (Western-influenced) delight consists of mashed potatoes mixed with minced meat, seafood, or vegetables. It is then shaped into patties, coated in panko breadcrumbs, and fried until golden brown. Flavourful and affordable, *korokke* is a street food staple in Japan. It is also commonly found in bento boxes, supermarkets, and at *izakaya*. Popular varieties include the classic potato *korokke*, meat *korokke*, *karē korokke*, and cream *korokke*, which is filled with a rich béchamel-like sauce.

IKAYAKI

Ikayaki is a grilled whole squid brushed with a soy sauce-based glaze, giving it a smoky yet slightly sweet flavour. Its chewy but tender texture makes it a festival favourite and quintessential Japanese street food. Often served on a stick for convenience, *ikayaki* is best paired with a cold beer or sake.

MATCHA

Matcha (finely ground green tea powder) is deeply rooted in Japanese culture and a staple in traditional tea ceremonies. It is prepared by whisking high-quality matcha powder with hot water (approx. 80°C/175°F) using a bamboo whisk (*chasen*) in a shallow bowl (*chawan*) until it becomes frothy.

However matcha is more than just tea in Japan—it is a popular ingredient in Japanese gastronomy. Its earthy, slightly bitter flavour pairs beautifully with sweet ingredients, making it a popular choice for desserts and beverages. Matcha is used in a variety of treats, from mochi and soft-serve ice cream to cakes, cookies, chocolate, and lattes. Its vibrant green colour and unique taste make it a sought-after ingredient worldwide, celebrated for its health benefits. Packed with antioxidants and a natural caffeine, matcha provides a calm, focused energy.



MISO SOUP

A staple of Japanese cuisine known globally, miso soup is a savoury broth made from miso paste and *dashi*. Typically served with additions like tofu, seaweed, and scallions, it is a comforting and nutritious side dish that accompanies nearly every Japanese meal.

MOCHI

Mochi is a traditional Japanese delicacy made from glutinous rice that is pounded into a sticky, chewy paste. This versatile treat can be enjoyed on its own, filled with sweet bean paste or fruits, or paired with toppings like *kinako* (roasted soybean flour) or sweet soy sauce. Mochi plays an essential role in Japanese celebrations, especially during the New Year.



OKONOMIYAKI

Okonomiyaki is a savoury grilled pancake made with wheat flour batter, fresh cabbage, and an array of delicious toppings—its name, which translates to “grill as you like it,” reflecting the dish’s customizable nature. Typical toppings include meat, seafood, and/or cheese.

Originating in Osaka and Hiroshima, these regions offer distinctive styles: Osaka’s version mixes all ingredients into the batter, while Hiroshima layers them with noodles. The pancake is cooked on a griddle and topped with mayonnaise, *okonomiyaki* sauce (similar to Worcestershire), and bonito flakes.

MONJAYAKI

Monjayaki is a runnier version of *okonomiyaki*. Cooked on a griddle and eaten with a small spatula, its gooey texture is packed with ingredients like seafood, vegetables, or cheese. Often enjoyed in casual settings, *monjayaki* offers a hands-on and interactive dining experience.

OMURAISU

Omuraisu is a fluffy omelette wrapped around ketchup-flavoured fried rice, often topped with more ketchup or a demi-glace sauce. A fusion dish combining Japanese and Western flavours, *omuraisu* emerged during the Meiji era (1868–1912) as part of *Yoshoku* (Western-influenced cuisine) and remains a beloved comfort food, especially in family restaurants.

ONIGIRI

Onigiri are convenient and portable Japanese rice balls, often wrapped in *nori* (seaweed) and filled with a variety of ingredients. Popular fillings include tuna mayo, grilled salmon, and pickled plum. Perfect for on-the-go snacking, *onigiri* is a staple of convenience stores and lunchboxes across Japan.

PONZU

Ponzu is a citrus-based soy sauce with a tangy, refreshing flavour, made with yuzu or citrus, soy sauce, mirin, and *dashi*. Commonly used as a dipping sauce for *shabu-shabu*, seared fish (*tataki*), and grilled meats, its name originates from the Dutch word “*pons*” (punch), reflecting early European influence in Japan.

RAMEN

Ramen, a beloved comfort food and one of the most internationally recognized foods from Japan, is a noodle soup dish. Traditionally it consists of wheat noodles served in a savoury broth, topped with ingredients like sliced pork (*chashu*), soft-boiled eggs, seaweed, and scallions, though there are countless regional variations. Miso ramen from Hokkaido is rich and hearty, while *tonkotsu* ramen from Kyushu is creamy and pork-based. *Shoyu* (soy sauce) and *shio* (salt-based) are other popular styles. Ramen’s origins can be traced back to Chinese immigrants, but it has since become a staple of Japanese street food and casual dining.



SHOKUPAN

Shokupan is Japanese milk bread, known for its soft, pillowy texture and slightly sweet taste. Introduced by British bakers in the early 20th century, its airy crumb is achieved using the *yudane* (hot water dough) method. A staple in Japanese households, it serves as the base for *tamago* sandos and fruit sandwiches.

TAMAGO SANDO

Tamago sando is a Japanese egg sandwich, made with soft *shokupan* and a creamy egg salad filling of mashed boiled eggs, Kewpie mayo, and a touch of sweetness. A convenience store favourite, it has gained international fame for its fluffy texture and rich flavour.



SOBA

Soba—a staple of Japanese cuisine—are thin buckwheat noodles that can be enjoyed at any temperature, whether in a hot flavourful, broth or served cold with a dipping sauce (*zarusoba*). Light and nutritious, soba is often accompanied by a variety of toppings, such as tempura, scallions, or grated daikon radish. Considered to be refreshing, soba is especially popular during Japan's hot summer months.

While buckwheat has been cultivated in Japan since the Jomon period (14,000–300 BCE), soba noodles didn't gain widespread popularity until the Edo period (1603–1868). During this time, soba became a staple in Edo (modern-day Tokyo), served in shops and street stalls across the city. Its high nutritional value and versatility made it a favourite among both commoners and the samurai class, cementing its place in Japanese gastronomy.

SUNOMONO

Sunomono is a Japanese cucumber salad, made with thinly sliced cucumbers that are marinated in a light, tangy vinegar-based dressing. Often topped with seafood like shrimp or octopus, or garnished with sesame seeds, *sunomono* is a healthy and flavourful side dish perfect for balancing heavier meals. It is also commonly served between courses in a *kaiseki* meal, used as a palate cleanser.



SUSHI AND SASHIMI

Sushi and sashimi are iconic symbols of Japanese cuisine, celebrated worldwide for their elegance and use of the freshest ingredients. Sushi combines vinegared rice with toppings such as raw fish, vegetables, or even egg, while sashimi refers to thinly sliced raw seafood served without rice. Both require precision and skill, with chefs meticulously selecting and preparing the fish to ensure optimal flavour and texture.

Sushi comes in various forms—*nigiri* (a slice of fish atop rice), *maki* (rolled sushi wrapped in seaweed), and *chirashi* (a bowl of rice topped with assorted fish).



TAIYAKI

Taiyaki is a traditional Japanese fish-shaped cake, typically filled with a variety of sweet fillings, including *anko* (a traditional red bean paste), creamy custard, rich chocolate, or modern options like matcha-flavoured cream. While typically sweet, savoury fillings such as cheese or sausage are also available, making *taiyaki* a versatile snack that caters to different tastes. The batter used to make *taiyaki* is similar to pancake or waffle batter; poured into fish-shaped molds and cooked until golden brown. The result is a warm, satisfying treat with a crispy, slightly caramelized exterior and a soft interior.

Often found at street stalls, festivals, and specialty shops, *taiyaki* has become a symbol of Japanese street food culture. Its fish shape is meant to resemble a sea bream, which is a symbol of good fortune in Japan. In recent years, *taiyaki* has gained global popularity, with variations appearing worldwide, including ice cream-filled *taiyaki* cones and creative twists on its fillings.



TAKOYAKI

Takoyaki are soft, savoury balls filled with chopped octopus. Cooked in special molds, each ball is roughly the size of a gold ball. Pillowy and golden, they are topped with *takoyaki* sauce, mayonnaise, bonito flakes, and seaweed, creating a symphony of flavours and textures. While a classic Japanese street food throughout the country, *takoyaki* are from Osaka and can be celebrated at Takoyaki Park in Universal Citywalk Osaka. Alternatively, sample and compare famous Osaka-style *takoyaki* varieties at the Takoyaki Museum in Odaiba, Tokyo.

TEMPURA

Tempura is a traditional Japanese dish known for its light, crispy texture. It involves coating ingredients like vegetables, mushrooms, or sweet potatoes in a thin batter made of cold water, flour, and sometimes egg, then deep-frying them until golden and crunchy. This method enhances the natural flavours of the ingredients while adding a satisfying crispness. Traditionally served with *tentsuyu* dipping sauce—a savoury blend of soy sauce, mirin, and dashi—tempura is often accompanied by grated daikon radish for an extra layer of flavour.

Tempura's origins trace back to the 16th century, influenced by Portuguese missionaries who introduced frying techniques to Japan. Now it is a cornerstone of Japanese cuisine, admired for its elegant simplicity and perfect balance of textures. Whether enjoyed at a specialized tempura restaurant or paired with soba noodles, tempura remains a timeless staple.



TONKATSU

Tonkatsu is a breaded and deep-fried pork cutlet—crispy on the outside and tender on the inside. Typically served with shredded cabbage and a tangy *tonkatsu* sauce, it's a versatile dish that can be enjoyed in sandwiches, curry dishes, or atop rice bowls like *katsudon*.

UDON

Udon is a type of thick, chewy wheat noodle that has been a staple in Japanese cuisine for centuries. It is often served in a warm, savoury broth made from *dashi*, soy sauce, and mirin, and topped with ingredients like crispy tempura, scallions, or *kamaboko* (a type of fish cake). Udon can also be enjoyed cold, accompanied by dipping sauces, making it a refreshing option during hot weather. Because of its simple flavour and satisfying texture, udon is a versatile base that pairs well with a wide variety of ingredients, from meat and seafood to vegetables and eggs, adapting to both traditional recipes and modern culinary twists.



UNI

Uni (sea urchin) is a prized delicacy in Japanese cuisine, loved for its creamy texture and briny, oceanic flavour. Harvested from Japan's pristine coastal waters, *uni* is often served atop sushi rice or as part of a *kaiseki* meal. The quality of *uni* can vary widely, with the best coming from Hokkaido, where the cold waters enhance its flavour. Fresh *uni* has a buttery consistency and a mildly sweet, umami-packed taste. Considered a fine delicacy with an unparalleled taste, it requires an adventurous palate.

WAGASHI

Wagashi, traditional Japanese confections, are as much a feast for the eyes as they are for the palate. Typically enjoyed alongside tea, these exquisite sweets are made from ingredients such as mochi, sweet bean paste (*anko*), and chestnuts. Their intricate designs often mirror nature and the changing seasons, from *Sakura*-shaped sweets in spring to autumn confections adorned with maple leaf motifs. Edible works of art, *wagashi* beautifully capture the essence of Japanese culture in bite-size form.

Wagashi come in a wide variety of types, each with its own unique characteristics and traditions—many of which are vegetarian or vegan, as well as gluten free, when prepared the old-fashioned way. Some of the most popular types of *wagashi* include: *higashi*, *namagashi*, *dorayaki*, *daifuku*, *taiyaki*, *mitarashi dango*, and *yokan*.

DORAYAKI

Dorayaki consists of two fluffy, honey-infused pancakes filled with *anko* (sweet red bean paste). The pancakes are soft, slightly spongy, and have a subtly sweet flavour designed to complement the filling. Its origins date back to the Edo period (1603–1868), where *dorayaki* was traditionally made with a single pancake folded over the filling. The modern, sandwich-style version was popularized in 1914 by the Tokyo-based confectionery Usagiya.

HIGASHI

One of the most popular types of *wagashi* and a part of Japanese tea ceremonies for centuries, *higashi* are dry, bite-sized sweets. They are often made from glutinous rice flour (*rakugan*) or *wasanbon* sugar—a fine-grained Japanese sugar known for its delicate sweetness—with very little moisture, which allows for a long shelf life. *Higashi* are best enjoyed with *koicha* (a thick matcha).

NAMAGASHI

The pinnacle of *wagashi* craftsmanship, *namagashi* are fresh, delicate confections. Typically made from ingredients like *anko* (sweet bean paste), mochi, agar, and seasonal fruits, these soft sweets are decorated with designs reflecting the seasons. Traditional artisans create *namagashi* using hand-carving tools and molds, ensuring that no two pieces are exactly alike. While *higashi* makes for a lovely souvenir, *namagashi* only lasts 1-2 days.

YOKAN

Yokan is a firm, jelly-like *wagashi*, made from red bean paste, agar (*kanten*), and sugar. Sliced into rectangular blocks, it has a smooth, dense texture, typically enjoyed with green tea. There are two main types—*neri yokan* and *mizu yokan*. *Neri yokan* is a dense and sweet version, often incorporating chestnuts, sweet potatoes, or green tea, while *mizu yokan* is a lighter, more refreshing version with higher water content, commonly eaten chilled in the summer.

Yokan was originally introduced to Japan from China during the Kamakura period (1185–1333), where it was initially consumed as a savoury dish, made with gelatin derived from sheep. Buddhist monks later adapted it using plant-based agar, making it a vegetarian-friendly sweet.



WAGYU BEEF

Wagyu beef is more than just high-quality meat—it's a culinary masterpiece renowned for its unparalleled marbling, rich umami flavour, and melt-in-your-mouth texture. The term "Wagyu" simply means "Japanese cattle," but only specific breeds raised under strict regulations qualify as authentic Wagyu—the most prized being the Japanese Black (*Kuroge Washu*) due to its exceptional intramuscular fat distribution. The most famous types include Kobe, Matsusaka, Ohmi, and Hida beef, each with its own regional characteristics, feeding techniques, and grading system.

Wagyu's immaculately tender texture comes from intensive breeding, meticulous care, and a specialized diet that enhances its signature marbling, leading to a buttery tenderness and complex depth of flavour. Whether enjoyed as succulent steaks, *shabu-shabu*, *sukiyaki*, or *yakiniku*, Wagyu offers a one-of-a-kind experience that elevates beef to an art form.

YAKITORI

Yakitori is grilled skewered chicken, cooked over charcoal and seasoned with either salt (*shio*) or *tare* (soy-based sauce). Each skewer highlights different cuts, such as *negima* (chicken with scallions), *tsukune* (meatballs), and *kawa* (crispy skin), offering a variety of textures and flavours. A beloved izakaya staple, yakitori has been enjoyed since the Edo period.



JAPANESE DRINKS

AMAZAKE

Amazake is a traditional Japanese sweet rice drink, often enjoyed warm in winter. It comes in two varieties: one made from fermented rice (non-alcoholic) and another from *sake lees* (low-alcohol content). Dating back to the Kofun period (250-538 AD), it was once consumed as an energy drink by farmers. Today, *amazake* is commonly found at Shinto shrines during New Year's celebrations, popular for its comforting, lightly sweet flavour.



AWA MORI

Considered the signature drink of Okinawa, *awamori* is Japan's oldest distilled beverage—made from long-grain Indica rice fermented with black koji mold. With a rich and aromatic profile, it gives a smooth earthy taste. The use of black koji mold plays a crucial role in the fermentation process, imparting deep umami notes that set *awamori* apart from other Japanese spirits. Aged in clay pots to enhance its complexity, *awamori* mellows over time, much like a fine whisky or sake. Traditionally, it is enjoyed diluted with water and ice, allowing drinkers to adjust the strength to their preference.

CHŪH AI

Chūhai is a refreshing, low-alcohol cocktail popular throughout Japan. The drink's name is a fusion of *shōchū* and highball, reflecting its original preparation—*shōchū* (a Japanese distilled alcohol, similar to vodka) mixed with carbonated water. While traditionally made with *shōchū*, modern variations often substitute vodka for a lighter taste. *Chūhai* comes in a wide array of fruit flavours, from citrusy lemon and yuzu to tropical mango and peach. It is a staple in izakayas (Japanese pubs) and convenience stores, where canned versions are widely available.

HAIBŌRU

Haibōru, or highball, is a whisky-based cocktail made by mixing Japanese whiskey with soda water and ice. A staple of *izakayas* (Japanese pubs), it became popular in the 1950s and saw a revival in the 2000s, thanks to Suntory's marketing campaigns. The *Mizuwari* (watered-down whisky) culture influenced its light, refreshing appeal, making it a go-to drink with meals.

JAPANESE BEER

Japanese beer is light, crisp, and easy to drink, making it a staple in *izakayas* and social gatherings. The big four breweries—Asahi, Kirin, Sapporo, and Suntory—dominate the market, producing lager-style beers with a smooth finish. Japan also has a growing craft beer scene, with small breweries sprinkled throughout the country experimenting with unique ingredients like yuzu, matcha, and sake yeast. A popular way to enjoy beer in Japan is “*nama beer*” (draft beer), served ice-cold with a frothy head.

JAPANESE GREEN TEA

Japanese green tea encompasses various types of steamed tea, such as *sencha*, *gyokuro*, and *bancha*, each differing in flavour, quality, and caffeine content. Unlike Chinese green tea, which is pan-fired, Japanese teas retain a vibrant green colour and umami-rich taste due to steaming. Green tea has been a cultural staple since the Heian period (794–1185) and remains central to daily life and tea ceremonies.

BANCHA

Bancha is a late-harvest green tea, made from mature leaves and stems that are picked after higher-grade teas like *sencha* are picked. It has a mild, slightly earthy flavour with lower caffeine content, making it a popular everyday tea in Japan. Due to its high antioxidant content, *bancha* is often consumed for digestive benefits. One variation, *Hōjicha*, is made by roasting *bancha*, giving it a nutty, caramel-like aroma.

GYOKURO

Gyokuro is one of Japan's highest-quality green teas, known for its deep flavour and natural sweetness. Unlike regular green tea, *gyokuro* is shade-grown for about 20 days before harvest, which increases its chlorophyll and amino acid content, giving it a vibrant green colour and rich taste. This labour-intensive process makes *gyokuro* more expensive and highly prized in tea ceremonies and connoisseur circles.

HOJICHA

Hojicha is a roasted green tea, distinct for its reddish-brown colour and nutty aroma. Unlike other green teas, *hojicha* is roasted over charcoal, reducing caffeine and bitterness, making it ideal for evening drinking. Introduced in Kyoto in the 1920s, it's often served hot or cold, and pairs well with light Japanese desserts.

MATCHA

Made from finely powdered green tea leaves, matcha is traditionally whisked into hot water during Japanese tea ceremonies. It's now widely used in modern beverages and desserts, offering a deep, umami-rich flavour and a vibrant green colour.

SENCHA

Sencha is the most common type of Japanese green tea, making up about 80% of tea production. It is steamed immediately after harvesting to preserve its grassy, slightly astringent flavour. Unlike matcha, *sencha* leaves are steeped, producing a clear, golden-green infusion.



JAPANESE WHISKY

Japanese whisky is a world-renowned style of whisky, influenced by Scottish distillation techniques but with a distinctly Japanese approach to craftsmanship and precision. It typically has a delicate, smooth profile with floral, smoky, or fruity notes, depending on the region and production style. Major distilleries such as Suntory (Yamazaki, Hibiki, Hakushu) and Nikka (Yoichi, Miyagikyo) have put Japan on the global whisky map, with Japanese whiskies winning top international awards. They are enjoyed neat, on the rocks, or in cocktails like the Highball (*Haibōru*).



KAMIKAZE

A classic Japanese cocktail made with vodka, triple sec, and lime juice, Kamikazes are best served cold in a chilled glass. Its simplicity and bright citrus flavour make it a popular choice for those who enjoy tangy and refreshing drinks that go down a little too easy.

MIDORI

Midori is a bright green melon liqueur, created in Japan in 1978 by the brand Suntory. Its name means “green” in Japanese, reflecting its vivid colour and sweet, fruity flavour. Midori is commonly used in cocktails like the Midori Sour and pairs well with citrus and tropical juices.

SAKE

Sake is Japan's national alcoholic beverage, brewed from rice, water, yeast, and *koji* mold through a complex fermentation process. It has been produced for over 1,000 years, with variations like *junmai* (pure rice sake), *nigori* (cloudy sake), and *daiginjo* (premium sake). Served hot, cold, or at room temperature, sake is deeply tied to Shinto rituals, celebrations, and traditional Japanese cuisine.



DAIGINJO

Daiginjo is one of the most refined and premium sake varieties, made using rice that is polished to at least 50% of its original size, resulting in an elegant, aromatic, and delicate flavour profile. Brewed at low temperatures with precise techniques, *daiginjo* sake often has fruity and floral notes. Best served chilled, it is considered a luxury sake, often enjoyed during special occasions.

GINJO

Ginjo is a high-quality category of sake, brewed using rice polished down to at least 60% of its original size, enhancing its aromatic and fruity profile. Made through slow, low-temperature fermentation, *ginjo sake* is lighter and more refined than regular sake, often served chilled to preserve its delicate flavours.

HONJOZO

Honjozo is a premium sake classification, brewed with a small amount of added distilled alcohol to enhance its aroma and smoothness. The rice used in *honjozo* is polished to at least 70% of its original size, giving it a cleaner, lighter body compared to *junmai* sake (which has no added alcohol). It is often served warm or at room temperature, making it a versatile choice for pairing with food.

JUNMAI

Junmai is a pure rice sake, brewed using only rice, water, yeast, and *koji* mold, with no added alcohol or sugar. It is full-bodied and rich, often with a pronounced umami flavour. Unlike other sake classifications, *junmai* has no minimum polishing requirement, focusing on the natural taste of the rice.

SPARKLING SAKE

Sparkling sake is a carbonated variation of traditional sake, often naturally fermented or artificially infused with bubbles. It is lighter, sweeter, and lower in alcohol (usually around 5-12% ABV), making it a great entry-level sake for beginners. Due to its refreshing, champagne-like quality, sparkling sake is commonly enjoyed as an aperitif or dessert pairing and has gained popularity in modern Japanese cuisine.



SHŌCHŪ

Shōchū is a distilled Japanese spirit, typically made from ingredients like barley, sweet potatoes, or rice—there are more than 25 different base ingredients that are used throughout Japan. First made over 500 years ago, this clear alcohol is one of the country's national drinks. Legally it must have an alcohol content of 45% or less, though most varieties sold are approximately 20-25% ABV.

Though not as internationally recognized, *shōchū* is more widely consumed in Japan than sake—its versatility, low-calorie content, and delicious taste making it a popular choice. With a smoother, milder flavour than whiskey or vodka, it can be enjoyed straight, on the rocks, or diluted with water or soda. If looking for something particularly unique, keep an eye out for *Kokutō shōchū*, which is made from brown sugar found on the Amami islands and has with a light, sweet tropical taste.

UMESHU

Umeshu is a sweet yet tangy Japanese plum wine, made by steeping unripe green Ume plums in sugar and alcohol. With a light, refreshing taste and fruity aroma, *umeshu* can be enjoyed straight, on the rocks, or mixed with soda. It is a popular choice for those who enjoy light, dessert-like drinks.



JAPANESE DINING STYLES: AN OVERVIEW

KAISEKI

A refined, multi-course dining experience that features seasonal ingredients prepared with precision and presented with artistic plating. *Kaiseki* embodies the pinnacle of Japanese haute cuisine.

IZAKAYA

A casual and lively dining style perfect for gatherings. Small plates of dishes like skewers, tempura, and sashimi are paired with a variety of alcoholic beverages, offering a vibrant and social atmosphere.

OMAKASE

Translating to “I’ll leave it up to you,” omakase is a personalized dining experience where the chef curates an exclusive menu. This often focuses on sushi or sashimi, created with the freshest ingredients.

ROBATA YAKI

A traditional style of Japanese barbecue where various meats, seafood, and vegetables are slow-grilled over open flames. The dishes are often cooked on skewers and served directly from the grill, providing a rustic and flavourful experience.



TEPPANYAKI

A theatrical dining experience where chefs prepare meat, seafood, and vegetables on a hot iron griddle right in front of guests, combining skillful cooking with engaging entertainment.

SHABU-SHABU

A communal hotpot meal where diners cook thinly sliced meat, seafood, and vegetables in boiling broth. This interactive experience is perfect for sharing with family or friends.

YATAI

Street food stalls offering quick and delicious options like *yakitori*, *takoyaki*, or *oden*. These stalls provide an authentic and nostalgic experience of Japan's vibrant food culture.

YAKINIKU

A Japanese barbecue style where diners grill bite-sized pieces of meat and vegetables over a charcoal or gas grill at their table. This interactive dining experience allows for customization and fosters a social atmosphere as guests cook and share their food together.



JAPAN

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