

Issue 7 2013

# pacific

## TASTE OF THE ORIENT

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# Land of the

Giving traditional Japanese recipes a modern twist has become a favourite in restaurants around Australia.



**Honed over** many centuries, Japanese food is everything one could want in contemporary cooking—elegant presentation, exotic flavours, food that is simultaneously sophisticated, healthy and comforting.

Japanese cuisine is incredibly diverse, with hundreds of recipes utilising a spectrum of cooking styles and techniques, such as steaming, grilling, barbecuing and deep-frying to make salads, stir-fries, noodle soups, curries and more.

Most dishes are extremely healthy, being low in fat and high in protein—the staples are vegetables and nutritious ingredients such as seaweed, tofu and raw fish.

“The mantra of local, fresh, seasonal food; a diet featuring less dairy and meat; more vegetables and fruit; all of it prepared with the minimum of meddling from the chef and a deep respect for ingredients, resonated precisely with contemporary thinking in the West,” says food and travel writer Michael Booth in his book *Sushi and Beyond: What the Japanese Know About Cooking*, when explaining why Japanese food has become so popular throughout the Western world.

Australia has taken to Japanese cuisine like soy sauce to rice. Given our large immigrant population, proximity to Asia, shifting focus to seasonal eating and abundance of fresh seafood, it’s little surprise Japanese food is now so widespread.

One can find Japanese restaurants and sushi trains in big cities and small towns, most offering a selection of the usual suspects: sushi and sashimi, *katsu* curries, deep bowls of soul-satisfying *ramen* and *udon* noodle soups, and bento boxes containing teriyaki meat or fish, miso, rice, salad and tempura.

Many modern Japanese restaurants use Australian Wagyu beef to make traditional dishes, such as *sukiyaki* or *shabu shabu* hot pots, because high-grade Wagyu has the same superior quality as the acclaimed Japanese Kobe beef.

Local seafood is frequently treated in a traditional manner but given a contemporary tweak thanks to fashionable ingredients. Wild snapper sashimi can be made over with the addition of truffle oil and pork crackling, or Moreton Bay bugs might be served tempura-style with *yuzukoshō* mayonnaise, as served at Sydney’s hip Toko restaurant.



# rising cuisine

“Japas” (Japanese tapas) has also become increasingly popular, either served as bar snacks or combined to form an entire meal. The idea is inspired by Japanese bars, known as *izakaya*, where it is customary for small dishes to be served alongside drinks, similar to Spanish tapas bars, allowing the diner to enjoy a range of textures and flavours.

## The basics

The staples of Japanese cooking include seaweed, *dashi* (stock made from a dried kelp seaweed called *konbu* and/or shavings of smoked, dried bonito fish), *shoyu* (soy sauce) and fermented foods, such as miso, which is made from fermented soybean paste and comes in a variety of strengths and flavours.

Other popular condiments include wasabi, pickled ginger, sake, rice wine and sesame paste.

Rice is so integral to Japanese cuisine that the terms for cooked rice—*gohan* or *meshi*—also mean ‘meal’. Almost every ‘side’ dish in Japanese cuisine is designed to accompany a bowl of carefully prepared rice, not the other way around.

Presentation, freshness and simplicity are all highly valued. Seasonings are generally subtle, so as not to overwhelm the palate and to allow the natural *umami* (the flavour of freshness; separate from sweet, sour, bitter and salty) of ingredients such as miso, shiitake mushrooms, seaweed and soy to shine through. ▶

## Inside-out

*Urumaki* is the Japanese word for sushi rolled with nori on the inside, rice on the outside.

## Essential tool

A *makisu* is a bamboo mat that is used for shaping sushi and other soft foods, such as omelettes.





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### New twists

Traditional Japanese flavours complement popular Western cuisine.

### Dumplings

Japanese dumplings, or *gyoza*, are traditionally served either steamed or fried.

### Crisp and fresh

Vegetables are preferred raw or lightly cooked, as in Luna’s green mango salad with smoked fish and sweet and sour dressing.

In many instances, food is eaten as close to its natural state as possible; fish and shellfish are often eaten raw or only very lightly cured. Dishes rarely mix many different food types and sauces are served separately for dipping rather than poured over the dish.

Japanese people generally believe vegetables are best eaten either raw or with minimal cooking, to retain both freshness and texture.

Preparation of ingredients is also essential to Japanese dining, not only for aesthetic reasons but also because food is eaten with chopsticks and therefore needs to be in bite-sized pieces that retain their shape when picked up.

Japanese meals can range from very casual affairs to elaborate banquets known as *kaiseki*—traditional degustation meals that pay homage to the seasons.

A more typical Japanese dinner, however, would include a bowl of rice and miso soup with an individual main of fish or meat and two to three other dishes, such as marinated fish, vegetables and pickles. Fruit and green tea frequently finish a meal.

More than perhaps any other cuisine in the world, Japanese food truly is a feast for the senses. Along with the intriguing flavours, its delicate aesthetics are unrivalled, whether it’s a simple bowl of soba noodles served with a cold dipping sauce or an elaborate bento box meal.

For in Japan, food is culture and culture is food. ■

## Got the taste for Japanese?

Luna is open every night for dinner, with a menu that rotates between Japanese and Thai. Luna is on Pacific Jewel and Pacific Dawn and will be added to Pacific Pearl soon. Book in early so you don’t miss out!

### A sneak peek at the menu ...

**Tuna and salmon sashimi** on crisp tacos with chilled tomato salsa and salted sugar snap peas

**Japanese pork dumplings** with black mushroom, chilli oil and cabbage (pictured far left)

**Caramel tamarind blue eye cod** with black pepper, raw shallots and pickled radish

**Chicken and vegetable yakitori** with ginger sauce, salted shiitake and chilli paste

**12-hour braised pork belly** and watermelon with soy and hoisin dressing (pictured above)



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