

A man in a dark kimono is shown in profile, working in a traditional Japanese kitchen. He is positioned behind a large, glowing hearth (kamado) which provides the primary light source. In the foreground, a wooden table is set with various Japanese dishes: a bowl of green soup with a central garnish, a plate of fried food (tempura) with a dipping sauce, and a small bowl of green sauce. A white ceramic bottle and other small vessels are also visible on the table. The background is dark, emphasizing the man and the hearth.

# scrutable japanese fare

*an enticing orientation  
course in far-eastern feasting*

*food* By THOMAS MARIO





THE HOST WHO'S INTERESTED in dining Japanese style will benefit from the fact that the Oriental criterion of fine art—which holds that less is more—reigns supreme. His needs are minimal: He can eschew chairs and conventional legged tables; his soup bowls function sans spoons; napery is almost nonexistent; and he is often able to do away with the kitchen completely. There is a basic Japanese seafood stock called *dashi* that he can dash off in a snap—py five minutes, and many of the dishes take no preparation at all—from wafer-thin slices of tuna fish to fresh strawberries the size of plums. In short, the host has a good thing going when he decides to prepare a Japanese repast. But his guests benefit equally from this ancient art.

For a long time, sukiyaki was the cornerstone of Japanese cooking at American tables; but in



recent years, that epicurean but elaborate entree has been yielding first place to *shabu shabu*. As a party production, it would be hard to imagine anything more relaxing for the host and more fun-filled for the guests; in order to eat, everybody has to get into the act. As with *sukiyaki*, the mere sight of the food—raw prime ribs of beef sliced as thin as bacon, creamy-white mushrooms, bamboo shoots, crisp onion slices and, sometimes, cooked noodles, among an infinite variety of possible adjuncts to the beef, spread out on platters—is enough to draw everybody to the table. But unlike *sukiyaki*, which the host alone prepares for his guests, *shabu shabu* permits him to sit back while each guest dips his or her own tidbit into a pot of bubbling broth. In about a minute, the scalding-hot food is retrieved and swirled into a cooling dip, so that it can be popped into the mouth. If a *shabu shabu* fancier likes his beef medium or well done, he merely keeps it in the bubbly stock for a moment or two longer than the rare-beef addict. After the beef has been dispatched, the vegetables and thin noodles are turned into the now richly flavored stock. Also, by this time, the unpremeditated elbow brushing, chopstick wielding, sake sipping and comparative taste testing will have divested the diners of their culinary inhibitions.

The would-be delver into the nuances of Nipponese cuisine should take note of the way the shoeless Japanese diner sits on his tatami mat; it is the key, the very ginkgo nut of Japanese dining; to wit: It must be at once graceful and informal. Only the Japanese tea ceremony is a stylized production; a dinner party is something else altogether. For instance, consider tempura, fried in an almost feather-light batter. The shrimps, clusters of fried watercress, slices of mushroom, strips of green pepper or whatever happens to strike the chef's fancy at the last moment are gleefully scattered over the tray in no fixed pattern. And yet even one learning to use chopsticks for the first time won't be able to mar the picturelike appeal of the tempura at the table.

Some Japanese restaurants on these shores that attract large numbers of *nisei* often have more patrons in the kitchen than cooks. One customer will want some slices of sweet yam in his tempura; another will ask for a chunk of abalone; another, for more onions. But the whole bumptious feeling, the free-and-easy humor between the chef and his guests, makes the guests feel just as they do at their own private tempura party. It's the kind of unceremonious fun that makes tempura in this country such a deliciously informal idea for late-night kitchen suppers.

Few hosts these days need an Admiral Peary in a chef's hat to introduce the

array of Japanese prepared foods such as bottled sauces and seasonings now coming to the U. S. The beauty of most of them is that even for non-Japanese menus, their uses are as flexible as young bamboo. Japanese soy sauce, more mellow than the Chinese, may be lightly brushed on any broiled food, from fresh salmon to shashlik, and it will impart delicate, nutty, rich flavor overtones. There's another sauce of the soy family called *menmi*, bottled by Kikkoman; you'll probably have to go to an Oriental food shop for this one. In Japan, it's widely used in a broth with noodles—requiring merely the addition of water. Add a spoonful or two of *menmi* to any soup or stew, be it Gallic or Greek, and the original flavors will suddenly blossom with a new, vivid richness. You needn't wait for a full kimono Japanese dinner to try wasabi powder, a pungent seasoning made from the strong wasabi radish. It rivals Chinese or dried English mustard in sharpness and goes as well with a *pot-au-feu* or even a New England boiled dinner as it does with any Oriental dish.

Even more useful for freewheeling parties is the Japanese style of cooking—as anybody who uses a fireplace hibachi can testify. Japanese steakhouses in this country have unveiled the miraculously simple way of cooking shell steak, shrimps and vegetables right on the metal slab that is part of the dining table. The technique, as easy as sprinkling sesame seeds, can be applied rewardingly to chicken, swordfish, lamb, sweetbreads, venison or any other tender flesh that can be cut into fair-sized cubes. The old problem of keeping food hot simply disappears when the sizzling steak is delivered directly from the grill to your waiting plate.

To really appreciate sake, the delightful Japanese rice wine, you have to drink it slightly mulled. At room temperature, it's a different potable, reminiscent of dry vermouth or *fino* sherry, although the *mirin* sometimes used for cooking is less dry than the table sakes. A second reason for drinking it warm is the Japanese belief, easily verified, that the effect of warm sake on the body is instant rather than slightly delayed, as in drinking unheated wine. Sake should be poured from the bottle into the small porcelain *tokkuri* pitchers, one for each guest, and immersed in hot water until it reaches about 120° or until the neck of the pitcher feels warm—not burning hot. It's then poured into the small *sakazuki* cups that are usually refilled about a dozen times during a meal. Like certain rieslings and all rosés, sake must be drunk young to be at its best. It should be consumed not later than a year and a half after its bottling, which means that sake shouldn't be honored with dust and cobwebs and should be bought at a thriving liquor store, preferably one that

caters to Oriental sake sippers. The best sake comes from Nada, a region of Japan that bears the same relation to other sake-producing sections that cognac does to other brandies. At the beginning of a Japanese-inspired party, the land of the rising sun is best toasted with the *saktini*—a very dry martini, with sake used in place of dry vermouth and garnished with a paper-thin slice of unpeeled cucumber.

Americans who were stationed in Japan after World War Two may remember having knelt alongside the Japanese as they prayed to their food goddess and to the souls of the departed salmon. In this country, no such ceremony is required to show an appreciation of the joys of Japanese cooking. A well-fed look is enough of a votive offering. Recipes fit for the gods follow, each of which serves four.

#### BROCCOLI SALAD, GOLDEN DRESSING

- 1 bunch broccoli
- 3 egg yolks
- $\frac{3}{4}$  cup cold water
- 3 tablespoons vinegar
- 2 tablespoons sugar
- $\frac{3}{4}$  teaspoon salt
- 1 tablespoon cornstarch
- 2 teaspoons prepared horseradish
- 3 large red radishes

As a rule, Japanese salads are served in Lilliputian bowls; Americans prefer the more generous proportions given here.

Cut flowerets off stalks of broccoli, letting about 1-in. stem remain on each. If flowerets are large, cut in half lengthwise. (Balance of stems may be cooked as a vegetable at another meal.) Bring a pot of water to a rapid boil. Drop a handful of flowerets into water and cook for  $\frac{1}{2}$  minute, no longer. Lift broccoli from water with slotted spoon or skimmer. Cook balance of flowerets in same manner, then chill in refrigerator. Put egg yolks, water, vinegar, sugar, salt and cornstarch in blender and blend at high speed until smooth—about  $\frac{1}{2}$  minute. Pour into top of double boiler over simmering water. Cook, stirring constantly with wire whip, until thick and fluffy. This will take only a few minutes. Stir in horseradish. Chill in refrigerator. Place broccoli on a platter or wide shallow serving dish. Spoon dressing on top. Grate radishes through coarse holes of square metal grater and sprinkle over dressing.

#### CABBAGE SALAD, SOY DRESSING

- 1 head Chinese cabbage
- 2 large scallions, white and green parts, thinly sliced
- 1 green pepper
- 2 medium-size white radishes
- $\frac{1}{4}$  cup rice vinegar or cider vinegar
- 2 teaspoons soy sauce
- $\frac{1}{4}$  teaspoon monosodium glutamate

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Cut Chinese cabbage crosswise into 1/4-in.-thick slices. Pour boiling water over it and drain well. Combine cabbage and scallions in mixing bowl. Cut green pepper in half lengthwise; remove stem end and seeds. Force pepper and radishes through coarse holes of square metal grater and add to cabbage. Add vinegar, soy sauce and monosodium glutamate and toss well. Place a piece of waxed paper or a plate over salad and press down firmly. Place a weight, such as two or three cans of food, on the paper. Let mixture marinate at least 1 hour before serving.

### SESAME DIPPING SAUCE

- 2 tablespoons sesame seeds
- 1 cup cold water
- 1/4 cup soy sauce
- 1/4 cup shelled walnuts

Put sesame seeds in a heavy dry pan over a moderate flame. Stir constantly until seeds turn light brown. Remove from heat and combine with balance of ingredients in blender. Blend 1 minute at high speed. Chill before serving. Pour a small cup of sauce for each guest.

### SCALLION DIPPING SAUCE

- 1 cup dashi or soup stock
- 1/4 cup soy sauce
- 2 tablespoons sake
- 1 teaspoon lemon juice
- 1 teaspoon freshly grated ginger
- 3 tablespoons finely minced scallions

The Japanese basic stock called *dashi* is normally made from dried *konbu* or seaweed and dried bonito. Since the main ingredients are dehydrated to start with, they lend themselves perfectly to packaging in paper bags now exported to the U.S. The bags are used in the same manner as tea bags. For those who prefer a nonfish flavor, chicken stock or any other stock may be substituted.

Pour all ingredients into saucepan and bring to a boil. Remove at once from fire and chill well. Pour a small cup of sauce for each guest.

### CHICKEN YAKITORI

- 3 double breasts of chicken (6 halves)
- 4 large scallions
- 3 tablespoons soy sauce
- 2 tablespoons cold water
- 2 tablespoons sake
- 4 teaspoons sugar
- 1 tablespoon lemon juice
- 2 tablespoons salad oil
- 1 tablespoon sesame oil

Remove skin and bones from chicken or buy boneless breasts. Cut chicken into pieces approximately 1 in. square. Cut off and discard green part of scallions. Cut white part diagonally into



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1-in. pieces. Combine all other ingredients in mixing bowl. Add chicken and scallions and marinate 1 hour. Fasten chicken and scallions on long skewers. Broil over hibachi about 4 ins. above charcoal or in preheated broiler until well browned on all sides. Brush several times during broiling with marinade. Serve with either or both of the salads and dipping sauces above. Pass a bowl of rice.

### SHRIMP TEMPURA

- 3 lbs. shrimps
- 1 small eggplant
- 1 large green pepper
- 1 large Spanish onion
- 2 bunches watercress
- 12 large white mushrooms
- Salad oil

Like all batter-fried foods, tempura is at its best when it's hissing hot; the guests should wait rather than the tempura. One device for party service is to hire a domestic geisha who will fry and deliver it in batches. Another technique, in a large open kitchen-dining area, is to sit atop a kitchen or bar stool at a counter, facing your guests, and fry a limited amount of tempura at a time, letting guests who wish try their hand at the skillet. At the dinner hour, tempura is usually served with rice; for a late-night supper, it may be presented as a leisurely hot hors d'oeuvre.

Peel shrimps, leaving tails on. Remove veins in backs and cut shrimps lengthwise, without separating halves. Press each shrimp to make it open flat. Peel eggplant and cut into finger-length strips. Cut green pepper into long strips about ½ in. wide. Peel onion and cut crosswise into ½-in.-thick slices. Separate slices to make onion rings. Cut about 1 in. off base of watercress stems. Cut mushrooms into slices about ¼ in. thick. All vegetables should be dry and spread out on platters for easy handling. Preheat oil to a depth of 1½ ins. in an electric skillet set at 350°. Use two pair of tongs or chopsticks, one for dipping food into batter and lowering into fat, a second for removing tempura from fat. Dip pieces of food into batter (recipe below). Hold for a moment to let excess batter flow off. Slide food into skillet, being careful not to drop it so that fat splatters. Fry small amounts at a time, until light brown on both sides. Drain on absorbent paper or rack. Serve as soon as possible. Remove stray pieces of batter from fat with skimmer or slotted spoon. Serve with sauce below. Wash tempura down with cold Japanese beer.

### BATTER FOR TEMPURA

- 1 cup all-purpose flour
  - ½ teaspoon salt
  - 1 cup ice water
  - 2 egg whites
- Sift flour and salt together. Beat water



and egg whites in a large bowl until top is foamy. Add flour all at once and stir only until flour is moistened; the batter should be somewhat lumpy. Avoid overmixing.

#### SAUCE FOR TEMPURA

- 1 cup cold *dashi* or other stock
- $\frac{1}{4}$  cup soy sauce
- 2 teaspoons sugar
- 1 tablespoon sake
- $\frac{1}{2}$  cup grated daikon or white radish
- $\frac{1}{4}$  cup grated fresh ginger

*Dashi* may be made from *dashi* bags. Combine *dashi* with soy sauce, sugar and sake. Pour into individual cups for each guest for dipping. Pass daikon and ginger for each guest to add to his dipping cup.

#### JAPANESE STEAK DINNER

- 4 lbs. shell steak,  $\frac{3}{4}$  in. thick
- 2 lbs. large shrimps, peeled and deveined
- 1 lb. fresh bean sprouts or 1 1-lb. can bean sprouts, drained well
- 2 10-oz. packages frozen large asparagus spears, thawed
- Salad oil
- $\frac{1}{2}$  lemon
- 2 teaspoons sesame seeds, browned in oven or toasted in dry pan
- Soy sauce
- Salt, pepper, monosodium glutamate
- 2 medium-size onions, sliced  $\frac{1}{4}$  in. thick
- 8 large mushrooms, sliced  $\frac{1}{4}$  in. thick
- 2 tablespoons butter

In Japanese steakhouses, the heavy metal grill on which the steak dinner is prepared is part of a huge dining table, with guests seated on three sides, the chef working from the fourth. For home-size tables, the best arrangement is to set two electric skillets near the dining table but not on it. All food may be precut in the kitchen before it is brought to the skillets, or cut alongside the skillets as part of the entertainment. If bean sprouts are fresh, place in cold water, bring to a boil and drain well. Cut off all fat and bone from steaks and cut into  $\frac{3}{4}$ -in. cubes. Shrimps should be neatly lined in rows and cut into  $\frac{3}{4}$ -in. cubes. Cut asparagus diagonally into 1-in. pieces. All food should be neatly arranged on platters before the cooking commences. Preheat both skillets at 400°. Pour 1 to 2 tablespoons oil into first skillet. Place shrimps and asparagus in skillet. Sprinkle with juice of  $\frac{1}{2}$  lemon and sesame seeds. Sprinkle with soy sauce, salt, pepper and monosodium glutamate. Sauté, turning food frequently with long spatula, until shrimps are cooked through, about 3 to 4 minutes. Asparagus will be semitender. Serve shrimps and asparagus as the initial stanza of the dinner. Cut onion slices in half. Pour 1 to 2 tablespoons oil into second skillet. Place steak, mushrooms and



*"Would you like to know what I really want?"*

onions in skillet. Season generously with soy sauce, salt, pepper and monosodium glutamate. Sauté, tossing frequently, until browned and glossy-looking. Add butter. Place steak on serving plates. In same skillet, place bean sprouts and sauté only until heated through. Each person should have a bowl of rice, one or both of the dipping sauces above and one or both of the salads.

#### SHABU SHABU

- 3 lbs. boneless rib or shell of beef
- 4 large white mushrooms
- $\frac{1}{2}$  lb. fresh bamboo shoots or 12-oz. can bamboo shoots
- 2 ozs. fine-size noodles or green vermicelli, if available
- 1 medium-size Spanish onion
- 1 bunch watercress
- 1-oz. can wasabi powder
- $\frac{1}{2}$  lb. bean curd, cut into 1-in. squares
- 1 medium-size carrot, peeled, sliced  $\frac{1}{8}$  in. thick
- 2 cups Chinese cabbage,  $\frac{1}{4}$ -in. slices

Beef should be from the small end of prime ribs, cut on a slicing machine, no thicker than bacon. Cut mushrooms through caps and stems into  $\frac{1}{4}$ -in.-thick slices. If bamboo shoots are fresh, parboil 15 minutes and slice  $\frac{1}{8}$  in. thick, or use canned sliced bamboo shoots, well drained. Break noodles into pieces about 3 in. long, boil until tender and store in cold water until needed. Peel onion and cut in half through stem end. Cut into slices  $\frac{1}{4}$  in. thick. Cut about 1 in. from bottom of watercress stems. Prepare wasabi powder, following directions on can, or use strong English or Chinese mustard; add this to

the dipping sauces. Provide each guest with a bowl of rice, with both of the dipping sauces above and with one or both of the salads. Drain the noodles and arrange all ingredients on platters and place on table. Pour boiling water or boiling stock to a depth of 4 ins. in a large metal marmite pot or fondue pot over a table flame. If fondue pot is small, two may be used instead of one. The flame should be strong enough to keep water at a slow boil. Provide each guest with a fondue fork or with chopsticks. Each guest turns one beef slice at a time into a loose roll and immerses it in the boiling liquid until done. Beef is then dipped into a cool sauce. Some of the vegetables and bean curd may be put in stock along with meat, or meat may be eaten first and vegetables cooked afterward. Noodles are added at end and entire contents of the pot are then turned into soup bowls. Replace liquid in pot from time to time, if necessary, to keep it close to original level. Seasoning of broth—if water is used—may be corrected with salt, pepper and monosodium glutamate to taste or may be strengthened with *menmi* sauce or soy sauce.

Of course, there's no hard-and-fast rule that says you have to serve the preceding dishes in a felicitously Far Eastern manner; but if your accessories complement your cuisine, you'll be striking the proper note of pentatonic harmony. Your guests will then come through with the Occidental equivalent of "*Ogochi-so sama de gozaimashita*"—"It has been an honorable feast."

