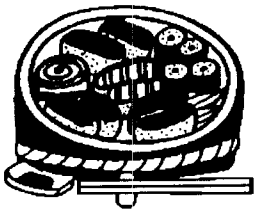

Eating in Japan

Except for learning about the Japanese transportation system and the many things to see and do in Japan, perhaps the most important thing that will help you enjoy your tour here is learning how to enjoy Japanese food. The food eaten by the Japanese people is delicious and comes in an enormous variety that can keep you busy trying out new items. In addition to getting a good meal in a Japanese restaurant, you will also be likely to have a very pleasant time. Many restaurants are fascinating, attractive places with interiors and atmospheres that really let you experience what Japan is like. Another important aspect about learning your way around Japanese food is that you will be able to save a lot of money. Eating in Japan can be relatively inexpensive if you take advantage of the typical neighborhood restaurants and special "plates".

By reading through these pages carefully and following the simple instructions you should be able to order satisfying and reasonable meals wherever you go in Japan.

1. JAPANESE FOOD AND RESTAURANTS

The foods available in Japan come in a dizzying variety and it would take the visitor many years to become aware of all the available dishes. Certain types of food seem to be more popular and are encountered quite often. Also, the Japanese long ago discovered that other countries also have good food. Today, restaurants serving Chinese, Korean, European and other authentic national foods are abundant, especially in Tokyo and Yokohama.

Before discussing specific foods, words for restaurants are in order. There are many types of restaurants but they generally fall into two categories: restaurants that serve many types of food (general restaurants), and restaurants that specialize in one dish or one type of food (SENMONTEN). The latter are quite common and some of your best eating experiences will be in this type of establishment.

Recognizing restaurants is usually not a problem in Japan. Many (60 ~70% in some areas) put a window case displaying plastic menu items in front of their establishment. For your first few eating adventures, it is best to patronize these restaurants. Not only can you readily identify the place as a restaurant, but you can also get a good idea of the menu items and the prices. These window displays can also assist in ordering items.

After you get a little experience, you might want to venture into some restaurants with no display cases. Occasionally, you will be able to identify these by looking through the door or window, but most of the time you will have to rely on the written word. Most restaurants will identify in Japanese characters what kind of food they serve. This will probably be written in a prominent place outside, often on the attractive canvas curtains (called NOREN) that hang over the doorway. The curtain is placed over the entrance to indicate that the restaurant or store is open for business.

Revised 2003 Mar

THE MOST COMMON JAPANESE FOOD ITEMS

1. TONKATSU – Fried Pork Cutlet. A very tasty dish that appeals to the Western palate. Inexpensive to moderate price.

2. TEMPURA – Vegetables and fish in a light batter, deep fried. One of the most famous of all Japanese dishes and another which usually appeals to the Westerner's sense of taste. Inexpensive to moderate price.

3. SOBA and UDON – Japanese noodles. One of the best food items for those on a budget. Soba are noodles made from buckwheat flour, while Udon are noodles made from wheat flour. They are served in many different ways, but the most common is in soup, usually with other ingredients. They are served fried like in Yakisoba, or fried noodles. Very similar to Ramen, one of the best foods for the newcomer to try out. Inexpensive.

4. YAKITORI – Pieces of chicken or pork skewered on bamboo sticks and cooked over charcoal. After cooking they are dipped into a special sauce. Another good dish that will appeal to the newcomer. Inexpensive to moderate.

5. OKONOMIYAKI- A thick pancake-like dish made of a delicious mixture of batter, vegetables and small pieces of meat or fish. It is a tasty food that, in some places, the customers cook at their own table, adding spices as they desire. It is very easy for a newcomer to enjoy; easy to cook. Inexpensive to moderate.

6. ODEN – A type of Japanese food containing radishes, potatoes, eggs, tofu (bean curd), seaweed, fish cake, and sometimes octopus, cooked for hours in a delicious broth. Often sold from small street carts (yatai) outside train stations. Especially popular in the winter. Inexpensive to moderate.

7. CHUKARYORI - Chinese food. This is the most abundant "foreign" food in Japan. It is even more common than what is served in most of the Japanese specialty restaurants. When you can't find anything else, you can always count on finding a Chinese restaurant. There are quite a variety of Chinese dishes, as well as a great variety of Chinese restaurants, from a tiny place only selling Chinese noodles (ramen) to big high-class restaurants with very fancy décor. Chinese restaurants are one of the best places for a beginner to learn about popular items including chahan (fried rice), ramen (noodles), gyoza (fried crescent-shaped dumplings), harumaki (spring rolls) etc. Inexpensive to expensive.

8. DONBURI – Rice topped with meat or vegetables. Inexpensive.

9. SUKIYAKI – Thinly sliced beef, sautéed for just a few seconds in a hot sukiyaki pan. A soup base broth is then added. After the beef is cooked, a selection of vegetables will then be added to the pan. Once the food is cooked, the Japanese then dip the food into a small cup containing raw egg. Almost always, the cooking is done entirely by the customers to suit their own tastes. This is probably the best-known Japanese food abroad. Usually served in a specialty shop but also found as a menu item in general restaurants. Since beef is quite expensive in Japan, sukiyaki tends to be fairly expensive.

Similar to sukiyaki is a dish called SHABU SHABU, which is thin strips of beef and vegetables, cooked in a pot of boiling broth, which is clear and slightly seasoned. As in the case of sukiyaki, the customers usually cook their own food right at the table. Moderate to expensive.

10. SUSHI – Small bite-sized blocks of rice topped with raw fish. This is probably the most popular food among the Japanese. Sushi actually refers to the style of the food, not the contents, and does not necessarily mean raw fish.

There are many different styles of sushi.

In the Tokyo area the two main styles are called nigiri-zushi, fresh sliced fish or sliced shellfish on vinegared rice, and maki-zushi (small bite-size blocks of rice rolled-up in seaweed, in the middle of which will be different fillings such as cucumber, egg, shrimp, etc.)

It is probably fair to say that most people going to sushi-ya (store or shop but in this case restaurant) expect to eat sushi with raw fish. In this form, sushi comes in many different varieties. Common nigiri-zushi items are maguro (tuna), tamago (egg), ebi (shrimp), tai (sea bream), hamachi (yellow tail), tako (octopus), toro (the best part of the tuna), awabi (abalone), and hirame (flounder). In between the rice and the topping is a small dab of a potent horseradish called wasabi.

In the maki-zushi category, there are tekka-maki (tuna), kappa-maki(cucumber), ika-maki (squid), ebi-maki (shrimp), and many others.

Sushi may be ordered individually or in set assortments. When ordering individually it is usually served in sets of two. Thus, you can get two of as many different types of sushi as you wish until you get full. This way of ordering, however, is sometimes quite expensive. A less expensive way of eating sushi is to order the fixed assortment. There are usually three assortments available, Toku Jo (deluxe), Jo (choice), and Nami (regular). You can often spot them in the display case.

In many places customers who sit at the counter may be expected to order individual pieces rather ran the cheaper assortment, so try to sit at a table for the latter. One word of caution is in order; prices of some sushi specialty shops are not posted. There are plenty, which are in moderate price. Inexpensive to expensive.

A few tips on eating sushi. You sit at the wooden counter (the best place to really enjoy the atmosphere and watch the chef in action), the sushi will be placed on the counter in front of you without a plate.

You will be given a small dish. Put a small amount of soy sauce (should be located on the counter) into the dish and then dip each piece of sushi into this. Dip the fish side rather than the rice into the soy sauce, or it may fall apart. You should then put the whole piece into your mouth. Don't try to eat it in several bites. It may crumble on you and you'll end up with a big mess.

Somewhere in front of you there should be a small mound of pickled ginger slices (gari), meant to be eaten in small quantities, in between different types of sushi. It is supposed to refresh the taste buds so that you can properly enjoy each new type. By the way, sushi may be eaten with chopsticks or with your fingers.

Another popular dish served in a sushi specialty shop is chirashi, which is a bowl of rice topped with many different types of raw fish.

If you prefer to have your raw fish by itself, SASHIMI is what you want. Sashimi is thin slices of different types of fish served on a platter or in a bowl along with a few raw vegetables. You can get almost as many varieties of sashimi as there are fish. Sashimi is usually eaten as an appetizer or as one course of the meal, but sometimes it will be the main dish.

11. BENTO or O-BENTO – Japanese box lunch. Many are sold in train stations for travelers, in which this case they are called Ekiben. Bento lunches come in a great variety but usually include a large portion of rice and an assortment of different kinds of pre-cooked meat, fish vegetables, and pickles. Bento are always made fresh the morning they are sold. There is no attempt to keep them warm, so the contents are always cold when you get them.
The Japanese don't mind this and neither will you once you get used to it. You will see regular bento sold at roadside stands and grocery stores, while ekiben will be sold on station platforms where long distance trains stop, as well as inside some long distance trains. Inexpensive to moderate.

12. YO-SHOKU – Western-style foods. There are a lot of restaurants, which serve either a few Western-style foods or specialize exclusively in Western foods. In general these foods are called by their American or European names, but the words will be pronounced in a Japanese way or abbreviated so that you may not readily recognize them. The food themselves may not be what you expect, for often the Japanese have changed them somewhat to "improve" them or, make them more suitable to their own tastes. Enjoy trying out some of these items cooked in the Japanese way.

13. YAKINIKU – Korean Barbecue. There are many restaurants serving Korean Barbecue. Korean Barbecue is thinly sliced meat (sometimes fish) that has been marinated. You cook this yourself over a grill and dip it in the special sauce they give you which looks like soy sauce, but is spicier. Plates of meat and vegetables are ordered a la carte (separately). Meat that can be ordered includes rosu (lean beef), karubi (beef with more fat), reba (liver); in some places you can get ika (squid) as well. Yasai yaki (mixed vegetables) in another favorite dish you can order and cook yourself. Cold side dishes include the famous kimchee (spicy hot Korean cabbage) and namuru (marinated vegetables).

Soups can be a meal of their own, depending on size, kuppa is an example of this. It is a glorified beef soup which includes rice, an egg scrambled on top, and vegetables. Wakame supu (seaweed soup) is not as filling, but just as good; it is another side dish.

If you order just meat and vegetables, you will probably want to order a bowl of rice, it doesn't usually come with the meal.

14. OTHER JAPANESE FOODS – The above items only scratch the surface of Japanese foods and the list does not include any of the other good foods available. After trying a few of the menu items listed above you should have enough experience to go ahead on your own trying out new foods.

There are a number of English language publications on Japanese foods to assist you.

II. *READING THE MENU AND ORDERING*

As mentioned in section one, many restaurants have a display case, containing plastic or wax models of their menu items, outside near the entrance. This is really all you need for your first few experiences in Japanese restaurants. Look over the items and select a dish that looks good and is the right price for your budget. This pamphlet should give you some help in figuring out what some of these items are called, but you really don't even have to know that. Once you have selected a dish, there are two methods of approach.

First, you can simply enter the restaurant, motion politely to the display case to get the waiter or waitress to go out to it with you, and point out what you want to them. This is the simplest and surest way to get what you want. An alternative to this which won't cause the restaurants personnel any trouble, is to copy down on a piece of paper the Japanese name of the dish from the signs in the display case, and show this to the waiter or waitress. This should work even if your Japanese characters look a little strange.

Once you're settled in the restaurant, use the time to become familiar with your surroundings and try to figure out a few menu items. Many of the less expensive restaurants will not have individual menus but instead will have a big menu on the wall.

We've included pronunciation in this manual, and a section on typical restaurant phrases, so with a little practice you should be able to go into a restaurant, look over the menu, study this booklet, and order in Japanese. It's really not that difficult.

A few restaurants handle ordering in a slightly different way. Instead of the standard system of sitting down at the table and ordering when the waiter or waitress comes, a number of restaurants sell tickets at a booth or window near the entrance. You give your order, pay and get tickets, which you then give to the waiter or waitress after you sit down.

For the most enjoyable and economical dining, a word you should learn is TEISHOKU (tay-show-koo). This means "a fixed meal," and is very common in specialty restaurants like tonkatsu-ya, etc, as well as in general restaurants. Teishoku comes after the name of the food set you want, as in "tempura teishoku." Another word you might keep in mind is ran-chi, or lunch, which refers to a special (less expensive) luncheon served only during the noon hour.

III. *GETTING ALONG IN LOCAL RESTAURANTS*

As you visit different Japanese restaurants, you will no doubt encounter a number of things and practices you do not quite understand. Restaurants have various arrangements for seating. The majority are quite similar to the average American restaurant, with tables and chairs. Some places will also have a counter, and in some cases only a counter. When a place has both a counter and tables, normally it doesn't matter where you sit, although in a sushi-ya you may be expected to order individual pieces, rather than the cheaper assortment, if you sit at a counter. Other restaurants have what we call zashiki tables, or low Japanese style tables on the tatami mats where customers sit on the cushions. For these, you will need to remove your shoes or slippers. This type of restaurant is the most Japanese of all, and you may find out that it is a great pleasure to eat in this style. In some places you might have to request a zashiki (or tatami) room specifically, and there may be an extra charge for this, usually fairly modest. By the way, some restaurants with only Western-style tables may still require you to remove your shoes and

put on slippers. Just be alert whenever you go into a new restaurant and watch what the people around you are doing.

You will find a number of different items on the table in some Japanese restaurants. Where as in an American restaurant you might have sugar, salt, pepper, and napkins on your table, in a Japanese restaurant you are liable to find soy sauce (shoyu), sauce (so-su), chopsticks, toothpicks, and a few other items, depending on the type of restaurant. Normally you will be given a small damp towel called an oshibori before your food comes. In the winter the towel will be hot, while in the summer it will probably be cold. This is used for cleaning off your hands before eating. It will then normally be taken away when the food arrives. Cheaper restaurants do not have oshibori these days, but they will often have napkins. A few, however, have neither.

Since most Japanese food is eaten with chopsticks (hashi), they will be supplied somehow, either at the table in some kind of holder or served to you individually. They are usually the wooden throw away variety which must be broken apart before using. Some restaurants will have spoons and forks available, but the smaller, purely Japanese places may not. Spoons are usually supplied with certain dishes in Chinese restaurants.

In specialty restaurants, there will be some other implements and ingredients on the table. For example, in a Chinese restaurant there will be a container of vinegar and some hot sesame-seed oil along with the soy sauce. These are used to make up a special sauce. In an okonomiyaki-ya, there will be a container with oil for the griddle and several others sauces and powders to season the food. The best way to find out how to use these items is watch what the other customers are doing. Incidentally, you will find that most Japanese do not use soy sauce or anything else on their rice.

The Green tea (o-cha) which is served free in some Japanese restaurants (or the jasmine tea served in many Chinese restaurants) is never drunk with cream or sugar.

A few comments about the way food is eaten:

In general there are not too many differences from what you are used to, but the way soups are eaten may surprise you. Normally one picks up the soup bowl and drinks the soup. Another difference is slurping, which is perfectly acceptable for soups, noodles, tea, etc.

You will see that most Japanese pick up their rice bowls and bring them up close to their faces when they eat. They will probably find it rather strange to see someone lifting individual bites of rice up from the bowl, as Americans would do it. For other dishes, you will see the Japanese bending down close to the plate to eat.

Occasionally when two or more members of the same party order the same dish (as in Chinese restaurant) all orders will be brought out on the same plate. Smaller plates will be supplied to each person and people help themselves from the main plate. Another thing that might surprise you is that the Japanese do not have quite the same sense of ownership towards things like food dishes and drinks. If only one person orders beer or sake, all persons in the party may be given glasses, and the waitress or waiter may actually fill all the glasses.

Here are a couple of do's and don'ts for chopsticks. It is not very polite to stick them in your mouth any more than absolutely necessary. You will almost never see anyone sucking or biting on them. When taking food from the main serving platter with your chopsticks, when there are

no serving spoons, proper etiquette calls for using the unused ends of your chopsticks, although not all Japanese people do this. Two other things you should avoid is passing food from chopsticks to chopsticks, and standing your chopsticks up vertically in your food or rice. Both are associated with funerals and are considered to be bad luck.

When it comes to paying your bill, sometimes, there will be a written check and sometimes not. You will have to see how it is done in the restaurant that you happen to be in. Many restaurants will use a bill for keeping track of how many dishes you have ordered and only add it up at the register when you are ready to leave. The fancier places may have a service charge, normally around 10%, but possibly more in very expensive places. In small, simple places the money is paid to one of the cooks or waiters as you get up to leave. In the more modern places, you will normally receive a written bill, which is paid at the register or cashier near the exit.

IV. *APPENDIX*

1. **Handy Japanese Words and Phrases**

NOTE: Pronounce all syllables with equal stress. Consonants are generally Sounded as in English. Vowels are pronounced at follows

a – as the a in father
i – as the i in he
u –as the o in to
e – as the e in bet
o – as the word owe

A. Word

Check----------kanjo
Chopsticks---------hashi
meal ticket---------shokken
salt----------shio
pepper----------ko-sho
soy sauce----------sho-yu
spoon----------su-pun
knife----------naifu
fork----------ho-ku
hand towel---------o-shibori
toothpicks----------yo-ji
Japanese room-----zashiki
Japanese tea---------o-cha

drinking water----------mizu
black tea----------ko-cha
coffee----------ko-hi
coke----------ko-ra
beer----------bi-ru
sake--------pronounced *(O) sake
sauce----------so-su
plate----------sara
napkin----------napu-kin
menu----------me-nyu
rest room----------otearai or toire
yes----------hai
no----------ii-e

* (Optional) some Japanese words may be preceded by the honorific, or more polite "O"

B. Phrases

The following are model sentences.

How much is _____?
_____wa ikura desu ka ?

How much is it?
Ikura desu ka?

Please give me _____?
_____kudasai.

Where is _____?
_____wa doko desu ka?

Do you have _____?
_____wa arimasuka ?

I don't understand.
Wakarimasen.

This is very delicious.
Kore wa tottemo oishii desu.

What is this called?
Kore wa nan desu ka?

Thanks for a good meal.
Gochiso-sama deshita. (this is usually said when you are ready to pay the bill)

2. Common Japanese Food Items

A. Rice Dishes

Donburi--------or----------A bowl of rice topped with some kind of meat or vegetable.
Oyakodon----------A bowl of rice topped with egg and chicken.
Tendon----------A bowl of rice topped with tempura.
Katsudon--------or----------A bowl of rice topped with egg and pork cutlets.
Raisu----------Rice
Kama-meshi----------Rice, meat, and vegetables steamed in a bowl.

B. Noodles

(O) soba----------Japanese buckwheat flour noodles.
Kake soba----------Plain soba noodles with broth.
Gomoku soba----------Noodles with five ingredients (meat, egg, vegetables, etc)
Tempura soba----------Noodles and broth topped with tempura.
Yakisoba----------Fried noodles.
Udon----------Thin/flat wheat flour noodles.
Tempura udon----------Noodles and broth topped with tempura.
Kake udon----------Plain udon noodles with broth.

3. How to order Yakitori

Yakitori is ordered in two ways: as an assortment or by the stick. In the first way, the menu will simply list yakitori with a price, and you take what you get. In most yakitori specialty restaurants, you can order just the type and number of sticks you want. The Japanese counting words for ordering yakitori are:

One stick.....ippon
Two sticks.....nihon
Three sticks....sambon
four sticks.....yonhon
five sticks.....gohon
six sticks.....roppon

The followings is a list of common (and popular) types of Yakitori:

Tori-niku----------(chicken)----------鳥肉
Hatsu----------(pork heart)----------ハツ
Torimotsu----------(chicken liver)----------とりもつ
Shiromotsu----------(pork intestines)--------白もつ
Re-ba----------(pork liver)----------レバー
Suzume----------(sparrow)----------すずめ
Sasami----------(white chicken meat)---ささみ
Bara----------(pork fat)----------バラ
Tan----------(pork tongue)----------タン

4. **Types of Sushi**

Here is a list of the most common types of sushi, and a few additional related terms. All of the types of sushi listed here should be available at any sushi restaurant.

Tamago----------egg (omelet)----------たまご or 玉子
Maguro----------lean tuna (raw)----------まぐろ or 鮪
Toro----------fatty tuna (raw)----------トロ
Tako----------octopus (boiled)----------たこ or 蛸
Ebi----------shrimp (cooked)----------えび or エビ or 海老
Ika----------squid (raw)----------いか
Hirame----------flounder (raw)----------ひらめ
Awabi----------abalone (raw)----------あわび
Tekkamaki---------lean tuna rolled up in rice & dried seaweed----------鉄火巻き
Norimaki----------sweet pickled gourd strips rolled up in rice & dried seaweed-----のり巻き
Kappamaki---------strips of cucumber rolled up in rice & dried seaweed----------かっぱ巻き
Chirashi zushi------a bowl of seasoned rice covered with slices of many----------ちらしずし
different kinds of raw or marinated fish
Nigiri zushi--------standard combination sets of different types of sushi,----------にぎりずし
in several price ranges
Wasabi----------very spicy, green horseradish----------わさび
Added to most types of nigiri zushi
(***NOTICE: to order your sushi without wasabi, just say "SA-BI-NU-KI")
Nami----------(regular) the cheapest set----------並
assortment of nigiri zushi
Jo----------(choice) a better assortment of---------上
nigiri zushi, more expensive than Nami
Toku Jo----------(deluxe) the best assortment of---------特上
nigiri zushi, and the most expensive

5. Common Chinese Food Items

Ramen----------Chinese style noodles----------ラーメン
Gyoza----------Small meat filled dumplings----------ギョーザ
Chaahan----------Fried Rice----------チャーハン
Subuta----------Sweet and sour pork----------すぶた or 酢豚
Harumaki----------Spring rolls (egg rolls)----------春巻
Wantan----------Dumpling soup----------ワンタン
Shumai----------Steamed pork dumplings----------シュウマイ
Tamago supu---------Egg soup----------玉子スープ
Yasai itame----------Fried vegetables----------野菜炒め
Anman----------Steamed bun filled with sweet bean paste----あんまん
Nikuman----------Steamed bun filled with pork and vegetable mix---肉まん

6. Common Korean Food Items (Korean Barbecue is Yakiniku 焼肉)

Rosu----------Lean Beef----------ロース
Karubi----------Fatty Beef----------カルビ
Kim'chee----------Hot (spicy) Chinese cabbage--------キムチ
Reba----------Liver----------レバー
Namuru----------Cold marinated vegetables----------ナムル
Yasai yaki----------Mixed vegetables for barbecuing----ヤサイヤキ
Kuppa----------Beef soup with rice, egg----------クッパ
and vegetables
Wakame supu-------Seaweed soup----------ワカメスープ

7. Common Western-style Food Items

Kare raisu--------Curry rice----------カレーライス
Ebi furai----------Fried prawns----------エビフライ
Omuraisu---------Rice mixed with chicken or pork-----オムライス
wrapped in a thin omelet
Bifu shichyu-----Beef stew----------ビーフシチュー
Guratan----------Macaroni or rice gratin----------グラタン
Supagetti---------Spaghetti----------スパゲッティ
Sandowichi------Sandwich (also called "sando")-------サンドウィッチ
Toosuto----------Toast----------トースト
Sarada----------Salad----------サラダ
Suteiki----------Steak----------ステーキ
Piza----------Pizza----------ピザ

COUNTING IN JAPANESE

It's simple to count in Japanese. You only need to memorize thirteen easy words in order to be able to count all the way to 99,999,999. Pronunciation changes occur in a small number of combinations. These are noted below and marked with an asterisk (*). When counting prices in Japanese, just add the word "en" ¥ yen) to the number, as in "hyaku-en," one hundred yen.

1.....ichi.....一
2.....ni.....二
3.....san.....三
4.....yon.....四
5.....go.....五
6.....roku.....六
7.....nana.....七
8.....hachi.....八
9.....kyu.....九
10.....ju.....十
11.....ju-ichi.....十一
20.....ni-ju.....二十
21.....ni-ju-ichi.....二十一

100.....hyaku.....百
200.....ni-hyaku.....二百
300.....*sam-byaku.....三百
600.....*rop-pyaku.....六百
800.....*hap-pyaku.....八百
1000.....sen.....千
2000.....ni-sen.....二千.
3000.....*san-zen.....三千
8000.... .*has-sen.....八千
10000..... ichi-man.....一万
20000.....ni-man.....万
1000000....hyaku-man.....百万
yen.....en.....円 or ¥

Example of Prices:

¥ 250 (yen)----------ni-hyaku go-ju en----------二百五十円
¥ 1,000 (yen)----------sen en----------千円
¥ 12,000 (yen)---------- ichi-man ni-sen en----------一万２千円
¥ 123,456 (yen)----ju-ni-man san-zen yon-hyaku go-ju roku en----十二万三千四百五十六円

Note: There are two ways of writing prices using Japanese characters.

Note the following:

¥ 250 is 二百五十円 or 二五〇円

¥ 100 is 百円 or 一〇〇円