

Flavors of the Four Seasons



Traditional Japanese food does not end with sushi and tempura. No matter where you are in the country, from Hokkaido to Okinawa, local food associated with each of the four seasons can be enjoyed. Here we feature some representative local dishes that Japanese people commonly associate with the seasons.

SPRING

1 Ikanago no kugini (Hyogo)



Ikanago no kugini is cooked using soy sauce and sugar to stew young *ikanago* (sand lance), a species of fish caught in the Seto Inland Sea from February to

March. It is a homemade dish in Hyogo, Osaka and other parts of the Kansai area. Local people feel the coming of spring when eating *kugini*. *Kugi* means “nail” and the dish’s name is said to come from its resemblance to nails.

2 Hobazushi (Gifu)

Hobazushi is prepared by wrapping vinegared rice, trout, vegetables and other ingredients in a *honoki* (Japanese big-leaf magnolia) leaf. In the past, households in the mountainous areas of



Gifu served *hobazushi* to neighbors and relatives who helped them plant rice in the spring. The leaf has a pleasing scent and antimicrobial properties.

SUMMER

3 Katsuo notataki (Kochi)

Katsuo notataki is made using *katsuo* (bonito) caught off

the coast of Kochi in early summer and fall. Since the Edo period (1603–1867), it has been enjoyed as summer cuisine. Rice straw is burned and the fire is used to roast the surface of cleaned *katsuo* before cooling it. The roasted *katsuo* is sliced at about a one-centimeter width. It is eaten dipped in seasoning made of green onion or garlic, and soy sauce or other types of sauce.



4 Goya chample (Okinawa)



Goya chample is cooked by stir-frying *goya* (bitter melon), a typical Okinawan vegetable, with ingredients such as tofu and pork. “Cham-ple” in the Okinawan

dialect means “mix.” In the past, *goya* was mainly grown in Okinawa and Kyushu. These days it is grown in family gardens around the country.

5 Unagi no kabayaki (Shizuoka)

Unagi no kabayaki is cooked by cleaning an *unagi* (eel), basting it with a mix of soy sauce, sugar, rice wine and other ingredients, and broiling it. The broiled eel can be eaten alone, accompanying other foods or on hot rice.



Japanese customarily eat unagi no kabayaki in the summer to ward off fatigue. Abundant in water, Shizuoka is a common production area of unagi, with numerous farms raising the eels.

6 Hiyashiru (Miyazaki)

Hiyashiru is cooked by dissolving broiled miso in water, adding sliced cucumber, *shiso* (perilla) and other ingredients, and pouring it on rice. This local cuisine originated from busy farmers' need for an easy-to-cook food. It can be enjoyed even on a small appetite, a typical symptom brought on by the summer heat.



FALL

7 Imoni (Yamagata)



Imoni is cooked using a soy sauce- or miso-based soup to stew taro and meat. Local people in Yamagata typically hold *imonikai* (imoni parties) in the fall at outdoor locations such as rivers.

Imoni is enjoyed accompanied by family, friends, schoolmates and coworkers in the fall when taro is harvested. Every September, the Yamagata City government organizes an annual event for cooking imoni using a pan that is nearly six meters in diameter.

8 Harakomeshi (Miyagi)

Harakomeshi is cooked by adding salmon soup to cooked rice and topping it with salmon and *harako* (salmon roe). In the fall, salmon travel north in the Abukuma-gawa river that traverses



Miyagi and Fukushima Prefectures. *Harakomeshi* is said to have become popularized when Masamune Date (1567–1636), a famous military commander who governed this area in the Sengoku and early Edo periods, praised its taste.

WINTER

9 Ishikarinabe (Hokkaido)

Japanese have long had the custom of gathering around a kettle pot to warm themselves in the winter. *Ishikarinabe* is one of the representative dishes of cold Hokkaido. It originated from a practice of fishermen who lived at the mouth of the Ishikari-gawa river in the eastern part of Hokkaido. In the fall and winter, they would



catch running salmon and cook them by cutting them into chunks and stewing them with miso and ingredients such as cabbage, onions and tofu.

10 Kiritanpo (Akita)

Kiritanpo is cooked by grinding cooked rice, molding it to wooden skewers and broiling it. It is said to have originated in the northern part of Akita. *Kiritanpo* can be eaten pasted with miso, or added to a soy sauce based soup with chicken, green onion, and mushroom.



11 Fugu dishes (Yamaguchi)



The *fugu* (blowfish) season peaks in winter, making the fish a typical winter food in Japan. Yamaguchi Prefecture, especially its port city of Shimonoseki, is famous for dishes made with *fugu*. It can be eaten raw as *sashimi*, deep-fried as *karaage*, or thrown in a *nabe* (hot pot). Also popular is *hirezake*, sake containing a filet of broiled *fugu*.