

Tofu: Healthful & Fresh Japanese Favorite

By Nakako MATSUMOTO

Tofu has been everyday food in China, Japan and on the Korean Peninsula for many centuries. It was spread to Southeast Asia by ethnic Chinese and is now eaten in the entire Southeast Asian region, including Indonesia, Vietnam and Thailand. As it began to attract attention as a healthful food, it has also become available from ordinary food stores in the United States. However, in spite of its popularity, the history of *tofu* is uncertain. Although it is said that *tofu* was invented in China in the 2nd century, B.C., it did not appear in any documents until the 8th or 9th century, A.D.

Tofu appeared in a Japanese document for the first time in the 12th century. Since it was forbidden to eat animal meat in Buddhist temples, soybeans rich in vegetable protein were processed into *tofu* and other products, and were consumed in place of animal protein. It is assumed that *tofu*, which was originally made in Buddhist temples, then spread to ordinary households.

Tofu is 90% water. It has a subtle, sweet taste as well as an *umami* taste (a taste that comes from amino acids and enhances flavor). The constituents of these tastes are dissolved in water. Perhaps it is because the quality of water is very good in Japan (which makes it possible to make tasty *tofu*) that once *tofu* was introduced to this country, its consumption spread more rapidly than in China. In Japan, water is said to be especially good in Kyoto, where *tofu* dishes are still

among the local specialties. As a saying goes, "*Tofu* and women from Kyoto excel," and it was touted that *tofu* and women from Kyoto had no rivals. The tastiness of *tofu* comes not only from its taste but from its smooth, soft texture. There is a saying, "*Tofu* and the floating world (meaning this world) must be soft," showing that one has to be flexible in navigating this world by taking *tofu* as an example.

The rapid spread of *tofu* may be attributed to the fact that its subtle taste appealed to the Japanese and, since *tofu* does not have a strong taste, it can be seasoned in any manner. During the Edo period (1603-1867), a cookbook titled *One Hundred Novel Dishes of Tofu* was published in 1782. The book proved to be so popular that its serial was also published. One of the dishes in *One Hundred Novel Dishes of Tofu* was "*arare-dofu*" (hail *tofu*). The book suggests cutting *tofu* into 2-3 cm cubes, putting them in a bamboo colander and shaking them lightly to make hail-like *tofu*. When I actually tried it, it produced small, round *tofu* balls.

Leading Healthful Food

Tofu is made with soybeans, which are called "meat of the field" because they contain high-quality protein and fat. As they are digested, soya protein produces substances that lower cholesterol levels and blood pressure. Also, the fat in soybeans energizes the brain and improves memory and learning capability. Oligosaccharide in *tofu* promotes bowel movements and prevents cancer. Thus, the nutritious effects of *tofu* are varied, making it plain why it is touted as a healthful food. However, the most important effect is that it is good for people who need to control their weight because it is a high-protein, low-energy food.

As dry soybeans' cellular texture is hard, and as soybeans have their distinct smell

and contain some physiologically harmful substances, one needs to be inventive to use them as food. Soybeans are not easily digestible, even when they are cooked. Therefore, it is necessary to grind them to destroy their tissues and heat them to remove the smell as well as physiologically harmful substances. While many varieties of so-called healthful foods do not taste good, *tofu* stands out because it is nutritious, easily digestible and tasty.

How to Make Tofu

Tofu is made by extracting water-soluble proteins in soybeans and softly shaping them by adding a coagulant. This process produces a by-product, which is also edible. Soybeans are soaked in water overnight and then ground while water is being added until they become something like thick soup. This liquid is boiled for about 10 minutes in a pot and then squeezed in a sack to separate the liquid from the solid. This liquid is *tonyu*, or soybean milk, while the solid is called *okara*, or bean curd lees. When a coagulant, such as calcium sulfate, is added to the soybean milk and the milk is stirred gently, proteins begin to coagulate. Then, put a cotton cloth in a box with holes in the bottom and all four sides, and pour in the whole ingredient. Put a light weight on top to press water out of it.

When it is shaped and done, it is called "*momen-dofu*," or cotton *tofu*. *Momen-dofu* has a fine sponge-like texture, so by placing a weight on it, its water content can be removed further. When thicker soybean milk is mixed with a coagulant and put in a box, it becomes jellied. This



Vegetable with tofu sauce



Photos: Consumer Co-operative Kobe



Cotton tofu



Silk tofu

Photos: Otokomae Tofuten Inc.

version is called “*kinugoshi-dofu*,” or silk *tofu*. Cotton *tofu* has more substance, while silk *tofu* is softer and smoother. Cotton *tofu* is used as it is, but it is often used after squeezing water out of it. When squeezed cotton *tofu* is shaped like a golf ball and deep-fried, it is called *hiryosu*, or flying dragon heads. *Hiryosu* was originally the name of a Portuguese sweet, which was made by deep-frying small balls of wheat-flour dough. Gradually, it came to mean deep-fried *tofu* balls, which



Hiryosu

Tofu Dishes

The most Japanese of all Japanese *tofu* dishes are probably “*hiya-yakko*” (cold *tofu*) and “*yu-dofu*” (simmered *tofu*). The former is a summer dish, while the latter is a winter dish, and they are designed to enjoy the taste of *tofu* itself. *Tofu* is the most common ingredient in *miso* soup



Miso soup

Hiya-yakko (cold *tofu*)

Raw *tofu* is cut into cubes of about 5 cm and placed on a plate. It is dipped in *dashi* broth (made with seaweed, dried bonito shaves, etc.) seasoned with soy sauce. Or you may just pour soy sauce over it. Grated ginger, chopped scallions and other items can be used as condiments.



today are an important ingredient of cooked dishes – they are cooked alone or with vegetables and seasoned with soy sauce, sugar and sweet wine or *sake*.

Yu-dofu (simmered *tofu*)

This dish is prepared at the table. Put a shallow earthenware pot on a burner on the table and simmer *tofu* gently. Everyone at the table scoops *tofu* from the pot and eats in the same manner as *hiya-yakko* or dipping it in *ponzu* (made with soy sauce and vinegar). Since *tofu* hardens when heated excessively, never boil water. Simmer gently. This is why an earthenware pot is used.



Agedashi-dofu (deep-fried *tofu*)

Press water out of cotton *tofu*, roll it in wheat flour and deep-fry. This dish is also eaten in the same manner as *hiya-yakko* and *yu-dofu*. You can enjoy these three dishes in various other ways — with salt and olive oil or making salads with dressing instead of the traditional sauce.



Tonyu (soybean milk)

Soybean milk is used in the same manner as cow's milk – consumed as it is or used in soups or puddings.



Sukiyaki

This is a one-pan dish cooked at the table. An iron pan is placed on a burner on the table, in which beef, Chinese cabbage, scallions, *tofu* and other ingredients are cooked. It is seasoned with soy sauce and sugar. Each person picks up the ingredients when he or she feels they are cooked well enough and dips them in beaten egg to eat.

Okara (bean curd lees)



Bean curd lees used to be fried in a greaseless pan to remove water and then cooked with vegetables. However, as people have become increasingly health-conscious, it is now often mixed with ground meat or wheat flour to make hamburgers or to bake bread, cakes and cookies.

Tofu steak, fried in a bit of oil, is now very popular as a Western-style *tofu* dish. This dish can be easily prepared if cotton *tofu* is used after pressing the liquid out of it. Westerners who first brought Christianity to Japan wrote that *tofu* was “similar to freshly made cheese.” When its liquid is pressed or strained out, *tofu* is similar to cottage cheese. When one wraps cotton *tofu* in a piece of clean cloth and puts a weight such as a bowl filled with water on top of it, it loses its liquid and becomes merely moist. It can be added to hamburgers or a meat loaf. It can also be used in a wide variety of dishes, including salads and pasta dishes. JS



Tofu steak

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