Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

JAPAN: FOOD AND DRINK G92

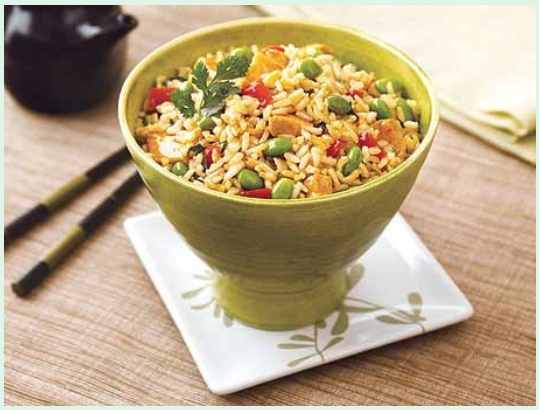
Japanese food is known for its fresh, seasonal ingredients and beautiful presentation. The staple foods, or *shushoku*, are rice and noodles. They tend to be included in every meal.



Left: soba noodles with tofu

Right: Sushi





Left: Edamame soybeans with rice

Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

READING MUSEUM SERVICE

JAPAN: FOOD AND DRINK G92

Tea bowls and lids



Tea bowls are used in Japanese tea ceremonies. In the Japanese language the bowls are called chawan and the tea ceremony is called chanoyu. They are made in many different sizes and with a variety of patterns.

For example, shallow chawan are used in the summer months as the tea cools down much quicker than in a deeper bowl. The chawan in this box are deep and so were probably used in the winter.



The tea ceremony is a formal and traditional activity. The host always wears a kimono (a long robe) and the guests should wear formal clothing. Powdered green tea, called matcha, is whisked with water, which has been heated over a charcoal fire. The tea is served into the chawan. Sometimes guests share one chawan and sometimes each person has their own. The pictures on the right show a tea ceremony in progress.





Both thick tea (koicha) and thin tea (usucha) are served. Different chawan are used. The chawan in the picture on the right dates from the sixteenth century and was used for thick tea. It is on display at the Tokyo National Museum.

Unfortunately, we don't know exactly which teas were served in the chawan in the box.

Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

READING MUSEUM SERVICE

JAPAN: FOOD AND DRINK G92

Rice bowls



Rice is an important staple food for many people across the world. Japanese rice, called japonica, has a sticky texture. It is easier to pick up with chopsticks than other types of rice (see picture on the right). Nearly all the rice eaten in Japan is grown in the country. Foreign rice is expensive to buy in shops.

Rice can be eaten in several different ways. It might be plain, used in sushi, fried or mixed with green tea to make chazuke. Dishes are usually served in a bowl similar to the four beautiful examples in the box.









Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

READING MUSEUM SERVICE

JAPAN: FOOD AND DRINK G92

Sake cups



Sake is an alcoholic Japanese drink made from fermented rice.

First, the protein and oils are removed from the grains of rice, leaving the polished starchy centres. The grains are then left to rest until they have absorbed moisture from the air. This moisture stops the grains cracking when they are soaked, which is the next stage. After soaking for several hours the grains are steamed and then cooled. Citric acid, yeast and a type of fungi called koji are added and the mixture is covered and left to ferment at room temperature for a few weeks. Afterwards, the liquid is separated, filtered and bottled.



Slight changes to this process produce different versions of sake. The picture on the right shows a cloudy, unfiltered sake called nigori.





Sake is served in a small ceramic flask called a tokkuri. See the pictures on the right for examples. It is usually served warm - only very expensive sake is served cold. The tokkuri is stood in a bowl of hot water until the sake reaches body temperature. The host then pours a cup for each guest, making sure to hold the tokkuri with both hands, palms facing down.

The small cups are called ochoko. One hand should be placed around the ochoko and the other should support it underneath. It should be sipped slowly, rather than drinking straight down in one go. The ochoko in the box are beautifully decorated with pictures of bamboo.

Sake goes well with tempura - deep-fried battered vegetables or seafood.

Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

JAPAN: FOOD AND DRINK G92

Chopsticks



In Japanese chopsticks are called hashi. They are made from a variety of materials, including wood, plastic, bamboo, metal, ivory or even bone. What do you think the examples in the box are made from? It is also common to find disposable chopsticks wrapped in paper. Japanese chopsticks are traditionally pointed at the tip - perhaps because Japanese cuisine includes lots of fish and the pointed tips help to pull it from the bones.

There are many stories as to the origins of chopsticks, although nobody is really sure how true they are. One story is that people just snapped twigs from trees and used them to eat. Another story is that Confucius (a Chinese philosopher) who was a vegetarian, encouraged people not to use knives as they were a reminder of the slaughterhouse.

Here are some rules for using chopsticks in Japan:

Hold chopsticks towards the end, not in the middle or the top third.
When you are not using the chopsticks lay them down in front of you on the chopstick rest with the tips to the left.
Do not stick chopsticks into your food, especially not into rice. This is only done at funerals.
Do not pass food to other people's chopsticks with yours. This is how bones are moved at funerals. Offer the plate instead.
Do not spear food with your chopsticks.
Do not point to something with your chopsticks.
Do not move your chopsticks around in the air too much, nor play with them.
Use the opposite end of your chopsticks in order to move food from a shared plate in the centre of the table to your own plate.

Chopstick rest



Chopsticks are placed on the rest to keep them away from the surface of the table, as shown in the picture on the right.

Rests can be both simple and elaborate in design, depending on where and when they are used.