



# A taste of autumn

*The seasons play a crucial part in Japanese food culture. Enjoying the best that the season has to offer is a way of life. It's perhaps a little hard to appreciate fully this love of seasonal food without living and tasting a full year in Japan, but let's whet tastebuds with some quintessentially autumn flavours.*

## But first, details matter

As autumn sets in, traditional restaurants in Japan, and not a few households, will start to use different plates and bowls to help create the right setting for the food of the season. Maple leaves are a classic symbol of autumn and often feature on crockery such as the traditional setting above which also has a chopstick rest and small red bowl in the shape of maple leaves, not to overlook the real leaf decorating the tall cup.

The appreciation of the seasons in food culture gained importance more than 400 years ago when Sen no Rikyuu (1522-91), the master of the Japanese tea ceremony, said that the *chakaiseki* (tea ceremony banquets) should make everything seem as cool as possible in summer, and the opposite in winter. A thoughtfully prepared meal should delight your eyes and your tastebuds and allow you to feel the season.

## A king among mushrooms

*Shiitake* has now well and truly entered the Australian chef's lexicon. But this is just one of the many mushrooms that can be enjoyed in Japan. While most are available throughout the year, there is a prized mushroom that has proven difficult to cultivate. A highly anticipated autumn delicacy, the *matsutake* gets its name from the red-pine forests where it grows in the wild—the name means 'pine mushroom'.

The *matsutake* is a king among mushrooms and considered by many to be *the* very best. Simply grilling *matsutake* allows the aroma of the mushroom and the delicacy of its flavour to be really enjoyed. There is even a tea made from the mushroom. While there are imports, the difficulty of growing the mushrooms and its scarcity mean *matsutake* are a big ticket item in Japan. Domestic *matsutake* can retail for up to ¥100,000 (approximately AUD\$1,100) per kilo.



O-tsukimi dumplings, with tea & onigiri



Matsutake



Sanma



Chestnuts

## Autumn delicacies

# 秋の実



Persimmons



Fukiyose-gohan

## Fruits of the forest

Chestnuts (*kuri*) and ginkgo nuts are other symbols of autumn. While roasted nuts are common in many countries, Japanese cuisine works them into actual dishes and sweets. The *fukiyose gohan* dish shown here includes both chestnut and ginkgo nuts and also slivers of *matsutake*. There are even maple leaves made from carrots scattered throughout.

Chestnuts are often used in rice dishes at this time and also in sweets. The originally French dessert known as

Mont Blanc, which consists of puréed chestnuts topped with cream, would be a natural choice if you visited a café with friends in autumn.

## The autumn fish

The *sanma*, mackerel pike or Pacific saury, is without doubt a true autumn delicacy. The fish is at its peak in this season and its name says it all. In Japanese, *sanma* is written with three characters—秋刀魚—that's autumn, knife and fish. *Sanma no shioyaki*, *sanma* grilled in salt, is a seasonal favourite and said to be particularly good with beer.

## Dumplings as round as the moon

The dumplings are actually offerings to the harvest moon or the *Jūgoya* moon. Moon viewing (*o-tsukimi*) is a custom that was adopted from China. The full moon in September is thought particularly beautiful. The dumplings are sometimes

skewered or heaped as pictured here with traditional decorations of the *susuki* rushes. On this occasion the moon viewers will enjoy tea and *onigiri* studded with *ginkgo* nuts and *edamame* (green soya beans). The *Jūgoya* moon is also called the sweet potato moon or *imo meigetsu*. *Yakiimo* or baked sweet potato are a comfort food that can take you through to the coldest days of winter.

