

A New Year's Banquet

By Patricia Massy

First Course: *O-hagatame*

O-mochi, pounded glutinous rice, is essential to a New Year's meal in every household. In former days it was thought that eating *o-mochi* would strengthen the teeth, thus ensuring a healthy life for the duration of the year. Here it is served with a syrupy treacle called *ame* (right) and *miso* that has been grilled on a thin board of fragrant cedar wood (left). This *yaki-miso* was as extravagant to the Japanese of old as *pâté de foie gras* is to us. To the left of the 30cm long chopsticks is a saucer of green tea. Made of white willow, the chopsticks are tapered so that both ends can be used. In this way the flavors of the different foods are not disturbed. A sheet of *hosho-shi*, the finest paper, is spread over the tray.



Second Course: *Shokon*

Three dishes are served with cold *sake*: ground dried chestnuts, sliced fresh *katsuobushi* (both symbolic of success), and *konbu* (representing happiness). Wrapped with paper folded in a tortoiseshell pattern, the dishes face the lord, who sits opposite his guests. Because the tortoiseshell motif signifies happiness derived from long life, this method of presentation is reserved for felicitous occasions.

NEW Year's Day for a provincial lord during the Tokugawa Period (1603-1867) was not a time to spend restfully with his family. On this day he was expected to treat his closest retainers to a sumptuous meal of rare and special food symbolizing health and happiness for the year to come. In its strict formality the meal also bespoke the rigid order of each of his next 364 days because, as the head of his fief, he had to conform to the set social patterns of the Confucian-based feudal government of the Tokugawas.

The food was served on finely lacquered low tables

called *zen* that stand just above knee level. The order of presenting these table-trays depended on the purpose of the gathering, felicitous occasions calling for the appearance of "7-5-3 trays," so called for the number of dishes on each tray. These lucky numbers are still observed today in the festival occurring on Nov. 15 when children aged seven, five or three are expected to pay a visit to a shrine.

The type of formal meal that a lord would have hosted originated in the palaces of Heian Period Kyoto some 1,000 years ago. Life in those days was composed of a

Third Course: *Nikon*

Warm sake in a red lacquered shallow cup placed on a similar black lacquered cup accompanies a bowl of vegetables cooked in a clear soup of sake and katsuobushi. Carrots and turnips pickled overnight in salt and dried sea bream, grilled and shredded, are presented in a tortoise-shell paper wrapping. The nandin leaves lend color while also signifying happiness.



over which water is gently poured. This method, which ensures an overall evenness of flavor, is called *shibiki*. Until the 19th century tuna was maligned, partly because its name, *shibi*, sounds like the word “death-day.” By the time of this meal, customs had changed, but just the same on the menu it was euphemistically termed “large fish.” Raw fish was always served with ginger, salted and washed in vinegar, as it is to this day. As ginger is believed to have antidotic properties, a bit of ginger was taken with every bite of fish.

series of rituals marking the passing of time, and these were celebrated with gala banquets which relieved the tedium of the aristocrats’ usual meal of a bowl packed with a mound of rice and accompanied by several small dishes of condiments. At a banquet the food was heaped in many dishes all of equal size much in the same manner that offerings were presented to the gods, for after all human beings theoretically rubbed elbows with celestial visitors on those sacred days.

The fish and fowl were prepared as befits an offering. To avoid polluting the meat by human contact, the chef



Fourth Course: *Sankon*

Warmed sake again is served, this time with two types of fish. In the large dish are the fins of a sea bream that has been ceremoniously cut by a professional carver. The wooden stand holds raw tuna which has been subtly salted by covering the fish meat with paper sprinkled with salt. This method, which ensures an overall evenness of flavor, is called *shibiki*. Until the 19th century tuna was maligned, partly because its name, *shibi*, sounds like the word “death-day.” By the time of this meal, customs had changed, but just the same on the menu it was euphemistically termed “large fish.” Raw fish was always served with ginger, salted and washed in vinegar, as it is to this day. As ginger is believed to have antidotic properties, a bit of ginger was taken with every bite of fish.

held the carcass with a pair of metal chopsticks while flourishing a long carving knife in his right hand. Although originally it was the duty of the host to undertake this feat before the eyes of his guests, eventually carving became the preserve of professional chefs who were highly respected for their skill. Until 1873, a white crane was ritually carved before the emperor on New Year’s Day. Emperor Meiji, however, seemed not to enjoy the spectacle. Since the fifth year of his reign white cranes have been allowed to grace the skies rather than the table.

Fifth Course: *Go-honzen*

Continuing seven delicacies, this tray is the main course of the “7-5-3” set of trays which were usually served at the same time. It was placed directly in front of the person, with the second tray to the right and the third to the left. The dish at the upper right holds a dip made of soy, sake, sand salt for the filleted *ayu* (a delectable river fish) in front of it. Being a dip, it is not counted as a serving. The tall bentwood container is tied with red and white cords, a congratulatory decoration that is still popular today. Inside is herring roe, called in Japanese “many children,” which is suggestive of good fortune in the form of a large family. The dish in the center is filled with several boiled tidbits: fish dumplings in the shape of bamboo shoots, abalone, sea cucumber and spinach. A fragrant herb, *sansho*, provides a piquant garnish. To the left of this dish is jellyfish in a dressing of soy and vinegar. Pickles are seen at the left rear. As transferring the food from the tray straightway to the mouth could be accomplished only with difficulty, it was understandably considered impolite. The little dish at the front of the tray was held in the left hand for receiving whatever morsel would be picked from the dishes far and near. The rice and clear soup with neatly cut radishes were consumed alternately after tasting the other food.



Sixth Course: *Ninosen*

The *pièce de résistance*, a snipe presented with head, wings, tail and legs, required exceptional skill in cutting and handling. The bird must appear quite fresh, with absolutely no trace of blood. Salt-grilled over charcoal, the meat is placed on persimmon leaves, chosen because they do not wilt. To the right of the bird is an abalone shell filled with abalone steamed in sake, shiobiki sea bream, and vinegared white yam. In the middle of the tray, grandly embellished with gold and silver cords, swims a sea bream, grilled. Two soups complete the arrangement: a miso soup with sea bream flavored with citron and a clear broth with duck meat, *daikon* (radish) cut in the shape of ginkgo leaves, brown mushrooms, slivered burdock root, starwort leaves and aromatic spikenard shoots.

With the passing of time, bowls and plates came to be seen as more than vessels in which to pile the food in conical mounds. Space was left in the dish to frame the food, and only enough was placed in the dish as to appear appetizing. Seasonings also improved. Taste therefore became as important a criterion as form. During the Heian Period the nobility knew only salt, vinegar and a primitive soy sauce that was merely the liquid drained from *miso* (soybean paste). In the 12th century the advent of the grinding bowl, or *suribachi*, made it possible to turn miso into a soluble paste that could be used to flavor soup. This and the discovery of the method of producing pure soy sauce in the 16th century revolutionized Japanese cuisine. In the Tokugawa Period there appeared two more flavoring agents: *katsuobushi* (smoke-dried bonito) and *konbu* (a form of kelp). All these flavors provided the perfect complement for the significant element at formal meals, *sake*.

Fish and fowl, the main source of protein, were either

grilled with salt or boiled in a mixture of sake, soy and katsuobushi stock, or in a miso mixture. Fish was also eaten raw, of course, or steamed over sake. Actually, the mind-boggling variety of preparation defies brief description. Whether meat or vegetable, freshness of taste and beauty of form were foremost in the minds of the chefs who presented a meal with the artistry and pride of a painter for during the great period of tranquility brought upon Japan by the Tokugawa regime, the wealthy and powerful had plenty of time to become gourmets of the highest order. In time, the fine cuisine of Kyoto spread throughout the provinces, the *daimyo* (feudal lords) having their chefs trained in the ancient capital.

Although the art of flavoring and presentation slowly filtered down to the untitled populace of the countryside, they had to make do with simpler ingredients. For instance, in the castle town of Obi, located scarcely 10km from the Pacific Ocean in Miyazaki Prefecture, even sardines and horse mackerel were precious commodities.

Seventh Course: *Sannonzen*

This tray, the last of the 7-5-3 set, features a miso-flavored carp soup with black seaweed. The raw tuna and the ginger duplicate the serving on the *sankon* tray.



leaves was sampled. Next to it, in the upper right-hand corner is a dish of melons pickled in salt and sake lees. The dish in front of it contains *fu*, a bread-like concoction simmered in sake and soy. The dish in the middle holds a firm fish paste, *kamaboko*, partly tinted red to create the felicitous red and white combination. The meal came to a close with the deserts arranged on paper-thin strips of wood: dried persimmon (loved for its sweetness at a time when sugar was still so precious that it was carried in pharmacies as a medicine), sweet bean jelly and a mandarin orange. Green tea was served afterwards.

Ingeniously, the townspeople learned to extend the fish meat by mixing it with *tofu* (bean curd) and then frying it. The result was the delicious *obi-ten*, now a popular treat for visitors to the area.

The lord of the Ito Clan who resided in Obi was probably served *obi-ten* at times. On New Year's Day, however, he had the meal that is featured on these pages while the low ranking samurai and commoners fared with sardines.

The menu shown here dates back to the 1820s and calls for eight courses. Not all was expected to be eaten. In fact, just a few morsels were sampled from each tray. Whatever was left over was neatly wrapped in the kitchen and given to the guests to take home to their eagerly waiting families. The banquet was more of a ritual than a meal.

The reproduction of the menu is the masterwork of Toyoura Kenji, who studied under the prestigious Shijo family of Kyoto chefs that have been pampering nobility



Eighth Course: *O-hikimuko*

Because the bent body of a lobster resembles the posture of aged people, it symbolizes long life. Elegantly tied up, it obviously is not meant to be consumed at this sitting. We can assume, however, that the roast quail on cryptomeria

for a millennium. Some of the ingredients that were luxury items in the 19th century are easily procured today, but the contrary is also true. The snipe served in the sixth course, for example, is a protected species now. Toyoura himself had to fly to Tokyo where he was told an injured bird was available. With one thing or another, preparing the meal finally cost some ¥300,000.

The meal was by no means an ordinary affair and probably made a noticeable dent in the daimyo's treasury. With such expensive rituals de rigueur, it is easy to see why bankruptcy threatened the feudal lords by the time Matthew Perry fired his cannons in Shimoda Bay, Shizuoka Prefecture. He might have been advised to be less belligerent and to shoot down a few snipe. **JS**

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