

Eat – and live to a ripe old age

Eating and drinking around the world: Japan



In many countries, eating is an extravagant pleasure, in others a concrete manifestation of the joy of being. In Japan, it's neither of the above – and yet so much more. Because in the Land of the Rising Sun, eating is synonymous with one of the greatest arts of all: The art of living.

Japanese food is a matter of taste. For some, there's nothing better anywhere in the world, while others suspect that only a fearless Samurai could eat food like blowfish (*fugu*). And in this special case, they might very well be right. *Fugu*, a famous Japanese delicacy, contains a potent nerve poison and may only be prepared by specially licensed cooks. Fortunately, though, Japanese cuisine is otherwise much less nerve-racking. On the contrary: In Japan, eating is considered to be part of the art of living, which is characterized by Zen Buddhism. And what it strives for above all else is harmony. According to the teachings of Zen,

even mundane everyday tasks aid in achieving personal enlightenment – as long as one totally devotes one's self to it. Everything an individual does is supposed to be simple, unpretentious and flawless. Like the traditional tea ceremony, a ritual that tends to be more suited for selfmeditation (Zen) than for ingesting a fluid. These influences can also be found, although in much less rigid form, in connection with the daily task of eating. For example in the simple way that foods are decorated with colorcoordinated vegetables that have been painstakingly carved into shapes or in the esthetics of artfully folded napkins.

Food as a work of art: Sushi

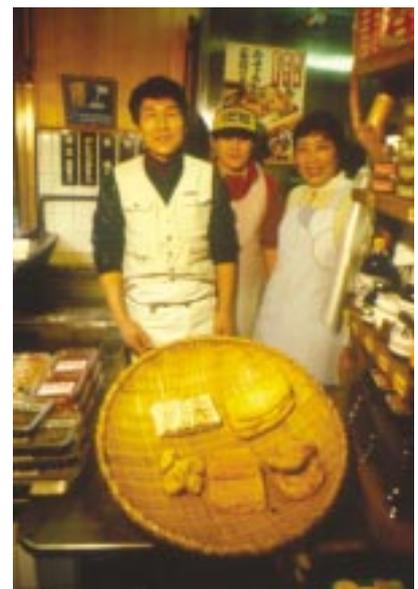


Many dishes that we consider to be typically Japanese today actually originated in Indonesia, China or Korea. Even *Sushi*, so the presumption goes, is a Chinese invention. But there's no question that these delicious, artistically presented tidbits are a culinary issue in their own right. For many, even a philosophy of life. The basic ingredient consists of costly Sushi rice, which is seasoned with vinegar while it cooks. Anything that's subsequently prepared with it is always called Sushi, regardless

of whether it's made with raw fish or vegetables. Two of the most famous and popular forms are Nigiri-Sushi and Maki-Sushi. Nigiri-Sushi are hand-formed from the rice and topped with fish. To make Maki-Sushi, the rice is spread out on a bamboo mat, topped with fish, rolled up and cut into slices. The Japanese, by the way, place particular emphasis on assuring that the Sushi ingredients reflect the sequence of the seasons.

Typical: Tofu, Tempura and Teriyaki

Generally speaking, much in Japanese cuisine is served either raw or only briefly cooked. And there's a very practical reason for this: Fuel used to be scarce. Since Japan is an island nation, fish and seafood are often on the menu. The basics in all dishes: Rice or soy products like *tofu*. Fermented soy is also used to make typical seasonings like soy sauce or sweet rice wine (*mirin*). Typical Japanese specialties include *Teriyaki* (marinated grilled beef), *Tempura* (vegetables or seafood



dipped in batter and deep-fried), *Okonomiyaki* (a kind of pancake that's prepared at the table) or *Sashimi* (raw fish).

Seasonal fruits – peaches, plums, cherries, pears and mandarins – are preferred as a dessert or snack. A meal is traditionally accompanied by hot or cold rice wine (*sake*).

Fraught with pitfalls: Japanese table manners

Eating with chopsticks is an art in its own right, because it's not just a matter of holding them correctly. A strict canon of regulations governs the way this delicate cutlery is used. It's considered to be extremely impolite, for example, to spear food with the chopsticks or to hold the bowl and the chopsticks in the same hand. And sticking the chopsticks upright in the rice is a breach of a religious taboo – because this is the way rice is offered to the deceased in front of the family altar. A contradiction? After all, it's as good as proven that Japanese food promotes good health and thus delays the moment of death. Statistics, at least, clearly demonstrate that the Japanese enjoy the highest life expectancy worldwide, which is also attributed to the nation's cuisine. If that isn't reason enough to eat Japanese more often!