

THE INSIDE  
GUIDE TO  
DINING  
NATIONWIDE

# Deeply dishy

Don't just stick to sushi. Feasting on *all* the local cuisine will be a highlight of your visit, says foodie **Alicia Miller**



Slices of life: salmon sashimi; right, clockwise from top left, sweets for sale in a department store; Wakasa fugu pufferfish; yakitori restaurant; Japanese tempura

The best bit about a visit to Japan? The food. If you don't believe me, wait until your first taste of featherlight tempura, silky salmon sashimi or rich, miso-laced ramen. No wonder *washoku* — Japanese cuisine — features on Unesco's Intangible Cultural Heritage list. It's complex, diverse and unique, imbued with meaning and a sense of place. But, most of all, it's crazy delicious.

First-timers to the country are often shocked by the breadth of Japanese fare — sushi and ramen are the tip of the iceberg. Just as often you'll find udon noodle shops, okonomiyaki pancake restaurants, stand-up yakitori bars and *gyudon* beef-bowl chains. There's a place for every taste and every occasion: the smoky izakaya pubs for drinking; the speedy *donburi* spots for solo diners; the elaborate *kaiseki* meals for high-class entertaining. Sure, you can drop a month's rent on wagyu beef or fugu pufferfish in Michelin-starred restaurants, but more often than not, a £5 slap-up dinner at a train station brings just as much pleasure.

Hole-in-the-wall places, often with only a handful of seats, usually specialise in one type of dish and deliver it expertly. Grab a stool and order by pointing to the plastic display food in the window. If you have dietary restrictions, bring these written in Japanese to show your server — even things that appear vegetarian often contain fish stock. Otherwise, just wing it!

Food in Japan is as seasonal as it is local. Whether it's Hokkaido sweetcorn or Tohoku peaches, the Japanese go mad for whatever's at its best that month — supermarkets are flooded accordingly with impeccable produce and cafes lay on themed dishes. It's not just fresh foods. Visit in spring and you'll find cherry-blossom-flavoured KitKats and *chuhai* (alcohol spritz) lining the shelves. By autumn they will have changed to red apple, and in winter sweet potato or lemon.

Packaged treats make for the cheapest and best souvenirs. Especially the many flavoured biscuits — because no-one, not even the French, nails patisserie like the Japanese. You need only wander round *depachika* (food halls) in department stores to see the evidence — the countless fluffy cakes and filled wafers are straight out of a magazine shoot.

These *depachika*, like the popular *konbini* (convenience stores) are perfect places to grab a thrifty meal on the go. Not that you should eat it on the go, mind. In one of Japan's many great contradictions, for all the ubiquity of food — it is literally available everywhere — eating or drinking while walking is a no-no. The other 'rules'? If dishes are served separately, eat them that way — don't spoon side dishes over your rice. Avoid propping chopsticks upwards in rice or passing food from your chopsticks to another person's. But most of all, have fun. For the Japanese eating is, above all, about joy. ▶





# Essential eating: your A-Z

**Asa-gohan:** Japanese breakfast. There are variations, but the staple format is: grilled fish, miso soup, rice, omelette, pickles, *kobachi* (small, usually veg-based side dishes) and *umeboshi* (salty fermented plums). Almost every hotel will put on a top-notch spread, served up artistically on a lacquer tray.

**Curry:** A popular fast-food item and nothing like Indian curry. Expect a deep brown, gravy-like sauce, often served over pork *katsu* (fried cutlet) and rice.

**Donburi:** Rice bowl, topped with veg, meat or fish — examples include *oyakodon* (chicken and egg), *tendon* (tempura) or *gyudon* (beef). Great for a quick, cheap lunch.

**Izakaya:** A Japanese pub. Order loads of dishes, tapas-style, including gyoza fried dumplings and sashimi. Drinking is essential: order in rounds of *nama biru* (draft beer), *chuhai* (Shochu spirit spritz), saké or umeshu (sweet plum wine).

**Kaiseki-ryori:** Multi-course, gourmet cuisine with many ingredients, complex preparations and very visual presentations. Found in speciality restaurants and hotels (sometimes ryokans), often around Kyoto.

**Mochi:** Chewy rice balls, usually sweetened and eaten with tea or dessert. Common fillings include adzuki (sweet red bean) and sesame.

**Okonomiyaki:** A Japanese savoury pancake, containing cabbage, fish or meat, and topped with fish flakes, seaweed, brown sauce and mayonnaise. Specifics vary from place to place — in Hiroshima they add noodles, while Tokyo's *monjayaki* version is thinner. Choose a restaurant that lets you cook your own — lots more fun — and order yakisoba fried noodles and *takoyaki* (octopus balls) as sides.

**Ramen:** A meaty, thin wheat noodle soup, which comes in

many varieties: rich, pork-broth *tonkotsu*; light *shio* (salt), savoury *shoyu* (soy) and creamy miso. You'll find ramen shops everywhere — fast-food spots, they're not built for lingering.

**Soba:** Made from buckwheat, these delicate, nutty noodles are pricier than ramen and often found in more formal settings. They can be served hot or cold, with a dipping sauce or in a soup.

**Sushi:** Fish, seafood and vegetables served atop or rolled in vinegar-seasoned rice. It comes at all price points, from blowout *omakase* (chef's choice) to cheap *kaiten* (conveyor belt), where two pieces cost £1.50-£5. The quality in *kaiten* is superb by UK standards. Don't add too much soy sauce; dip sushi in very lightly, fish-side first (and if you're not confident with chopsticks, fingers are fine).

**Sashimi:** Slivers of sliced fish, often served as part of a *kaiseki* multi-course meal.

**Sukiyaki and shabu-shabu:** Thinly sliced beef or pork and vegetables, cooked in hot broth — can be mid-priced or expensive (Kyoto has many top-end versions). With *sukiyaki*, you cook ingredients together in a shallow pot before dipping them into raw egg and sweet sauce. With *shabu-shabu*, you dip items one by one into hot water, cooking them briefly.

Hunger games: above, *sukiyaki*; below left, clockwise from top left, *chicken donburi*; *kaiseki*; *mochi*; *okonomiyaki* pancakes; below, *sushi*

**Tempura and kushiage:** Battered veg, meat and fish. Tempura is light and veg-focused. *Kushiage* is heavier and served on a skewer — meat and cheese feature.

**Udon:** Fat wheat noodles, usually served in soup with a clear broth and topped with tempura or sweet fried tofu.

**Yakitori:** Skewered chicken, grilled over charcoal, served in dedicated restaurants or izakayas. Offal is often used, so if you're squeamish ask for *mune* (chicken breast), *tsukune* (chicken meatball) or *torinegi* (chicken and leek).

**Yakiniku:** Japanese barbecue, usually beef, often expensive. Also try Korean barbecue, which is popular and more affordable.

