

The origins of food culture in Kyoto

The traditions of Japanese cuisine still live on in Kyoto to this day. Mainly using ingredients such as rice, the staple food; side dishes of seafood and vegetables; and condiments of salt, fermented rice products (sake, vinegar and mirin), and fermented soybean products (soy sauce and miso), Japanese cuisine preserves their natural flavors. “Washoku (traditional Japanese cuisine), the traditional dietary cultures of the Japanese” was added to UNESCO’s Intangible Cultural Heritage list in 2013, raising the government’s hopes of enhancing its global recognition, attracting more foreign tourists and boosting exports of the country’s agricultural products.

Starting with rice cultivation in the Yayoi period (300 BC–300 AD) and after being influenced by Chinese culture in the Nara period (710–794), by the time Kyoto was made the capital in the Heian period (794–1185), Japanese cuisine had flourished as part of an independently Japanese national culture. In those times, the emperor and the nobility governed the country, and the elegant culture that formed the foundation of modern Japan developed. Social events were held all year round at the imperial court, as well as traditional banquets to mark seasonal changes. Among them was the New Year’s “Daikyo”, extravagant banquets hosted by the imperial family and by servants in their respective residences. At the time, the focus of attention was on how splendidly ingredients were cut and prepared, and “Houchounin” (masters of the knife) from within the imperial palace, in the Office of the Palace Table (in charge of cooking and serving court food), and outside the palace, became famous. Cooking, along with academic knowledge, performing arts, painting and literature, was part of the education of a court noble, and those who excelled were called “Yusoku” (having great artistic talent), as was told in “The Tale of Genji”, (a classic novel from the early 11th century), and the ritual cuisine of the imperial court that has been handed down to today is known as “Yusoku” cuisine.

By the Kamakura period (1185–1333), samurai warrior households began to incorporate the culture of the imperial court, and together with the spirituality and recipes of “Shojin” vegetarian cuisine, derived from Buddhist monks who were prohibited from taking the life of living things, these features were used effectively in



The “Ikama” style of Shikibouchou (Masayasu Ikama, current 30th head)

the creation of what later became “Wabi-cha” (a rustic and simple style of tea ceremony), and “Kaiseki” cuisine for the tea ceremony.

The Muromachi period (1336–1573) saw the birth of “Honzen” cuisine, served on legged trays. Samurai retainers invited their shogun general for a formal meal which had many variations but consisted mainly of serving “Shikisankon” (three trays of drink and food), or “Shichigosan Honzen” (three trays of 5 and 7 dishes). From this ritual was born the “Shikibouchou” rite of the ceremonial carving knife, with its unique techniques continuing the tradition from Heian era cooks, and is currently still handed down in a long-established Kyoto restaurant.

The table manners for Honzen cuisine were elaborate and varied, depending also on the style and era, but from the Sengoku (warring states) period to the Azuchi-Momoyama period (c. 1467–c. 1603), a simplified version became known as Kaiseki cuisine, and was established together with Wabi-cha. The efforts of tea masters Takeno Joo, who dispensed with the luxurious meals that were served at the time and offered “Ichiju-sansai” (one soup dish and three side dishes), and Sen no Rikyu, simplified Kaiseki cuisine to be more suitable for Wabi-cha. By doing away with the superfluous and complicated aspects of Honzen cuisine, the quality of the food improved, becoming not only a feast for the eyes, but also the palate.

In the Edo period (1603–1868), demands for banquets to be enjoyed in a more relaxed mood led to “Kaiseki” (会席) or banquet course cuisine, spelled with different words but sounding the same as the Kaiseki (懷石) of the tea ceremony. These two types of Kaiseki cuisines eventually constituted the mainstream of Japanese cuisine. As the emperor lived in Kyoto, food was delivered here from all over the country, and restaurants run by the merchant class prospered. In addition, many tea houses and inns were operated along the “Kaido” transportation routes used by itinerant traders, and the large variety of food cultures that were born in Kyoto spread throughout Japan in the form of recipe books. It is with such a history that the present form of Kyoto cuisine more or less achieved completion from the Muromachi to the Edo period. Today, it is highly appreciated around the world.

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The exterior of Heihachi Tea House Inn during the Meiji period.