

Washoku—Japanese cuisine: a world heritage intangible property

Mt Fuji wasn't the only Japanese world-heritage property confirmed last year. On 4 December 2013, Japan's national cuisine known as washoku was inscribed on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO.

One of the great joys of travelling to Japan is its food. It's possible to eat really well really cheaply; spend a little more and you can be in for a memorable culinary experience. Taste is of course paramount, but the attention to seasonality and



presentation make eating in Japan such a pleasurable experience.

Washoku joins French cuisine as one of only two designated national cuisines (there are several dishes from other countries that are designated and the Mediterranean diet which covers many countries).

This designation might seem a little late to some. After all according to the prestigious Michelin guide from France, Tokyo restaurants already have more Michelin stars than Paris! Michelin stars aside, Japan takes food seriously. This is a country that even writes up and rates *B-kyuu* or 'B-grade' food.

Of course, Japanese food today is really international. Visitors can enjoy top French, Chinese or Italian style meals. Curry is now very much part of daily food culture; visit any supermarket or convenience store and be amazed at the range of curry roux and precooked curries available. All these foods are part of Japan's rich contemporary food culture, but the UNESCO designation is for 'traditional Japanese food cultures' called *washoku*.

Washoku (和食) is the term for traditional Japanese food, in contrast to *youshoku* (洋食), foreign or Western food, which began to

enter Japan during the Meiji Period (1868-1912) as the country looked to modernise and absorbed Western influences.

The other main term is *chuuka-ryouri* (中華料理)

meaning Chinese food, long influential in Japan.



Washoku centres around rice, typically served with a bowl of *miso* soup. This comes with a range of side dishes, each served in their own bowl or plate. Fish, vegetables and edible plants were the mainstays of such dishes, with previously taboo meat only becoming acceptable during the Meiji Period.

Sushi is perhaps the quintessential Japanese food abroad. In Sydney, which has no shortage of Japanese restaurants, sushi has become a food-court and shopping-centre favourite, a type of healthy fast-food. In Japan, going out for or ordering in a meal of sushi tends to be more for special occasions. The skill level required to be a proper sushi chef in Japan is exceptionally high.

The continuing heritage of *washoku* and its transmission from generation to generation were important elements behind its inscription by UNESCO. This continuity is especially notable at New Year when food, particularly the preparation of *osechi ryori*, is integral to this important celebration.

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Looking at the kanji in the word *washoku*, the second character 食-*shoku* simply means food; the first character 和 means Japanese and also peace or harmony. A good traditional Japanese meal should achieve this; flavours that don't overpower but balance, dishes that respect the season, and something best shared with others.

Highly recommended for any first-time visitor to Japan is a trip to the basement of a major department store. Here you will find the *depa-chika* food halls. Walking through gives a great snap shot of the variety of food available in Japan. Not to be missed.