



Japansophy's Guide to

40 Must-Try Japanese Foods and Drinks



Beyond sushi

Alright foodies, buckle up because we're about to dive headfirst into a culinary wonderland – Japan! This isn't just a country with polite people and stunning scenery, oh no. We're talking about a place that boasts an absolutely ridiculous number of Michelin stars, proving they know a thing or two (or ten!) about seriously good eating. But don't let those fancy accolades intimidate you! From exquisitely crafted, melt-in-your-mouth masterpieces that could bring a tear to a seasoned chef's eye, right down to the most unbelievably delicious street snacks that'll have you saying 'hit me up again!' before you've even swallowed, Japan's got a flavour adventure for every palate and every budget. So, ditch the diet for a bit, pull on the stretchy pants and let's explore the must-try bites and sips that make this island nation a true gastronomic paradise!

1. Sushi

Number one has to be sushi, right? Vinegared rice, typically topped with pristine slices of seafood: In Japan, the freshness is unparalleled – especially straight from the bustling Tokyo fish market. But of course it can also be vegetarian/vegan-friendly: look out for sushi rolls filled with cucumber or pickled veggies.



2. Sashimi

Sushi's elegant, minimalist cousin. It's simply thinly sliced raw fish or seafood, meant to be savored for its pure, unadulterated taste and texture. Trying it in Japan means experiencing seafood at its absolute peak freshness, often locally sourced. Enjoy it cold with a touch of soy sauce and wasabi – a true taste of the ocean.



More than just noodles in soup! This iconic dish features springy wheat noodles swimming in a rich, flavorful broth (soy, miso, pork bone – the list goes on!). Each region in Japan boasts its own unique ramen style. Slurping is encouraged! While often featuring meat, vegetarian and even vegan options are becoming more common. Best enjoyed piping hot, any time of year.



3. Ramen

Light and airy, not greasy! Seafood and vegetables are delicately battered and deep-fried to crispy perfection. The key is the light batter and the freshness of the ingredients, best experienced at a specialized tempura restaurant in Japan. Enjoy it hot, often with a dipping sauce. Seasonal vegetables make it a year-round delight

4. Tempura



5. Udon



Thick, chewy wheat flour noodles that are incredibly versatile. Served hot in a savory broth with various toppings (meat, tempura, vegetables) or chilled with a dipping sauce. Their satisfying slurpability makes them a comforting staple, found everywhere in Japan. Vegetarian options abound. Perfect for any season!

Thin buckwheat noodles with an earthy, slightly nutty flavor. Often served chilled with a soy-based dipping sauce and wasabi (zaru soba) or hot in a flavorful broth. A healthier noodle option, soba is particularly popular in the Nagano region, where buckwheat cultivation thrives. Enjoy it year-round, hot or cold

6. Soba



Skewered and grilled deliciousness! Chicken in all its glorious forms (thigh, heart, skin – you name it!) and sometimes vegetables, brushed with a savory-sweet sauce or simply seasoned with salt. Found in smoky, atmospheric yakitori-ya (restaurants) all over Japan. A perfect accompaniment to beer! Enjoy it hot, fresh off the grill

7. Yakitori



8. Okonomiyaki



A savory pancake that's often described as "Japanese pizza" or "soul food." A batter of flour, eggs, and shredded cabbage is mixed with various fillings (pork, seafood, vegetables) and grilled. Each region has its own style (Hiroshima and Osaka are famous!). Often cooked right in front of you! Best enjoyed hot and customized to your liking

Little balls of happiness! These spherical snacks are made from a wheat flour-based batter filled with diced octopus, tempura scraps, pickled ginger, and green onion. Cooked in a special molded pan and topped with takoyaki sauce, Japanese mayonnaise, bonito flakes, and aonori seaweed. A quintessential Osaka street food, best eaten hot off the griddle – be careful, they're molten inside!

9. Takoyaki



Japan's answer to the dumpling! Typically pan-fried to a crispy bottom with a juicy filling of minced pork, cabbage, and garlic. Often served as a side dish with ramen or as an appetizer. While pork is common, vegetarian versions can be found. Enjoy them hot with a dipping sauce of soy sauce, vinegar, and chili oil.

10. Gyoza



11. Yakisoba



Stir-fried noodles with a savory-sweet sauce! Wheat noodles are tossed with vegetables (cabbage, onions, carrots), meat (usually pork or chicken), and a tangy Worcestershire-style sauce. Often topped with bonito flakes, pickled ginger, and Japanese mayonnaise. A popular street food and festival favorite, best enjoyed hot off the griddle

Okonomiyaki's gooey, Tokyo-born cousin! This savory pancake features a more liquid batter cooked on a hot plate. Ingredients are chopped finely and mixed into the runny batter, creating a cheesy, slightly burnt crust as you eat directly from the hot plate with tiny spatulas. A fun and interactive experience unique to the Tokyo area

12. Monjayaki



Imagine a pork cutlet that's been given the full crispy treatment! A thick slice of pork, coated in panko breadcrumbs and deep-fried to golden perfection. Often served with a sweet and savory tonkatsu sauce, shredded cabbage, and rice. A satisfying and comforting dish found in dedicated tonkatsu-ya restaurants across Japan. Best enjoyed hot for maximum crunch!

13. Tonkatsu



14. Karaage



Forget your average fried chicken! Japanese karaage is marinated in ginger, garlic, and soy sauce before being lightly coated and deep-fried, resulting in incredibly juicy and flavorful bites. A popular staple in izakayas (Japanese pubs) and as a bento box item. Enjoy it hot, often with a squeeze of lemon. Perfect for sharing (or not!)

More than just a starter! This traditional soup, made from fermented soybean paste (miso) and dashi (fish stock), is a cornerstone of Japanese cuisine. Often featuring tofu, seaweed, and green onions, it's a warm and umami-rich comfort. Enjoyed hot at almost any meal, from breakfast onwards. Vegetarian and vegan versions exist (check the dashi!)

15. Miso soup



Japan's grab-and-go goodness! These triangular or round rice balls are often filled with savory delights like pickled plum (umeboshi), tuna mayo, or salmon, and wrapped in crisp nori seaweed. Found in convenience stores (konbini), supermarkets, and specialty shops everywhere. Perfect for a quick and tasty snack, eaten cold or at room temperature

16. Onigiri



17. Donburi



A simple yet satisfying one-bowl wonder! Steamed rice is topped with a variety of savory ingredients, like thinly sliced beef and onions simmered in a sweet sauce (gyudon), chicken and egg (oyakodon), or crispy tempura (tendon). A quick and affordable meal found in many restaurants. Enjoyed hot and endlessly customizable

Japan's comforting take on curry! Typically milder and sweeter than its Indian counterpart, this thick stew often features vegetables and meat (beef, pork, or chicken) served over fluffy white rice. A popular family dish found in curry specialty shops and regular restaurants. It's a warming and satisfying meal, especially on a cooler day

18. Kare Raisu



Get interactive with your dinner! Thinly sliced meat (usually beef or pork) and various vegetables are cooked by briefly swishing them in a simmering pot of flavorful broth at the table. Diners then dip the cooked ingredients in ponzu (citrus soy sauce) or sesame sauce. A communal and fun dining experience, enjoyed hot and perfect for sharing

19. Shabu Shabu



20. Sukiyaki



Another delicious hot pot adventure!

Thinly sliced beef, tofu, vegetables, and shirataki noodles are simmered in a sweet soy sauce-based broth at the table. Often dipped in raw beaten egg before eating, which adds a rich and creamy texture. A communal and comforting dish, especially popular in the colder months

A winter warmer in a pot! Various ingredients like boiled eggs, daikon radish, fishcakes, konnyaku (yam jelly), and more are simmered for hours in a light, flavorful dashi broth. Found simmering away in convenience stores and specialty oden shops during the colder seasons. Enjoyed hot, it's a comforting and diverse culinary experience.

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Brace yourself for a unique experience! These fermented soybeans are known for their sticky, stringy texture and... distinctive aroma. Often eaten for breakfast mixed with soy sauce, mustard, and green onions, served over rice. A polarizing food – you either love it or you... well, you'll know. Said to be very healthy!

24. Natto



More than just a side! A colorful and diverse array of pickled vegetables, ranging from crunchy daikon radish to crisp cucumbers and flavorful eggplant. Each region in Japan boasts its own unique tsukemono. Enjoyed cold as a palate cleanser or accompaniment to meals, they offer a delightful range of textures and flavors. Vegetarian and vegan-friendly!

25. Tsukemono



26. Taiyaki



Sweet and adorable fish-shaped cakes! These little treats are typically filled with sweet red bean paste (anko) but can also contain custard, chocolate, or even savory fillings. Often found at street stalls and festivals, they're best enjoyed warm, fresh off the griddle. A delightful and photogenic snack for any sweet tooth

Osaka's deep-fried skewer sensation! Various ingredients like meat, vegetables, and even cheese are coated in panko breadcrumbs, skewered, and deep-fried to crispy perfection. Diners then dip them in a communal (double-dipping is frowned upon!) sweet and savory sauce. A fun and casual way to sample a variety of flavors.

27. Kushikatsu



28. Daifuku

Soft and chewy mochi (glutinous rice cake) with a sweet filling, most commonly red bean paste (anko). These little bundles of joy come in various flavors and colors, sometimes dusted with potato starch to prevent sticking. A popular traditional sweet, enjoyed year-round as a delightful treat.



29. Kakigori



Japan's answer to a snow cone, but oh-so-much better! Finely shaved ice is piled high and drizzled with sweet flavored syrups (strawberry, melon, matcha) and often topped with condensed milk, sweet beans, or mochi balls. A refreshing and colorful treat, especially popular during the hot summer months

Super thin and delicate wheat flour noodles, typically served chilled with a light dipping sauce (mentsuyu) flavored with soy sauce, dashi, and mirin. Often enjoyed in the summer, sometimes with ice and refreshing toppings like shredded ginger, green onions, and sesame seeds or even mandarine oranges! A light and refreshing way to beat the heat

30. Somen



Prepare for a truly decadent experience! This isn't just beef; it's a highly prized Japanese cattle breed renowned for its intense marbling, resulting in incredibly tender and flavorful meat that practically dissolves in your mouth. From the famous Kobe beef to other regional varieties, indulging in Wagyu in Japan is a splurge worth making – it's a taste of luxury you won't soon forget.

31. Wagyu



32. Sake



Japan's national beverage! Often called rice wine, it's brewed from fermented rice. Served chilled, at room temperature, or warmed, with a diverse range of flavors from dry and crisp to sweet and fruity. Exploring regional sake breweries offers a fascinating glimpse into Japanese culture

Vibrant green and packed with flavor (and caffeine)! This finely ground green tea powder is whisked with hot water to create a frothy, slightly bitter, and umami-rich drink. Central to the traditional tea ceremony, it's also used in countless desserts and lattes. A unique and energizing experience.

33. Matcha



34. Whisky

Surprisingly smooth and complex! Japanese whisky has gained international acclaim for its meticulous production and elegant flavors, often compared to Scotch. Enjoyed neat, on the rocks, or in a highball. Exploring different distilleries can be a treat for whisky enthusiasts



35. Shochu



Japan's versatile distilled spirit! Made from various ingredients like rice, barley, sweet potatoes, or sugarcane, resulting in a wide range of flavors. Enjoyed straight, on the rocks, mixed with water or tea, or as a base for cocktails. A popular alternative to sake and whisky

36. Umeshu

Sweet, fruity, and utterly delightful! This liqueur is made by steeping Japanese plums (ume) in alcohol (often shochu or white liquor) and sugar. Enjoyed on the rocks, mixed with soda water, or as a dessert wine. Often homemade, it offers a taste of summer in a glass



37. Sencha

The everyday hero of Japanese green tea! These whole tea leaves are steamed, rolled, and dried, resulting in a refreshing and slightly grassy flavor with a hint of pleasant bitterness. Enjoyed hot or cold, it's a staple in Japanese homes and restaurants, perfect for sipping throughout the day. A simple yet satisfying taste of Japan



38. Hojicha



Warm, toasty comfort in a cup! This Japanese green tea is roasted over charcoal, giving it a distinctive reddish-brown color and a nutty, slightly sweet, and less caffeinated flavor compared to sencha. Often enjoyed in the evening or with meals, its comforting aroma and gentle taste make it a soothing experience

The uniquely bottled taste of summer festivals! This iconic Japanese carbonated soft drink is sealed with a marble that you have to pop down into the bottle to open. With a variety of fruity flavors (melon is a classic!), the fizzy sweetness and the fun of opening it make it a nostalgic and refreshing treat, especially during warmer months

39. Ramune



40. Calpis

A milky enigma that's surprisingly refreshing! This non-carbonated soft drink has a slightly tangy and sweet yogurt-like flavor. Diluted with water (or sometimes served carbonated), it's a popular and unique Japanese beverage enjoyed by both kids and adults. A subtly addictive and distinctly Japanese taste



Well, folks, if your stomach isn't rumbling louder than a Shinkansen speeding through the countryside right now, we might need to check your pulse! We've taken a whirlwind tour through a mere fraction of Japan's incredible culinary landscape, from the delicate dance of sushi to the soul-warming embrace of ramen, and those quirky, marble-sealed bottles of Ramune that are as fun to open as they are to drink.

Remember, this isn't just about ticking items off a list; it's about diving headfirst into a culture that cherishes flavor, presentation, and the sheer joy of eating and drinking well. So, go forth, be adventurous, and don't be afraid to point enthusiastically at a picture on a menu. Embrace the slurps, the 'oishii!' moments, and maybe even that first tentative bite of natto (you never know!).

Whether you find yourself bowing in gratitude after a Michelin-starred kaiseki feast or happily munching on takoyaki at a lively festival, each bite and each sip tells a story of Japan's rich history and vibrant present. Consider this guide your trusty starting pistol in the marathon of delicious discoveries that awaits you.

Now, if you'll excuse me, all this talk of food has made me hungry. Go book that flight, pack your appetite, and get ready for a taste adventure that will leave you saying 'kanpai!' and 'gochisousama deshita!' with genuine enthusiasm. Happy eating, and may your culinary explorations in Japan be nothing short of legendary!"