## WASHOKU: a designated UNESCO intangible cultural heritage

In December 2013, Japan's national cuisine known as *washoku* was inscribed on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO.

Here in Australia, Japanese food and a growing number of food products have been warmly embraced. A 2019 JNTO survey of Australians travelling to Japan asked them what they were looking forward to experiencing while in Japan and the most common response was ... the food!

But, contemporary Japanese food is itself international – curry rice is one of the most frequently eaten meals in Japan today. So, what is *washoku*?

The UNESCO designation is for 'traditional Japanese food cultures'. *Washoku* centres around rice, typically served with a bowl of miso soup and three side dishes, each served in their own bowl or plate. Fish, vegetables and edible plants were for centuries the mainstays of such dishes, with previously taboo meat only becoming acceptable during the Meiji Period (1868-1912) when Japan actively sought to modernise, absorbing Western influences, including in the world of food.

If we look at the word itself – *washoku*, written 和食 – the second character means 'food' or 'to eat' and the first means 'Japanese'. While the cuisine is centuries old, the term *washoku* came into common use as a way to distinguish traditional food from the newer Western imports, collectively referred to as *yoshoku* (洋食), foreign or Western food. The other main term is *chuka ryori* (中華料理) meaning Chinese food, long influential in Japan – one of Japan's best known dishes around the world is *ramen*, a Japanese take on a type of Chinese noodle.



## Achieving balance

Taking another look at the word *washoku*, the character 和 not only means 'Japan', it also means 'peace' or 'harmony'. A good traditional Japanese meal [photo a] should achieve this; the flavours of the various elements should be harmonious and not overpower one another, the meal should be nutritionally balanced and dishes should respect and celebrate the season.

Seasonality is highly appreciated in Japan and traditional Japanese cuisine reflects this. In autumn, a bright red maple leaf might be is used to decorate a dish [b]. Great care and thought are given to presentation in traditional Japanese cuisine.

## A continuing heritage

The continuing heritage of *washoku* and its transmission from generation to generation were cited as significant elements behind its UNESCO inscription. This continuity is especially notable at the New Year, when food is integral to the celebrations. Elaborately prepared meals of *osechi ryori* [c] are among the traditional foods served at this time.

Food does not have to be complex to achieve greatness. A bowl of perfectly steamed rice topped with nothing more than a fine *umeboshi* pickled plum ... just how does it taste so good?

