NIKI NAKAYAMA

Teaches Modern Japanese Cooking

MasterClass

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Meet Your Instructor
NIKI NAKAYAMA

By mixing formal training with a modern perspective, chef Niki Nakayama has redefined an ancient Japanese culinary art form

"Japanese cooking is simple," says Niki Nakayama, the world-renowned chef, culinary personality, and owner of the award-winning Los Angeles restaurant n/naka. "The complexity comes in using ingredients at the perfect time and knowing how to make them shine."

When it comes to Japanese cuisine and seizing a moment, well, Niki is an authority on both subjects. The youngest daughter of immigrant parents, she was born and raised in Los Angeles, where her family owned a wholesale seafood business. After high school, she traveled to Japan to pursue another love: music. She ended up in Niigata, a port city north of Tokyo, and worked at a ryokan—a traditional Japanese inn—owned by her extended family. When she moved back to Los Angeles, Niki went to culinary school and landed a job at a high-end sushi bar in Los Angeles's Brentwood neighborhood. But in 1997, she decided to return to the ryokan in Niigata. There, she took on a formal apprenticeship in kaiseki, a traditional Japanese culinary art form that reflects the constantly changing rhythms of nature.

In this style of food, "seasonality" means more than spring, summer, fall, and winter. One tenet of the culinary philosophy is to appreciate each moment in time—whether it's the number of days that a certain vegetable is at its peak or the number of weeks that yellowtail fish are at their fattiest. Rooted in the rituals of tea ceremony, kaiseki was codified in the 16th century as a light meal consisting of rice, miso soup, and a few side dishes, like vinegared fish and simmered vegetables.

The kaiseki associated with tea eventually created an offshoot—a second version that is the multicourse meal now served at restaurants and ryokan, like the one where Niki apprenticed in Niigata. After again returning to Los Angeles, she opened a sushi restaurant of her own in 2000. It was a successful venture but ultimately left Niki feeling depleted.

So, in 2008, she sold the sushi business and focused on her goal: a kaiseki

Left: Niki with her wife and sous chef, Carole, the day n/naka was awarded two Michelin stars. Right: Niki and Carole on *Top Chef*.

restaurant. She set out to honor the concept of "ichigo ichie," an idiom that translates to "one time, one meeting" and conveys immersion in the singular essence of a fleeting point in time. "This moment will only happen right now," Niki explains. "You must enjoy it before it goes away."

When she opened n/naka in West Los Angeles, in 2011, the kaiseki fare was a revelation in the dining community and beyond. The food and its chef garnered rave reviews, including one from Jonathan Gold, the late, great *Los Angeles Times* critic. Zagat ranked Niki's venture as the best restaurant in Los Angeles, and she was featured on the acclaimed Netflix anthology *Chef's Table*. In 2019, n/naka was awarded two Michelin stars.

Along the way, Niki managed to make kaiseki—traditionally male-dominated, bound by prescribed aesthetics and etiquette, and wholly Japanese—her own. She has successfully adapted a centuries-old craft to reflect her values and perspective. "I consider myself someone who really loves what tradition stands for, but I also believe that tradition needs to keep moving with time," she says. "Traditional places in Japanese history do not necessarily have space for women."

At n/naka, Niki wanted to create a new type of space. In the kitchen, she's joined by her wife and sous chef, Carole Iida-Nakayama. Together, they have forged this updated version of a beloved Japanese cuisine with California as their backdrop. Kaiseki is meant to showcase the best of what nature has to offer in a particular location; Niki and Carole do exactly that, right in the middle of Los Angeles.

Niki encourages you to do the same, regardless of your locale. Because kaiseki at home should reflect wherever you are, whatever grows around you, and the thoughtfulness with which you treat your ingredients. It's about the process and attention. "So much of Japanese cooking is all the various steps we take and the things that we think about when we're working with an ingredient," Niki says. "It's always on some level 'listening' to the ingredient." A kaiseki meal is an exploration of textures, temperatures, colors, and techniques; each course is meant to flow from one to the next, to build on the last course or take you in a new direction. Its name refers not only to the meal but to the methodology used to prepare it.

Accordingly, Niki wants to demonstrate some essential Japanese-cooking techniques and dishes. She'll show you how to cut a whole fish, slice sashimi, make rice and dashi, steam a dish, fry tempura, and grill over binchotan. And she'll discuss the tools, pantry staples, and mindset you will need to prepare a kaiseki meal at home.

That said, Niki is also a champion of experimentation. Her take on kaiseki is influenced by Los Angeles, a city where all cultures come together, which has meant incorporating new flavors and processes. You should feel free to branch out, too. Recipes are the starting point, she stresses, not the last word.

"It's about trying to find and respect what is traditional, but also finding our own path within it," Niki says. "When I'm in the kitchen, I feel that it's so easy to be free. The connection feels very deep and easy. When I really want to express something, it's through the medium of food."

From prepping to plating, Niki and Carole embrace kaiseki ideals.

THE KEY CONCEPTS OF KAISEKI

The heady thinking behind Japan's most exquisite cuisine

Kaiseki often is compared to its non-Asian analog, haute cuisine, for its beauty and deliciousness. But kaiseki also embodies cultural concepts and philosophies that go back hundreds of years. Some of it is rooted in Buddhist or Shinto religions; some of it just common sense. Here are a few of the key concepts:

ICHIGO ICHIE

- The idea that no singular encounter can ever be repeated. Accordingly, it's worth devoting your fully attuned senses to the physical moment—the smells, sounds, colors, and textures of life. "So much of it is about gratitude," Niki says. "This feeling of being grateful for what nature has to offer and being in harmony and connecting to all the things that nature is about. It's a wonderful reminder and resetting of our mindset to really take a deep breath."

SHUN

- The exact moment that a certain food—vegetables, fruit, fish—is at its peak flavor. This attention and dedication to seasonality can be traced to Japan's agricultural history as well as to the Shinto religion's veneration of nature. (Seasonal celebrations include rice planting and harvest festivals, many of which are still observed.)

WABI-SABI

- An ancient aesthetic philosophy based on Zen Buddhism. Wabi-sabi focuses on the acceptance of impermanence and imperfection; it defines beauty as transient and inherently flawed. Applied to everything from food to pottery and poetry, it serves as a reminder to celebrate the way things are rather than how you think things should be.

MOTTAINAI

- An expression used when something has been left unused and needlessly discarded, conveying remorse and exasperation: "What a waste!" In the kitchen, it's repeated as a call to utilize all parts of your ingredients, whether a radish or whole fish, similar to head-to-tail cooking. Environmentalists use the word, too, to encourage ideas around reusing and recycling.

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN KAISEKI AND OMAKASE?

The terms *kaiseki and omakase* are often (and mistakenly) used interchangeably. Omakase is short for "omakase shimasu," which means "I trust you." Many types of Japanese restaurants, whether sushi or robata or yakitori, offer omakase; the diner relinquishes the decision-making to the chef, who chooses what to serve based on spontaneity or intuition.

Kaiseki, meanwhile, is a distinctive culinary art form, a way of preparing and eating a multicourse meal that revolves around seasonality. Each small dish highlights a specific cooking method and presentation—a prescribed, intentional sequence where each course differs from the last. Kaiseki is considered to be the ultimate dining experience, given the amount of thought and effort the chef has dedicated to preparing your meal. Still, it's a decidedly unostentatious format, highlighting ingredients over showmanship.

SOME JAPANESE PANTRY ESSENTIALS

Before diving into Niki's recipes, take a moment to assess your cupboard

GENERAL

With just a few staple items, you can make the prototypical Japanese meal: steamed rice, dashi (kelp and bonito stock) for miso soup, and pickles. Or you can build a full kaiseki menu by utilizing local ingredients. Either way, it's best to familiarize yourself with these foundational elements.

SHORT-GRAIN RICE

- Rice is categorized by length relative to width. Japanese rice is short-grain—so short, in fact, that the grains are nearly round. The most-cultivated variety, called koshihikari, is known for its robust flavor, sheen, and firm texture. "There's a bounce to it that is unique to koshihikari," Niki says. But there are other varieties from all over Japan to try, such as akitakomachi and tamanishiki. California also produces more than its fair share of rice, and in the kitchen at n/naka, Niki and Carole like to mix Japanese and American or koshihikari rice together for a balance of both worlds. Much of the Japanese-style rice available in the U.S., Carole says, is actually considered medium-grain rice, "which is still delicious, but just to be clear, the short grain is a very, very special grain that we love in Japan."

SESAME SEEDS

- White and black sesame seeds are often used for finishing dishes, sprinkled atop dashi-steamed vegetables, grilled fish, or a bowl of steamed rice. In Japanese cooking and in the n/naka kitchen, sometimes toasted sesame seeds are ground to a paste with a mortar and pestle for use in various sauces. Using sesame seeds this way differs from using sesame oil; the flavor is much lighter, Niki explains, making this a great way to add the nutty, earthy flavor of sesame without relying on the strong, concentrated taste of sesame oil.

Pro-Tip: To toast your sesame seeds, place a shallow pan on the stovetop set over very low heat. Add the seeds and stir so they don't burn. Toast until they're golden and aromatic, about 2 or 3 minutes.

RISHIRI KOMBU

- Kombu is sun-dried kelp, of which there are several species; in Japan, many of them are harvested in the icy, mineral-rich northern waters of Hokkaido. Among the most common types used for dashi, the stock that serves as the foundation for most Japanese cooking, are ma kombu, rausu kombu, and rishiri kombu. The latter is often considered best for dashi; it's one of the most delicious, Niki says. Rishiri kombu is typically grown for two years and harvested in the summer, when it's laid out to dry in the sun before its fronds are shaped and folded. It's known for containing high levels of glutamate, the amino acid responsible for umami, or "the fifth taste," along with sweet, sour, salty, and bitter.

KATSUOBUSHI

- Dried, fermented, and smoked fillets of skipjack tuna (or bonito) shaved into paper-thin slices are called katsuobushi. They're used in many Japanese dishes, but probably most significantly as a main ingredient—along with kombu—in dashi. Like kombu, katsuobushi has a lot of umami thanks to its high inosinic acid content. The labor-intensive process to make katsuobushi starts with steaming or simmering the fillets, followed by a monthlong period of alternating between wood-smoking (often with oak) and a day of rest. The built-up smoke on the surface of the fish is eventually removed, and a special mold is applied and cultivated, helping it ferment as it dries in the sun. The mold is removed before more sun-drying; this process of mold-growing and sun-drying is repeated twice more until the katsuobushi is completely dry. When you tap two pieces together, it will sound like tapping pieces of wood or metal together.

Pro-Tip: Katsuobushi comes in several grades. When making dashi, look for katsuobushi that has even coloring, or close to it; if you see a substantial dark red outline, it might result in a broth that has less clarity.

DRIED SHIITAKE

- Dried shiitake mushrooms can create umami and depth. At n/naka, Niki uses dried shiitake in a number of vegetable braises, where the mush-

rooms lend their rich aroma. They're also a particularly good substitute for dried bonito flakes if you'd like to make vegan dashi.

SEASONINGS

Niki and Carole point out that Japanese seasoning is a matrix of ratios—a balance between the saltiness of soy sauce, the sweetness of mirin or sake, the acidity of rice vinegar, and the umami of dashi. Used all together or in various combinations, these are the basic building blocks of Japanese flavor profiles.

RICE VINEGAR

- Made from fermented rice wine (sake), rice vinegar is milder, sweeter, and less acidic than wine, malt, or distilled white vinegars. Its relatively low acidity—4 percent to 5 percent as opposed to the 6 percent to 8 percent or higher of other vinegars—doesn't mean it lacks zing. Use it for salad dressings, marinades, and pickling. It's an especially important ingredient for sushi rice.

SOY SAUCE

- Soy sauce is another umami-laden fermented staple in the Japanese kitchen. One of the world's oldest condiments, it's made from a combination of soybeans, wheat, and salt water. A starter culture called kojikin acts as the fermenting agent and works over time—anywhere from several months to several years—allowing the sauce to become richer and darker and less salty. Dark (koikuchi) soy sauce is the all-purpose soy sauce you see at most supermarkets and on the table at Japanese restaurants. Light soy sauce (not to be confused with low-sodium soy sauce), though lighter in color, is saltier. Called usukuchi, this variety is often used when you don't want a deeper flavor or darker color to affect your ingredients.

MISO

- This fermented soybean paste is funky, earthy, and salty; sometimes, depending on the variety, it can have a hint of sweetness. And there are a lot of varieties—more than 1,000 of them—with a range of flavors, colors, and textures based on the fermentation process and the region of Japan in which they're made. The two main categories are light and dark (or red). In general, the darker the miso, the stronger and less sweet the flavor. In the kitchen at n/naka, a light miso called saikyo miso is a staple for sauces and dressings, soups and stews, batters, and even sweets. It has a creamy, pale color and a sweet, nutty flavor. You can use any light miso interchangeably, but note that each will have its own flavor characteristics.

SALT

- Niki uses two kinds of salt at her restaurant: arajio and moshio. The former is a sun-dried sea salt with a mild flavor and a balanced texture—fine enough to dissolve into liquids during cooking but coarse enough to use as a finishing salt for dishes. The latter is also a sea salt, though it's blended with a little kombu for flavor. "When we use [moshio] to garnish sushi, it really brightens up the dish without having to use soy sauce," she says.

YUZU

- Fragrant but tart, yuzu is also incredibly seedy, so it's used for its juice and peel rather than for its fruit. Yuzu is cultivated mostly in Asia, but a small amount is available in California. You can find fresh yuzu when it's in season at farmers' markets and Asian markets. (Frozen juice, zest, and bottled juice also are available.) Yuzu is a versatile and

unique ingredient: Try it in dressings, soups, desserts, and cocktails. In savory dishes, it helps balance out richness. And when you finish a dish with fresh zest, the oils perfume the air around you.

SESAME OIL

- Sesame oil, pressed from raw or roasted seeds, has a distinctive nutty flavor. Light sesame oil (made from the raw seeds) is used as a cooking oil. Dark sesame oil (from the roasted seeds) has a stronger taste and is used sparingly as a finishing oil, adding an extra depth of flavor because of the roasted aromas.

SAKE

- The taste of this alcoholic beverage made from fermented rice is as varied as wine, depending on the rice and the brewing process. (Though, it's actually brewed more like beer than wine; the rice from the starch is converted into sugars and fermented into alcohol.) Niki recommends using a sake you like but that isn't too expensive, since the alcohol will be cooked off.

MIRIN

- Mirin is a sweet rice wine that's similar to sake, but it has a lower percentage of alcohol and a higher sugar content. The sugar isn't added but is a product of the fermentation process. Mirin is milder than straight sugar, Niki says, and is used for enhancing the natural sweetness of ingredients.

WHERE TO BUY SPECIALTY JAPANESE INGREDIENTS, EQUIPMENT, AND TABLEWARE

Besides Japanese and Asian markets, many of which have brick and mortar locations, online resources offer specialty items, fresh seafood, tableware, and kitchen equipment

JAPANESE INGREDIENTS

Track down all the essentials you'll need

Dainobu
dainobu.com
The New York grocery store and deli ships nationwide; you can also order items directly from Japan.

Kitazawa Seed Company
kitazawaseed.com
Founded more than 100 years ago, this purveyor offers seeds for Japanese varieties of vegetables like Komatsuna greens, shiso, pickling melon, and more, shipped nationwide, if you want to grow your own.

MTC Kitchen Home
mtckitchen.com
This Japanese distributor to restaurants also delivers groceries, pantry items, and kitchen equipment to home chefs in L.A. and New York.

Nijiya
nijiya.com
This Japanese chain of grocery stores has a fully stocked online shop of dry goods where you'll find everything from bonito flakes to gluten-free udon noodles.

The Japanese Pantry
thejapanesepantry.com
A curated selection of best-quality Japanese ingredients such as premium rice vinegar, double-brewed soy sauce, and dried winter-grown shiitake.

The Rice Factory
the-rice-factory.square.site
A store for single-origin rice, such as koshihikari from Niigata and nanatsuboshi from Hokkaido.

Toiro
toirokitchen.com
The Los Angeles shop specializes in donabe imported from Japan; it also sells and ships specialty food items.

Umami Insider
umami-insider.store
Japanese pantry staples like organic mirin and dashi powder, shipped all over the U.S. and Canada.

FRESH SEAFOOD

A few distributors ship sashimi-quality seafood—including fatty tuna, salmon, hamachi, and more—to your door

Luxe
luxegourmets.com

Catalina Offshore Products
catalinaop.com

True Fish
truefish.com

TABLEWARE AND COOKING EQUIPMENT

For unique plates, bowls, and other tableware—as well as cooking equipment such as donabe—these websites offer curated and artisan-produced pieces

Analogue Life
analoguelife.com

Chubo Knives
chuboknives.com

Itsumo
itsumo.ca

Nalata Nalata
nalatanalata.com

Mjölk
Mjolk.ca

The Good Liver
good-liver.com

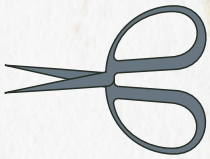
Tortoise General Store
tortoisegeneralstore.com

Toiro (see Japanese Ingredients above)

JAPANESE CULINARY TOOLS

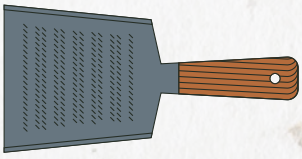
Kaiseki cooking emphasizes precision. Having the right equipment on hand will ensure that the details are spot-on

Each tool seen here has a specific use, but each is surprisingly versatile. Scissors and a mandoline might be considered essential in all kitchens, Japanese or otherwise. And while a donabe for cooking rice is an investment, this traditional Japanese clay pot also makes delicious soups, stews, and casseroles. So while some of these pieces might appear esoteric, they're all fine additions to the arsenal of any enthusiastic home cook.



SCISSORS

- Niki's scissors are a pair of gold-handled Japanese bonsai scissors. The distinctive large handles and thin, pointed blades offer maximum leverage while remaining capable of very fine work, whether that's snipping herbs or cutting through fish bones. Niki prefers to use scissors instead of a knife for tasks like cutting flounder fins. You can remove the pivot screw and sharpen the blades as needed.



WASABI GRATER

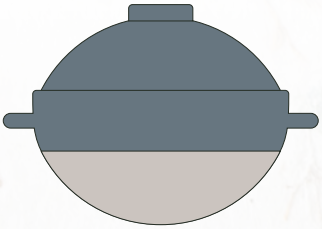
- Wasabi graters (oroshigane) come in a variety of materials, including porcelain, steel, tin, plated copper, and shark skin. They also come in different shapes and sizes—though they're generally meant to fit in the hand—with rows of "teeth" fashioned for finer or coarser grating. Niki uses a steel two-sided grater. One side achieves a smoother texture, ideal for wasabi paste; the other, rougher side results in a chunkier wasabi yield, like you might want for daikon radish. Both sides can be put to other uses, too: grating garlic, ginger, potato, carrots, and some fruits.

Pro-Tip: Instead of the back-and-forth motion you would use with a microplane, use your wasabi grater in a circular motion.

MORIBASHI

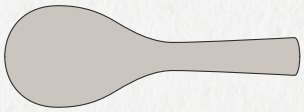
- Moribashi are special chopsticks for plating sashimi. "You don't want to use your hands...when touching sashimi, because just the warmth from your hands is going

to cause a change in texture and flavor," Carole says. Besides their fine, pointed tips, moribashi are usually steel—meaning they're strong and hygienic (and easy to clean). The extra weight of metal also allows for precision when working on a detailed presentation.



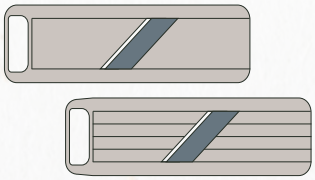
DONABE

The donabe is a traditional clay cooking vessel; like a Dutch oven, it's used primarily on top of the stove. Niki's double-lidded version was made in Japan's Iga prefecture, famous for its clays, earthenware, and ceramics. While it can be used for soups, stews, and hot pot, her donabe really earns its keep by cooking rice—"having the right amount of heat for the right amount of time" is what opens each grain and steams them from within, Niki says. Indeed, the donabe is known for even, steady heat distribution while the porous clay "breathes." So even after the stove is shut off, the pot's contents continue to steam as the clay slowly cools down, which results in fluffy, shiny, tender rice. (See "How to Season Your Donabe" at right.)



RICE SHAMOJI

A flat spoon or scoop, called a shamoji, is another crucial rice-cooking tool. Usually made from wood, bamboo, or plastic, this paddle-shaped instrument comes in handy when mixing and fluffing the cooked grains (the final step in the preparation process). "It grabs just the right amount of rice and is very gentle," Niki says. "You maintain the shape of [each grain of rice] without smashing it or breaking it."



MANDOLINE

With a mandoline, you move ingredients across a blade, which does all the cutting for you. It's one of the quickest ways to get consistent, thin slices of potatoes, onions, carrots, cucumbers, apples, and citrus. You can try a Benriner, a cult-favorite Japanese mandoline (sometimes called "Bennies" in professional kitchens), which allows for slices up to about ¼ inch thick. Sizing adjustments can be done on the fly with the turn of a screw, which increases or decreases the gap between the runway and the blade.

FISH BONE TWEEZERS

To remove pin bones from certain fish, Niki uses a set of specialized tweezers. Hewn from stainless steel, these are easy to hold—they're longer and stronger than cosmetic tweezers— and some have squared-off, flat tips (rather than angled and pointed tips). While this tool is niche, it's worth having around if you plan to fillet a whole rockfish on your own.

HOW TO SEASON YOUR DONABE

Many Japanese kitchens have electric rice cookers. But stovetop preparation is easy and versatile, and, according to Niki, creates "an incredible kind of rice that is actually a little different" from the plug-in alternatives. She uses a traditional Japanese donabe, and if you buy one brand-new, it'll need to be seasoned. Here's how:

1. Fill the donabe with enough water so that it comes about ⅔ up the sides.

2. Add a couple of cups of the leftover cooked rice (it doesn't have to be exact but should be at least 20 percent of the volume of the water).

3. Cook the water and rice over medium-low heat. Simmer, stirring occasionally, so that the bottom doesn't burn, until the mixture becomes thick and paste-like, 20 to 30 minutes.

4. Turn off the heat and cool for 1 hour. Remove the rice mixture, then rinse and dry the donabe.

5. Done. Now the porous clay of your donabe is sealed, preventing future cracks or leaks. It's ready to cook rice for years (or decades) to come.

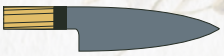
A GUIDE TO JAPANESE KNIVES

Whether cooking or plating, your knife is an extension of yourself

Japan has a long history of metal craftsmanship, and its reputation for kitchen knives is unparalleled. Niki and Carole have three Japanese knives they use on a daily basis: usuba (for cutting vegetables), deba (for cutting whole fish and meat), and yanagiba (for cutting sashimi). In home kitchens, a good chef's knife works, too—so long as you keep the blade sharpened. "You treat your knives with as much respect as you would any ingredient," Carole says. "You have to respect the ingredient, you have to respect the knife, and in doing so you respect the craft of Japanese cooking."

USUBA

- The usuba features a straight blade for cutting vegetables, as well as for peeling them, by using a special rotary technique called katsuramuki. Because the blade is tall, it's good for large ingredients, like cabbages. It's also easy to properly use your knuckles as a guide as you cut and an excellent entry knife for learning to sharpen intuitively, Niki says. "When you're learning to cook as a Japanese chef, the only knife you get in the beginning is the usuba," Niki says.



DEBA

- The deba is traditionally used to cut whole fish. Because it's a heavy knife, and because the heel (the base of the blade near the handle) is sturdy, it can be used for other meat and poultry, making easy work of small bones. And the spine tapers, so it's thinner toward the tip of the knife—which means it's ideal for more delicate filleting, too.

Pro-Tip: When you're looking at knives, pay close attention to qualifiers in the name. For example, a "Western deba" ("yo-deba") will have a double-edge blade instead of the customary single-edge.

YANAGIBA

- Niki's most prized knife might be the yanagiba. It's

"by far the sharpest in terms of the way it can cut," she says. Yanagiba—yanagi means "willow leaf," a reference to the shape of the long, thin blade—is intended to slice sashimi from boneless blocks of fillets, like tuna loin. When cutting sashimi, the knife slices through the fish cleanly without tearing it. Japanese cutting is about preserving the integrity of the ingredient; having a remarkably sharp knife that glides through the fish, as opposed to pulling or ripping the meat, is true to the spirit of the cuisine.

OTHER CHOICES

Looking for something comparable to an American or European chef's knife? Two other common Japanese options—gyuto and santoku—are popular among both professional and home cooks, and are often sold at cookware stores.

GYUTO

The gyuto is meant for breaking down big cuts of beef. But it's useful for cutting fish and vegetables, too, and the super-sharp tip offers precision in tight spaces. Gyuto has a thin, tall, light blade relative to other chef's knives, with a balance point toward the front. Its curvature flattens near the heel, so it chops cleanly in a rocking motion, which is how American and European cooks often cut, though not how Japanese cooks typically use a knife.

SANTOKU

The santoku is an all-purpose kitchen knife (usually between 5 and 8 inches long) that features what's called a sheepsfoot blade because of its downward curve, which nears 60 degrees at the point. It's used for cutting meat and slicing cheese as well as for slicing or chopping vegetables, fruit, and nuts. It's also a good choice for precision cutting—try using this knife when you need to create really thin cuts.

ICHIBAN DASHI

Kombu and Bonito Stock

Makes about 60 ounces

Ingredients

30 g kombu

60 oz cold filtered water

50 g katsuobushi (bonito flakes)

"Dashi is one of the most important ingredients in Japanese cooking," Niki says. "It's what Japanese flavor is all about." A stock that flavors everything from dressings and marinades to eggs, soups, and vegetables, dashi is made with kombu (kelp), katsuobushi (shavings of smoked bonito), and water. Three ingredients. That's it. Which means the quality of the ingredients—and the chef's attention to detail—is what stands out here.

Pro-Tip: For her dashi, Niki uses rishiri kombu, which has a ruffled edge and is dark brown and narrow. It's known for its flavor and ability to produce clear broth. Other types of kombu are good for dashi, too Look for the largest flakes (hanakatsuo) of shaved bonito you can find.

Method

Cut the kombu so that you have 30 grams that fit in your pot. Don't tear it or use your hands to break it apart—tearing can create rough edges, which can cloud the dashi and increase the unpleasant tastes of the sea. The goal is to make as clear a stock as possible, and cutting helps prevent the powder from dispersing.

Put the kombu in a heavy-bottom pot and pour in the cold water. The cleaner the water, the better your dashi. Let it simmer at a low temperature (140°F/60°C) for about 1 hour. Don't let it boil, which will cloud the stock. Using tongs, remove the kombu from the pot. (Leftover kombu can be used to make a second batch of dashi, called nibandashi, which is lighter. It can also be sliced and pickled, sautéed with soy sauce and ponzu, or braised with soy sauce and sugar.)

Bring the kombu broth to a light simmer. Add the katsuobushi to the pot and let it simmer for 15 to 20 seconds. (For the best flavor, don't oversteep. "You want as much of that fresh bonito flavor as possible," Niki says.) Lightly skim the stock with a spoon or ladle.

Remove the stock from the heat. Line a strainer with fine cheesecloth and set it over a bowl, then gently pour in the dashi. Gather the edges of the cheesecloth and lift it out of the strainer. Carefully squeeze any excess liquid over the bowl. Discard the katsuobushi. Use the dashi immediately, or store it in a covered container in the refrigerator for up to 3 days.

ROCKFISH

Whole Fish Preparation

Ingredients

1 whole rockfish, about 1.5 lb, scaled and innards removed

Rockfish, also known as rock cod and red or Pacific snapper, is widely available at supermarkets. Dozens of species and varieties swim along the North American shorelines; they can be a few pounds or up to 40 pounds. Rockfish is generally delicate in flavor, firm, flaky, and lean, with tender white meat (shiromi). It's versatile—excellent steamed, grilled, fried, baked, sautéed, poached, or raw—and can be used in just about any fish recipe. Clean- and light-flavored, its bones also make for delicious fish stock.

Whole fish can be purchased with scales and innards removed; if you can, buy fish with its pectoral fins intact. Niki uses pieces of the collars with fins attached for her owan (see "Owan: Soup With Bone Broth" on page 21). "When we make an effort to use all parts of the fish, it's in line with the feeling of gratitude and the philosophy of no waste," she says, "which is what kaiseki is about—to make best use of ingredients. Every single part of the fish has something different to offer."

Pro-Tip: When buying whole fish, give it a good smell; it shouldn't be "fishy" but instead give off the aroma of clean seawater. The eyes should be clear, and the inner gills should be pink, not bloody.

Method

To cut the whole rockfish: The fish should be cut open along the belly and up to the head. Using a sharp deba or chef's knife, remove the head, cutting along the natural separation where the collar and head meet—right in front of the pectoral fins on both sides. With the tip of your knife, feel for a soft area of the spine, and cut through the bone to completely remove the head and discard it.

Open the fish flat to expose the inside. Remove any of the blood line along the spine, if necessary, with a brush. Rinse and pat dry.

Cut the collar area on both sides of the fish, including the pectoral fin. You will have 2 pieces; set aside and save these for the owan dish (see page 21), keeping them refrigerated.

In Japanese, sanmai oroshi means "cut in three pieces." This refers to two fillets and the center bone. Cut the first fillet away from the body of the fish: With the belly of the fish facing you (head side to the right and tail to the left), cut along the belly all the way to the tail, keeping your knife close to the ribs. Continue to cut the fillet along the ribs, lifting the flesh away from the bones as you go. When you reach the spine, use the tip of your knife and cut along the spine with a gentle rocking motion to release the meat from the bone.

Turn the fish so that the dorsal fin (the fin on top of the fish) is closest to you, with the head to the left and the tail to the right. Cut an opening ½ an inch above the dorsal fin from the tail to the head. Press your left hand on top of the fish to help secure it, and allow the knife to lie flat against the bones. Continue to cut the fillet until it is completely off. This is your first fillet.

To cut the second fillet, flip the fish over so that the dorsal fin is closest to you and the tail is to the left. Draw the knife along the back above the dorsal fin from head side to tail. Lifting the flesh up and away from the bone, cut into the base of the rib/belly bone and slide the knife along the spine toward the tail. Close the fish and cut all the way through to the tail with the knife flat against the spine bone.

Clean and debone the fillets: To remove the belly bones from the fillet, place the fillet skin side down with the head end to the right. Hold the knife blade facing upward, and draw the tip of the knife between the flesh and the top edge of the belly bones. Turn the knife blade around, slide it into the incision you just made, and slice the belly bones away from the flesh.

Turn the fillet around so the head end is now on your left and carefully slice off the thin belly membrane that is connected to the flesh. Leave as much flesh as possible. Cut through the edge of the flesh to completely remove the belly bones and membrane. Repeat with the second fillet.

Fill a small bowl with water. Using fish tweezers, feel along the center of the fillet with your fingertips and remove the pin bones. The top part of the fillet (along the back of the fish) is called the hara, and the bottom portion (along the belly) is called the se (see "A Primer on Tuna" on page 23). In between the hara and the se is where the pin bones are. Repeat with the other fillet.

Pro-Tip: As you remove the pin bones from the first fillet, count them so you know how many you've removed and you have a reference when removing the bones from the second fillet. It should be the same number of bones on each side (you'll know, then, if you've missed any).

To cut the fillets: Cut each fillet lengthwise (horizontally) down the middle so you have 2 belly loins and 2 back loins. These will be used for the modern zukuri (see "Zukuri: Modern Rockfish Sashimi" on page 19), the mushimono steamed dish (see "Mushimono: Steamed Rockfish" on page 35), and the tempura (see "Agemono: Rockfish and Vegetable Tempura" on page 37).

For the modern zukuri: From each back loin, cut a 5-inch-wide piece from the thickest part (the head side) and set aside.

For the mushimono: Cut 2 3-inch pieces from each of the fillets, so you have 4 pieces total.

For the tempura: Using your knife, cut the skin from the 2 tail-end pieces and set aside. Remove the skin from the remaining 2 belly loins. Cut the 2 loins into ½-inch-thick slices on a bias so that each slice is 2½ inches long.

Keep the fish covered in the refrigerator until ready to use.

ZUKURI

Modern Rockfish Sashimi

Serves 4

Ingredients

For the cured rockfish

2 pieces of rockfish from the upper loin

½ cup kosher salt

4 oz fresh flatleaf parsley

4 oz dill

Peel of ½ lime, finely grated

For the burnt romaine sauce

1 tbsp grapeseed oil, plus extra

2 hearts of romaine, cut in half

Salt to taste

1 tsp minced garlic, or to taste

3 oz ponzu, or to taste

For the garnishes

2 red radishes

Chives

½ lime, cut in half (2 quarters)

Leaves of seasonal microgreens such as sorrel and shiso

This modern version of sashimi comes first on n/naka's kaiseki menu—not only because it's visually exciting, Niki says, but because the flavor profiles are so rich and robust. "It's nice to start a Japanese meal that's based on tradition with something untraditional. That sets the tone for a meal at our restaurant." The sashimi precedes a soup course, which is generally a way to cleanse the palate. And since the flavors here are a little stronger, it's the ideal way to begin.

Here, the rockfish is cured with salt and herbs that aren't typically used in Japanese cuisine—parsley and dill—inspired by a preparation by Adeline Grattard, head chef of the Michelin-starred restaurant Yam'Tcha in Paris. The cure, along with a light romaine sauce, is a simple and fun way to incorporate a new flavor profile while still retaining the dish's strong Japanese identity.

Method

Blanch the rockfish: Prepare an ice bath by filling a bowl with ice water and set aside. Bring a pot of water to boil and remove from the heat. Put the rockfish in a heatproof dish skin side up. Gently ladle hot water over the skin 1 or 2 times so that the skin curls slightly. (Blanching helps enhance the flavor of the fish and softens the texture so it's easy to bite through.) Transfer the fish immediately to the ice bath so that the fish is still raw. After 15 to 20 seconds, use tongs to move the fish to a paper towel–lined plate to remove excess water. Pat the top of the fish dry with paper towels.

To make sure no scales remain on the skin of the fish, lightly run the edge of a spoon against the direction of the scales. Set the fish aside in the refrigerator while you make the cure.

Cure the rockfish: Mix the salt, parsley, dill, and grated lime peel in a bowl. Sprinkle a little of the cure on the bottom of a container big enough for the rockfish pieces. Place the fish on top of the cure. Then completely cover the fish with the remaining cure. Lightly pat the cure on the fish. Cover with plastic wrap and set aside in the refrigerator for 40 minutes.

Make the burnt romaine sauce: Heat a pan over medium-high heat and add 1 tablespoon of grapeseed oil. When the oil is shimmering, add the lettuce to the pan, cut side down. Sprinkle with a pinch of salt. Cook the romaine on each side until charred, being careful not to burn it, about 1 minute on each side. Remove from the heat and transfer to a plate.

Blend the charred lettuce with the garlic and ponzu until completely puréed. Add just enough grapeseed oil as needed to loosen. Taste and adjust the seasoning as desired. (This sauce also can be used as a marinade for chicken or fish.)

Remove the cure from the fish. Gently rinse the fish under cold low-running water. Pat dry with paper towels.

Cut 1 piece of fish loin into thin slices (usuzukuri). For each slice, use one stroke of the knife to glide through the fish (don't saw). If you don't have a sashimi knife, use a sharp chef's knife—the longer, the better. Cut with one fluid motion all the way to the tip of the blade, letting the weight of the knife glide through the fish. Cut the other fillet into slightly thicker slices (hiragiri). Set aside in the refrigerator while preparing the garnishes.

Prepare the garnishes: Prepare an ice bath by filling a bowl with ice water. Set a fine-mesh strainer in the bowl so that it's submerged in the water. Using a mandoline, cut the radishes into paper-thin slices. Put the slices in the strainer set in the ice bath until you're ready to plate the sashimi.

Cut the chives into 1-inch pieces on the bias. Cut the ½ lime in half (so you have 2 quarters of a lime). Cut a few thin half-moon slices from the lime quarters, then cut those half-moons in half again.

Remove the radish slices from the ice bath and shake off any excess water. Put the slices on a paper towel to dry. Place several leaves of microgreens in the ice bath to perk them up, then remove them and dry.

Plate the sashimi: Place several radishes on one side of a plate so that they're overlapping in a circle. Using chopsticks, place a few slices each of the thick-cut and thin-cut fish next to the radish, folding them upright and decoratively on the plate. Repeat for the second plate.

Artistically intersperse the chives and microgreens among the slices of fish, and add at least one slice of lime to each plate. Serve the sashimi with a small bowl of the charred romaine sauce for dipping.

OWAN

Soup With Bone Broth

Serves 4

Ingredients

Rockfish bones, leftover from preparing a whole fish

2 rockfish collars, cut in half

½ onion, sliced

48 oz dashi stock

2 tsp sake

Salt to taste

½ cup thick-sliced daikon, cut into half-moons, lightly blanched

¼ cup 1-inch carrot pieces cut on the bias, lightly blanched

2 small shiitake mushroom caps, cut into quarters, blanched

1 tbsp julienned ginger

¼ cup scallions, thinly sliced

The soup course is meant to be a light cleanser between the previous recipe, modern zukuri, and the next recipe, a traditional otsukuri (see page 27). It also offers a temperature contrast between the two, which are both served cold—"something warm to reset your stomach and palate," Niki says. These are the kinds of modulations that make the kaiseki meal feel transportive.

When serving, skip the spoon and choose soup bowls that can be held comfortably (despite the heat) and lifted to the mouth one-handed. "You pick up the whole bowl and sip it slowly so that you can enjoy all the aromas," explains Niki. Lidded bowls are great here—they keep the soup heated as it arrives at the table. Between the temperature, taste, smell, and presentation, it's like receiving a surprise.

Method

Blanch the rockfish bones and collars: Bring a small pot of water to a boil and remove from the heat. Set the pot next to the sink. Line a rimmed baking sheet or plate with parchment paper and place the rockfish bones and collars flat on top. Hold the baking sheet over the sink and ladle the hot water over the entire surface of the rockfish bones, tilting the baking sheet or plate to allow the water to run off into the sink. Ladle the hot water over the bones and collars two more times, then turn the bones and collars over and ladle hot water over them two or three times. Remove any scales from the collars. Blanching the bones helps to remove any impurities so that the soup will be as clear as possible.

Place the blanched bones in a pot, breaking them as needed to fit, along with the sliced onions. Pour the dashi into the pot. Heat the broth over low heat, bringing it to a low simmer and skimming as needed. Simmer on low (this helps prevent it from clouding) for about 40 minutes; the onions should be translucent.

Meanwhile, sake steam the collars: Place the blanched collars into a steamer and pour a ½ teaspoon of sake over each collar. Steam for 4 minutes. Turn off the heat and keep the collars warm until ready to plate.

Using tongs, carefully remove the rockfish bones from the pot and discard. Set a cheesecloth-lined strainer over a large bowl, and pour the broth through the strainer.

Once the broth is strained, return it to the pot and bring it back to a simmer. Add a few pinches of salt, taste, and adjust the seasoning accordingly. (Make sure to take a couple of sips, Niki says, to really taste the subtle aromatics.) Continue to simmer for 2 minutes.

While the broth is simmering, prepare your soup bowls. Put one piece of daikon in each bowl, then one piece of carrot, and finally one piece of shiitake. Place the ingredients next to each other rather than on top of one another so that each vegetable can be seen. Top with the rockfish collar.

Carefully ladle the broth into the soup bowls, pouring it to the side of the ingredients so that you don't disturb their placement. Top with the julienned ginger and sliced scallions, and serve immediately.

A PRIMER ON TUNA

How to score choice fish at the market (and treat it with care in the kitchen)

Tuna is the most prized and commonly eaten fish in Japan, beloved for its flavor and the celebratory coloring of its red meat, Niki says. Indeed, the Pacific bluefin tuna is so highly sought-after that a single, prized fish can fetch millions of dollars at Tokyo's famed Toyosu Fish Market auction. Scarcity is a factor, too. Bluefin is subject to overfishing, and there are catch limits in place to help restore the population. If you're looking for alternatives, yellowfin tuna and albacore usually do the trick. But check out the Monterey Bay Aquarium's Seafood Watch's sustainable-buying guide for the most up-to-date info.

SHOPPING FOR FISH

The best way to shop for fish is by talking with your local fishmonger: You want fresh, sashimi-quality catch from a reputable seafood market or fish counter. The best seafood sellers will offer the whole loin, but Japanese markets also carry small portions for sashimi. When buying fresh tuna, it should be firm with a deep-red color. (If this color is too bright and vibrant, Niki warns, it could mean artificial color was used. Make sure to ask where and when the tuna was caught.) Albacore tuna also should be firm but with a paler color.

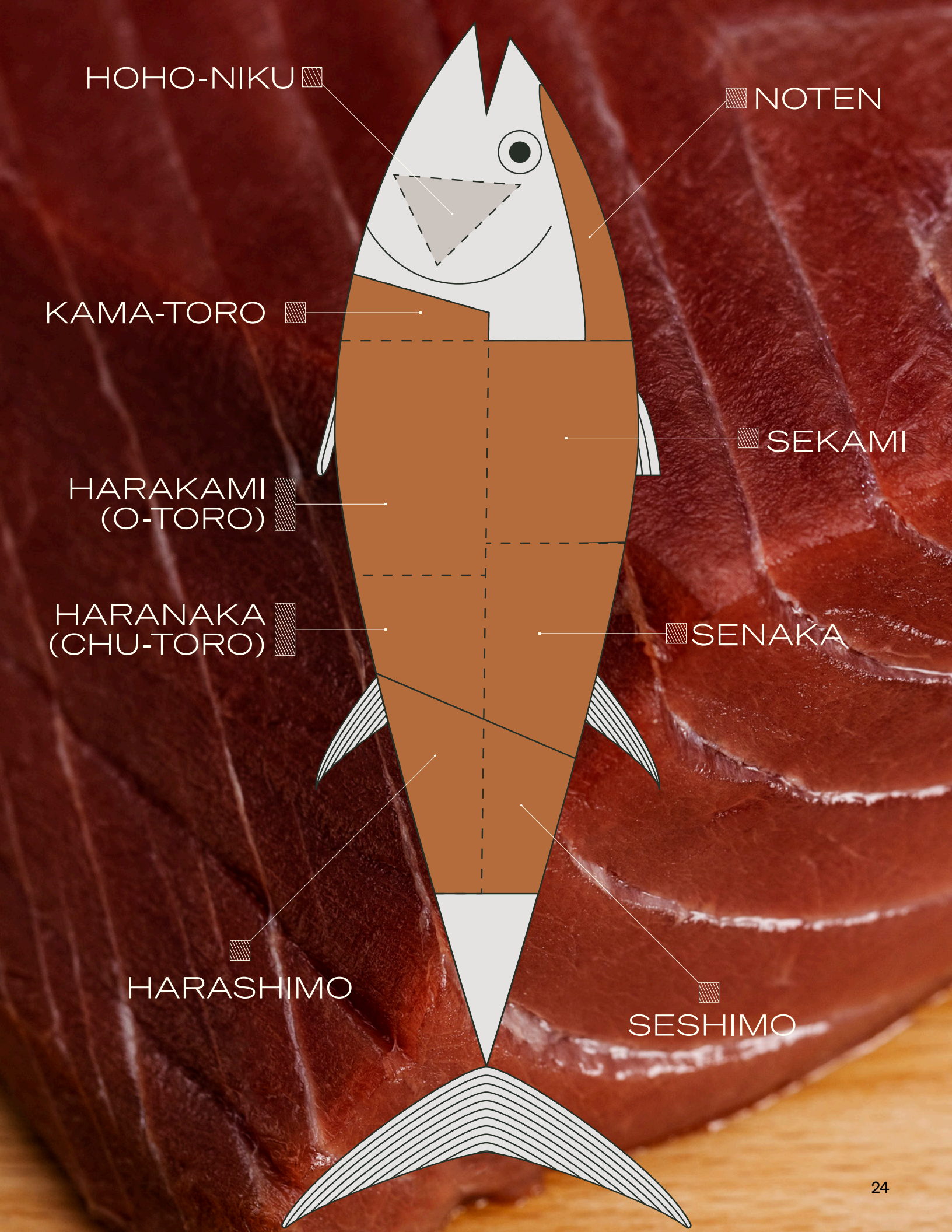
GET TO KNOW THE WHOLE TUNA

The two categories of meat from the tuna are the fatty toro (which means "to melt") and the lean akami ("red meat"). These are located in different sections of the tuna. The main parts of the tuna are the head, collar, the two back (upper) loins, and the two belly (lower) loins.

The back refers to the upper part of the fish (where its spine runs) and yields akami. The back loins are called se, and each loin is further divided into three main sections. **Seshimo** is located near the tail; because it's what the fish uses the most to swim, this part has the least amount of fat and is considered the lowest-quality akami (not used for the highest-grade sushi and sashimi but still good for other preparations). **Senaka** is the center of the upper loin (the best of the akami). **Sekami** is the portion near the head.

The belly loins are called **hara**, the fattiest part of the tuna, which are also divided into three main sections: **Harashimo** is near the tail; **haranaka** is the center, where fatty chu-toro is located; and **harakami** is closer to the head, where you'll find o-toro, the extra-fatty meat.

Though all parts are used, the loins are the main cuts of the tuna, especially for sushi and sashimi. Once the loins are cut from the fish, they're broken down into roughly even blocks called koro.


HOHO-NIKU
NOTEN
KAMA-TORO
SEKAMI
HARAKAMI
(O-TORO)
HARANAKA
(CHU-TORO)
SENAKA
HARASHIMO
SESHIMO

HOW TO CUT TUNA LOIN

Niki is cutting the back top loin (sei) from a 65-pound tuna into smaller blocks called saku, which in turn can be sliced for sushi and sashimi.

The sei is cut into horizontal layers across the grain. Start by trimming off the blood line, the darkest part of the meat that runs the length of the loin. It will be much darker than the rest of the red meat, or akami. The texture is also distinct, so if you put a knife in between the blood line and the akami, the blood line should come off relatively cleanly. Run the edge of the knife against the blood line and start to peel it away from the red meat. You don't want to trim away too much of the meat. Trim any remaining blood line, which can be discarded or reserved for another use (some restaurants save it for special preparations).

Use a sharp chef's knife—Niki is using a knife called a gyuto (see page 13)—to cut the tuna loin into even layers, running the knife straight across (parallel to your work surface) and through the red meat.

Depending on the size and thickness of the loin, you will have three or four pieces. The top layer is tender and sometimes can be very, very soft. It's great for nigiri sushi because it's tender but lean, and the texture of sushi rice helps enhance it. Set this aside on a platter.

Cut the next layer; as you cut, pay attention to the change in the ratio of meat to fat. A balance of fat and leaner meat is delicious for both nigiri sushi and sashimi. Set the tuna aside on a platter.

Cut another layer, avoiding any sinew, and set it aside on your platter. As you cut, you'll see that the sinew (suji) has a different, fibrous texture. The fibrous sinew and the tendon are still good for other uses, but not for sashimi and sushi. The tuna meat can be scraped from the fibrous parts of the fish and used for hand rolls (such as spicy tuna) or tartare.

With the trimmed and cut pieces of tuna, you're now ready to cut the fish for sashimi or sushi.

OTSUKURI

Traditional Tuna Sashimi

Serves 4

Ingredients

For the soy sauce

9 parts soy sauce

2 parts dashi

1 part mirin (alcohol cooked off)

1 part sake (alcohol cooked off)

For the vegetables

1 cup julienned daikon from ½ medium daikon, peeled, trimmed, and rotary cut

¼ cup scallions from 2 scallions, white and light green parts only, trimmed and thinly sliced

1 small Japanese cucumber, cut into 4 pine trees

For the toro and sashimi

5 to 8 g toro per serving

2 pieces tuna loin, cut from akami

For the garnishes

4 shiso leaves

Wasabi flowers (optional)

8 g wasabi paste grated from fresh wasabi root, peeled, and trimmed

Soy sauce for serving

Sliced raw fresh fish, or sashimi, is a fundamental element of Japanese cuisine, as well as a course that's traditionally included in a kaiseki meal. Sashimi is also referred to as otsukuri, which means "cutting"; this speaks to the importance of how the fish is sliced. "Cutting is one of the most important techniques to master," Niki says, "so that we always do right by the ingredients" to enhance their flavor, texture, and appearance. Selecting the right kind of fish, cutting it, and presenting it are all skills that professional Japanese chefs must be able to demonstrate. Luckily, Niki has some pointers on how to prepare and serve your own sashimi.

The vegetable garnishes can be prepared simply—julienned daikon radish, slivered scallions, sliced cucumbers. But there are several techniques that apply specifically to how sashimi and vegetables are cut for otsukuri. So if you want to practice your knife skills, make sure to review the slice-by-slice breakdown below.

Pro-Tip: If you can't find fresh wasabi root, prepared wasabi paste is available at Japanese markets and select grocery stores.

Method

Make the soy sauce: Blend 9 parts soy sauce with 2 parts dashi, 1 part mirin, and 1 part sake. Refrigerate until ready to serve.

KATSURAMUKI (ROTARY CUTTING)

For the daikon: Prepare an ice bath by filling a small bowl with ice water. Put a mesh strainer in the bowl of ice water until it's submerged, and set aside. Cut the peeled daikon so that you have a piece that is a 5-inch cylinder. Niki uses her usuba vegetable knife to make paper-thin slices of daikon radish, using a rotary cutting technique called katsuramuki. The usuba has a very thin, straight blade used specifically for this cut. "This is one of the very first things that we must practice when learning Japanese cooking," she says.

Hold the knife in your cutting hand and the daikon in the other. Set the edge of the blade against the daikon lengthwise. Angle the blade just slightly against the daikon. Use your thumb to guide the knife as you turn the daikon. Your other thumb guides the daikon toward the blade. So as the daikon turns against the flat blade, you're cutting a paper-thin sheet. Move the knife back and forth very gently while turning the daikon. The tendency is to push too hard with either or both hands, but you should be moving lightly. The angle of the knife will determine the thickness of your sheet of daikon. "It takes a little bit of time to master," Niki says, "but once you get used to it, it's actually quite easy."

Continue to rotate and slice until you reach the center (or near the center) of the daikon and you have a long, thin sheet of daikon.

KEN (JULIENNE)

For the daikon: Cut the long, thin sheet of daikon into squares. Stack the pieces on top of one another and then julienne into 1/16-inch fine strips (ken). Transfer the julienned daikon to the strainer set in the bowl of ice water. Swish the daikon in the ice water to rinse, and let it soak for a few minutes. Lift the strainer from the bowl, gently shake off any excess water, and remove the daikon. Set aside to dry.

KOGUCHIGIRI (EDGE CUT)

For the scallions: Use a sharp knife (a chef's knife or usuba) to thinly slice the scallions, using your knuckles as a guide. Cutting them into straight, thin slices is called koguchigiri (if you were cutting them on a diagonal, that would be nanamegiri). Carole notes that in Japanese cooking, the knife isn't rocked back and forth against the cutting board. Slice through the vegetable, utilizing the entire blade from the front of the knife toward the back, pulling it toward you. Then lift the knife to slice again.

Once you're finished slicing the scallions, transfer them to the strainer set in the bowl of ice water. Swish the scallions in the ice water to rinse, then lift the strainer

from the bowl, gently shake off any excess water, and remove the scallions. Set aside to dry.

MATSUGIRI (PINE CUT)

For the cucumbers: Niki cuts each piece of cucumber so that it resembles the shape of a pine tree. (Yes, a pine tree.) This is known as matsugiri, or "pine cut."

Cut off about ⅓ of the cucumber and reserve it for another use. Then cut the remaining cucumber in half lengthwise. Lay the cucumber flat side down. Trim the sides lengthwise, so that you have straight sides (discard or eat the trimming).

Make lengthwise cuts in each piece, but do not cut all the way through—you're cutting about halfway down. Next, starting about an inch away from the top end, angle the knife about 45 degrees away from the top and cut partway through the cucumber on a diagonal. Again, you aren't cutting all the way through. This cut is one of the branches; using your fingers, slightly turn the angled cut away from the center of the cucumber so that it fans out like a branch with needles. Repeat to make 4 pine trees. Set aside.

For the toro from the tuna sinew: Use the edge of a spoon to lightly scrape the tuna meat from the white sinew that was trimmed from the loin. It will be very tender and fatty (and delicious). Place the meat in a bowl and use a spoon to gently mix in the scallions. Set the toro aside and discard the sinew.

For the sashimi from the tuna loin: From the tuna loin, square off 2 pieces (saku blocks) for sashimi. Hirazukuri is a cutting technique for slightly thicker pieces of sashimi (thicker than usuzukuri, which are fine slices), used for fattier fish such as tuna. First, "I like to get a good sense of the fish," Niki says, "the way the fish is moving and what feels like the right way to cut." This is a moment to "listen to the ingredient," as Niki says, before cutting. Depending on the condition of the tuna, various parts might be more tender than others, or you might see the lines between the meat breaking. Note the direction of the grain.

Cut the fish against the grain into about 12 ⅓-inch slices. The pieces shouldn't be so big that you have to bite it multiple times to swallow it. The flavor of sashimi is best enjoyed when you can eat it in a maximum of two bites.

Create the sashimi rosettes: Rosettes are a unique way of presenting sashimi. Slice the tuna very thinly at a slight angle—hold the blade of the knife at about a 45-degree angle. Cut 20 slices and arrange them in 4 lines on your cutting board by slightly overlapping 5 slices vertically for each rosette, with the short ends of the slices facing you. Use chopsticks to roll the slices and form a rosette. Set aside.

Otsukuri plating: The emphasis on the plating of the otsukuri course rests firmly on beauty, but it is also meant to convey a sense of being alive. There should be movement to it, Niki says. "Yama-tani-kawa!" That's the phrase she heard over and over again from one of the chefs she worked with in Japan. It means "mountain-valley-river," a reference to the different heights and levels that the components on the plate should create. Tableware is given special consideration for its visual effect and also contributes to the colors and shapes of the otsukuri course.

Start by placing a small mound of julienned daikon, called tsuma (which also is a generic term for any of the garnishes that accompany sashimi), on each plate to form a "mountain." Place a shiso leaf against the tsuma, and then place 3 slices of sashimi against the shiso leaf, fanning the fish out and arranging it at an 11 o'clock angle. This is a traditional angle for sashimi plating, an example of adding an element of movement.

Place a rosette of tuna next to the sashimi.

"Add a little of the forest," as Niki says, by adding the pine-cut cucumber to the center of each plate. Next to the cucumber, add a spoonful of the fatty tuna-scallion mixture.

For a pop of color, Carole adds dainty white wasabi flowers; if you can't find these, you can add any small edible blossoms to your dish.

Form a small mound (a mini mountain!) of grated wasabi and place it on the side of the plate.

Pro-Tip: Rather than mixing the wasabi with the soy sauce, a little of it should be dabbed on your sashimi with your chopsticks, and then the fish with wasabi is dipped into soy sauce.

Serve with a small bowl of soy sauce.

YAKIMONO

Grilled Tuna

Serves 2

Ingredients

For the pickled cucumber

1 Japanese cucumber

2 percent salt (measure 2 percent of the weight of the cucumber in salt)

2 red shiso leaves

½ tsp yuzu juice

For the grilled tuna

2 oz sake

2 oz mirin

4 oz soy sauce

2 tsp ginger, grated

1 clove garlic, grated

1 oz sugar

4 small tuna steaks, about 3 oz each, cut from the loin

4 red shiso leaves for garnish

Niki loves grilling because it requires full engagement, unlike other temperature-regulated types of cooking (i.e., the stove or oven). You're constantly studying the whole process, shifting the charcoal to adjust the heat or moving your ingredients to different parts of the fire. "You work through the nuances of what makes a dish," she says. When grilling with binchotan charcoal (see "Binchotan, King of Charcoal," on page 34), the fat from the fish or meat that hits the charcoal makes less smoke and instead produces vapors, pumping up the flavor. One type of binchotan is made with compressed pieces of wood. The original is made of pure hardwood (it's more expensive but burns more slowly at higher temperatures). Niki prefers the latter—"something about it is always reminiscent of the woods," she says.

In this recipe, the tuna is marinated in a soy sauce–and–sake glaze that caramelizes as it grills. It pairs well with crunchy, tangy pickles made with salt and yuzu to counterbalance the marinade. Have it with a glass of sake, too. Delicious.

Method

Make the pickled cucumber: Cut the Japanese cucumber into ¼-inch discs. Place the discs in a bowl and measure their weight. Add 2 percent of salt by weight and mix. Let the discs sit for 10 to 15 minutes, and discard any liquid that leaches out. Julienne the shiso leaves and add them to the bowl. Add in the yuzu juice and toss. Chill until ready to serve.

Prepare the grill: Put 8 to 10 pieces of binchotan in a charcoal chimney or directly over a flame to ignite. Heat the charcoal until it is consistently glowing, 30 minutes to 1 hour.

Prepare the marinade: Pour the sake and mirin into a shallow pan set over medium-high heat. Heat the mixture until the alcohol burns off, 2 to 3 minutes.

In a large bowl, combine the soy sauce, ginger, garlic, and sugar. Pour the heated sake-mirin mixture into the bowl and mix until the sugar dissolves. Add the tuna to the bowl and marinate for 40 minutes.

Skewer the tuna: Because of the size of the tuna, use double skewers for each set of tuna steaks. Pierce the tuna against the grain to prevent the meat from breaking apart.

Cook the tuna: Use tongs to transfer the charcoal to your konro or grill in a well-ventilated area or outside, if possible. (Tuna is fatty, and as its oil drips onto the charcoal, it will get quite smoky.) Divide the binchotan into 2 stacks of different heights. The different heights give you different heat levels so that you can move the tuna from one to the other as needed.

Place the skewers on the grill over the charcoals. As the tuna cooks, move the skewers or the binchotan as needed to adjust the heat. Grill each side until the marinade is caramelized and golden brown, with the edges of the tuna becoming a darker brown, about 4 minutes on each side. "It's always nice to have parts that are caramelized and parts that are not," Niki says. You'll also notice that the grain of the fish becomes more pronounced. Once the tuna is cooked, set it aside and remove the skewers from the grill.

Place two overlapping leaves of shiso in the center of each plate. Place two tuna steaks, also overlapping, on top of the shiso. Put a small mound of pickled cucumber next to the tuna, and serve.

BINCHOTAN, KING OF CHARCOAL

Binchotan is traditional Japanese charcoal that dates to the Edo period (1603–1868), when craftsmen first produced what's sometimes called "white charcoal." They carbonized the hard, dense oak of Wakayama prefecture in a kiln, then buried it in a mound of sand and ash. The result? An intense burn with very little smoke. This is what gives Japanese grilling its unique flavor, Niki says.

WHAT'S A KONRO?

A konro is a special type of Japanese grill, often made from hand-mined blocks of diatomite (fossilized plankton) or similar porous clays. These blocks are joined together and baked at very high temperatures for hours, producing super-strong, durable, fire-resistant grills. Crucially, konro are generally long and narrow enough that skewers of yakitori can rest on the sides of the box (which is compact enough to go on a countertop) without falling into the coals at the bottom. Like binchotan, these grills have been used for hundreds of years.

GRILLING TIPS FOR BINCHOTAN

- Binchotan can take a while to ignite, but once it does, it burns for longer than other kinds of charcoal.
- If you need to tame the heat, you can spray the binchotan with a water bottle. (Ashes will rise from the charcoal, so move the ingredients off the grill first.)
- You can also use aluminum foil to cover certain sections of binchotan to diffuse the heat.
- Put out the charcoal as soon as possible; you can save and reuse it the next time you grill.

MUSHIMONO

Steamed Rockfish

Serves 4

Ingredients

For the steamed rockfish

4 rockfish fillets (2 to 3 oz each)

1 tsp sake

1 tsp soy sauce

Pinch of salt

For the potato purée

1 russet potato, cut into large pieces and boiled

6 tbsp butter, room temperature

4 oz dashi (see "Ichiban Dashi: Kombu and Bonito Stock" on page 15)

Salt to taste

For the ankake

12 oz dashi, divided

1 oz mirin

1 oz usukuchi soy sauce, light colored, not low sodium

2 tbsp potato starch

For the garnishes

1 in lemon rind, thinly julienned

4 red baby bell peppers, julienned

1 oz scallions, thinly sliced

In the spirit of mottainai, use some of the remaining rockfish fillets from the modern sashimi course to make a special mushimono (steamed dish). This rockfish with potato purée is "heartwarming and hearty without being overwhelmingly strong or too rich," Niki says. "A steamed dish brings everything together halfway through the meal."

Indeed, the mild flavor and tender texture of the rockfish make it ideal for steaming. The temperature of the dish is important here: Having a steamed dish come to the table very hot is part of the experience. According to Niki, "You'll find with Japanese cooking, very little is ever served at room temperature. If it's supposed to be hot, it's going to be hot. If it's supposed to be cold, it's going to be very cold."

Another important element in this dish is ankake: a Japanese sauce thickened with a starch such as arrowroot or potato (in this case, potato starch). It has a viscous texture that stands in for fats.

Pro-Tip: Niki uses lidded heatproof bowls for this dish.

Method

Pre-steam the fish: Place the rockfish fillets in a shallow bowl, and add a splash of sake and soy sauce and a pinch of salt. Place the bowl in a prepared steamer over medium heat, and steam for 4 minutes. Remove from the steamer and set aside.

Make the potato purée: Put the boiled russet potatoes and butter in the bowl of a food processor. Add the dashi a little at a time while pulsing. Blend to a smooth purée. (It shouldn't be too thick—the consistency should be similar to a loose mashed potato.) If you lift the purée with a spatula, it should slide off. Add salt to taste. Keep in mind that all of the elements of the dish will be seasoned, so be careful about adding too much salt.

Make the ankake: This sauce is made with dashi, mirin, and usukuchi soy sauce in the ratio of 12:1:1. In a saucepan, combine 8 ounces of dashi with the mirin and soy sauce, and set over medium heat. In a small bowl, whisk the remaining 4 ounces of dashi together with the potato starch to make a slurry, and add it a little at a time to the saucepan, whisking continuously to prevent clumps. Bring the mixture to a gentle simmer.

Continue whisking the mixture continuously while bringing it to a boiling point to thicken. (You'll see it start to stick to the whisk.) Once the mixture is slightly thickened, keep it warm until ready to use. There will be more ankake than you need. Cover and store in the refrigerator for up to 5 days. Reheat and use it on top of steamed or sautéed vegetables with rice.

Put a couple of spoonfuls of potato purée in the bottom of each of 4 small heatproof bowls. Divide the fish among the 4 bowls, placing it skin side up on top of the potato purée. Place the bowls in a steamer and steam for 3 to 4 minutes (the temperature should be between 135°F/57°C and 145°F/63°C). When finished, carefully remove the bowls from the steamer.

Garnish each bowl with the lemon rind, then ladle the ankake over the top of the fish—just enough so there is a thin layer on top. Garnish with the peppers and scallions. Cover the bowls with their lids, and serve immediately.

LEARN MORE: RATIOS

When it comes to sauces and seasonings, much of Japanese cooking is ratio-based. For example, 2 parts rice vinegar to 2 parts dashi to 1 part sugar for pickles (see Shokuji: Rice and Pickles on page 43), or here for the ankake, 12 parts dashi to 1 part mirin to 1 part usukuchi soy sauce. "It's not uncommon in a Japanese kitchen to hear chefs shouting, '7:1:1!' or 'Throw together an '8:1:1!' " Niki says. These don't always refer to the same ingredients, but you can use ratios to learn to season and find what suits your taste.

AGEMONO

Rockfish and Vegetable Tempura

Serves 4

Ingredients

For the tempura batter

1 cup flour

1 tsp baking soda

2 tsp potato starch

1 egg

1 cup ice water

For the rockfish vegetable tempura

3 qt rice bran or soybean oil, for frying

¼ cup potato starch, for coating

8 ½-inch slices of rockfish, left over from cutting the belly loin (see "Zukuri: Modern Rockfish Sashimi" on page 19)

4 broccoli florets

4 pieces zucchini, cut into ¼-inch discs

4 pieces Japanese sweet potato, cut into ¼-inch discs

For the tempura dipping sauce and serving

2 cups dashi

½ cup mirin

½ cup soy sauce

Freshly grated daikon, to taste

Freshly grated ginger, squeezed of excess moisture, to taste

Sea salt, to taste

Lemon wedges

Frying tempura is an art form unto itself. At tempura restaurants in Japan, the chef might have several pots going at once, each filled with a certain type of oil at a certain temperature for a certain ingredient. One pot of oil at home for frying delicately battered vegetables and rockfish works, too. Use a variety of vegetables for texture and flavor: mushrooms, squashes such as kabocha, shiso leaves, carrots, or eggplant. "Be open—try everything and see how you like it," Niki says.

Pro-Tip: Many Japanese markets sell tempura flour with the baking soda, starch, and dried egg white pre-sifted and mixed. It makes a very crispy batter. If you don't have a Japanese market in your neighborhood, try online outlets (see "Where to Buy Specialty Japanese Ingredients, Equipment, and Tableware" on page 10).

Method

Fill a wide, deep pot or wok with enough oil so that it comes nearly halfway up the sides (at least 3 to 4 inches). Heat the oil over medium-high heat until it's 350°F/177°C.

Make the tempura batter: Prepare an ice bath for your tempura batter by filling a large bowl with ice. Set another large metal or glass bowl on top of the ice bath, and sift in the flour, baking soda, and potato starch. In a small bowl, mix the egg and 1 cup ice water together until well combined. Add the egg mixture to the flour mixture, and stir with chopsticks or a small whisk, leaving small lumps (you want lumps!). This should take less than a minute; the batter should coat the spoon in a thin layer but run off easily. Keep the batter on ice. (See "Niki's Tempura Tips" on page 39.)

Prepare the rockfish and vegetables: Put potato starch in an even layer at the bottom of a shallow baking dish, enough to cover the bottom so that you can lightly toss your tempura ingredients in it.

When you're ready to batter and fry, check the consistency of your tempura batter. If it has thickened, you can add a little cold water. You can test the oil by dropping in a little of the batter: It should float to the surface and will start to bubble.

Lightly dust your ingredients with the potato starch; this helps remove any excess moisture. Dip each in the batter to lightly coat. Fry in batches by ingredient until lightly golden, turning the ingredients with a skimmer. For vegetables, 1 to 2 minutes (for shiso leaves, 15 seconds). For root vegetables, 3 to 4 minutes. For the rockfish, 1 to 2 minutes. Transfer to a rack or paper towel to remove excess oil.

Make the tempura dipping sauce: Mix the dashi, mirin, and soy sauce in a 4:1:1 ratio in a small saucepan set over medium heat. Heat until the sauce comes to a light simmer, about 5 minutes.

Meanwhile, place a small mound of freshly grated daikon into small bowls and top with freshly grated ginger. When the dipping sauce is hot, transfer to separate dipping bowls. Niki serves her tempura on paper alongside small bowls of salt, lemon wedges, tempura dipping sauce, and grated daikon. Your guests can add the grated daikon and ginger as desired to the dipping sauce at the table.

NIKI'S TEMPURA TIPS

- Don't overmix your batter, as you risk overworking the gluten. Chopsticks are a critical tool here; you want to mix roughly and retain small lumps.
- Keep your batter cold by setting it over a bowl of ice.
- Make sure the oil is hot. Niki fries tempura at 350°F/177°C. Test the oil with a drop of batter; it should float to the top and start to bubble.
- Lightly toss ingredients in potato starch before dipping them in batter; it should be just a thin coating. This helps remove excess moisture. The batter also sticks better to the ingredient.
- Lightly dip ingredients in the batter. You want to be able to see your ingredients through the batter.
- Monitor the fry temperature: Make sure the oil comes back to the right temperature between batches.
- Don't fry too much at once. The ingredients shouldn't take up more than half the surface area of your pot; they need space to fry up crispy. Use a skimmer to push them apart as you're frying.
- Turn the ingredients in the oil with a skimmer to ensure they fry evenly.
- Between frying batches of ingredients, remove any crumbs from the oil, which will burn and turn the oil dark.
- When you move your tempura to a rack or paper towel, keep each piece spaced apart. Giving them room to breathe helps maintain their crispness.

AGEMONO

Tuna Karaage

Serves 4

Ingredients

4 oz tuna marinade (see "Yakimono: Grilled Tuna" on page 31)

2 oz dashi

1 tsp sesame oil

½ tsp grated garlic

12 pieces sliced tuna (2½ inches long by 1 inch wide and ½ inch thick)

3 qt rice bran or soybean oil, for frying

½ cup potato starch, for coating

¼ cup panko, for coating

3 cups julienned cabbage

Lemon wedges, for serving

For the sesame aioli

½ cup Kewpie mayonnaise

3 tbsp ponzu

2 tsp sesame oil

Only the deep-red part of the tuna loin is used for sashimi—and fresh tuna can change color quickly as a result of oxidation. So if you have a block of tuna whose exterior has darkened, you can trim that part off and use it for this karaage dish of fried tuna. Instead of a batter, it has a "dry" crust, which makes it crunchy, crispy, and good for snacking with sake or beer. Karaage is traditionally fried chicken, so Niki calls this dish "tuna chicken."

Pro-Tip: Kewpie mayo is a Japanese mayonnaise brand found in many Asian markets. Ponzu also is available at Asian markets and select supermarkets. If you can't find either at markets near you, search online (see page 10).

Method

Prepare the tuna: Mix the tuna marinade with the dashi, sesame oil, and grated garlic in a bowl, and add the tuna. Marinate for 40 minutes.

Fry the tuna: Fill a wide, deep pot or wok with enough oil so that it comes nearly halfway up the sides (at least 3 to 4 inches). Heat the oil over medium-high heat until it's 350°F/177°C.

Put the potato starch in an even layer on the bottom of a shallow baking dish. Toss the tuna in the potato starch and coat it thoroughly. Sprinkle the panko over the tuna and toss again.

Fry the coated tuna pieces in the deep pot a few at a time. Don't overcrowd the pot, and be sure to keep the pieces separated, moving them around with tongs. Fry until medium golden brown, 1 to 2 minutes.

Transfer the fried fish to a rack or paper towel to remove excess oil.

Prepare the sesame aioli: In a small bowl, whisk the mayonnaise, ponzu, and sesame oil until well combined. Transfer to small dipping bowls.

Place a mound of julienned cabbage in the center of each plate. Top with overlapping pieces of karaage. Place a wedge of lemon on the side. Serve immediately with the bowls of sesame aioli.

SHOKUJI

Rice and Pickles

Kaiseki often ends with a bowl of plain steamed rice and some house-cured pickles: the shokuji course. Shokuji means "meal," and the simple moniker is a reference to the more humble cha-kaiseki (tea ceremony) of just rice and pickled vegetables—a nod to modern kaiseki's culinary roots.

Cooking rice is both intuitive and exacting. It's simply steamed with water, but paying attention to each step of the preparation and cooking process benefits the final texture. Japanese rice should be fluffy, light, tender, glossy, and slightly sticky. The grains cling together when cooked, but each distinct grain is intact and has its own chew.

"When I was growing up, my grandmother would always ask me what I wanted to eat," Niki says. "I always told her I just want a bowl of rice and an egg. Egg and rice and soy sauce, and that's to this day one of my favorite things to eat. Rice is just one of those things—when you have it as part of your regular diet, if you don't eat it after a couple of days, you start to crave it."

Measure: Measure the amount of rice you want to cook by weighing it on a kitchen scale. Also measure your water for cooking later. The water should weigh 111 percent of the amount of rice. Set the water aside.

Rinse: Put the rice in a fine-mesh strainer set over a large bowl. In the sink, wash the rice under cold low-running water (you don't want the water pressure to be so high that you risk breaking the grains of rice).

Swish: As the water fills the bowl, gently swirl the rice with your hand. You'll notice a lot of the starch wash off. "You want to wash as much of that starch away as possible," Niki says, "so I like to swish it around a little bit and gently run my fingers through the rice." (Excess starch can make the rice overly sticky or clumpy.) Pour the water out of the bowl once it's full. Repeat a few times until the water runs fairly clear. Drain the liquid and shake the rice in the strainer to remove any excess water.

Soak: Transfer the rice to your donabe, pot, or rice cooker. Pour the cooking water that you measured earlier over the rice. Set aside for 20 to 30 minutes to soak. "Letting it sit is key to a really beautiful batch of rice," Carole says.

Steam: If you're using a double-lidded donabe such as Niki's, place the lids on the pot (the single steam hole on the top lid should be perpendicular to the two holes on the interior lid). Cook the rice over medium heat until you see steam steadily coming out of the hole of the top lid; this should take about 10 to 12 minutes. Let the rice rest off of the heat for 15 to 20 minutes.

Fluff: Carefully remove the lids from the rice. Using a rice shamoji or a rubber spatula, gently fluff the rice. Start at the edges of the pot and mix the rice inward, scooping upward to add some volume. Make sure you're not smashing or overmixing.

Fill: Transfer the rice to a bowl—the traditional way is to fill your bowl only 80 percent—and fill it a little at a time (not dumping it all at once) by using small scoops. You don't want it to be one big clump. You should end up with a fluffy, warm, jiggly mound of rice. Serve immediately.

Ingredients

For the brine

5 oz water or dashi

5 oz rice vinegar

2.5 oz sugar

1 tsp salt

For the vegetables

¼ cup daikon (use the core left over from "Otsukuri: Traditional Tuna Sashimi" on page 27), cut into ½-inch-thick quarter-circles

¼ cup thinly sliced carrots (left over from "Owan: Soup With Bone Broth" on page 21)

¼ cup sliced red bell peppers, seeds removed

¼ cup julienned cooked kombu (from "Ichiban Dashi: Kombu and Bonito Stock" on page 15)

QUICK-PICKLED VEGETABLES

This is a really simple pickle recipe that utilizes a 2:2:1 brine—2 parts water or dashi to 2 parts rice vinegar to 1 part sugar. This brine is sometimes called mazu, which means "sweet vinegar," and is meant to be versatile. Add aromatics or herbs such as shiso to change up the flavor.

Method

Prepare the brine: Put the water or dashi, rice vinegar, sugar, and salt in a small saucepan set over medium-high heat and bring to a light simmer. Stir to dissolve the sugar and salt. Remove from the heat.

Pickle the vegetables: Put the daikon, carrots, and peppers in a heatproof bowl, and pour the brine over the vegetables. Let cool. These can be served immediately or stored in the refrigerator in a covered container for up to 1 month.

Enjoy the pickled vegetables on their own or transfer to small bowls to accompany the freshly steamed rice.

"Itadakimasu!"

CREDITS

Clips from *Chef's Cut: The Art of Kaiseki With Niki Nakayama*
Clips courtesy The Art of Plating

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