

# Balancing Act

With Japanese cuisine, everything has a purpose and relationship. And our resident culinary expert was reduced to a humble student when he stepped into the kitchen.

by **Donald Downes**

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**N**o doubt you've had Japanese food. Besides tasting pretty terrific, it's always beautifully displayed. Colors are vivid and thought out, textures and shapes contrast, and plate space is fully utilized, not cluttered. Yet the cuisine and its preparation is mysterious to many, probably because it is a cuisine that's steeped in an ancient heritage — everything has a purpose, a reason, a place, a relationship. Whew! No wonder it's a mystery.

Given my curiosity for cuisines, and the fact that America Japan Week '93 is here in town this month, I investigated further. I learned that Japanese food is big on opposites. Dark colors against light hues (and light colors against dark hues) arouse the eyes. Smooth or soft-textured foods are often weaved with crunchy counterparts. Roundish foods are served on dishes having straight lines, and, of course, straight-line foods are served on round dishes. Even the food on a plate (the positive space) balances where there is no food (the negative space), and the two are usually connected by a single line, such as a green onion, a vegetable stick, or a piece of pickled ginger. It's all a matter of balance.

Fascinating stuff.

Yet, none of this amounts to a hill of sticky rice if the ingredients are not fresh. Freshness is the basis of Japanese cooking. It is the food itself you taste, not what has been done to it. And, unlike the other above elements, there is no acceptable opposite.

Take tempura, for example. What could be simpler? I mean it's just some odd pieces of vegetables and things batter-coated and deep-fried. Right? Well, my first travels into tempura world produced objects that would have frightened children and small pets. The resulting experimental items looked like barnacle-encrusted creatures dragged up from a murky abyss — à la Jules Verne — instead of the light and lacy wrapped vegetables I had sampled at a Japanese restaurant.

What happened!?

According to Fred Yamada, owner/chef of Scottsdale's Yamakasa, any one of a number of things could have troubled my attempt. To make terrific tempura, these things are crucial: The batter should be thin (not pancake batter), sort of lumpy (don't stir in every last speck of flour), use *ice* water, prepare the batter just before frying,

and make several batches if frying a lot; also be sure the oil is heated to a temperature between 350 and 375 degrees.

Another try at tempura did yield recognizable (and edible) lightly coated pieces. However, I do need more practice before throwing a tempura bash.

Those who know me, know that I have professed a liking for cooked fish, as opposed to its raw state known simply to most as sushi. But, in order to better understand and truly appreciate Japanese cooking — especially that freshness part — I sacrificed my proclamation and surrendered my palate to the sushi masters at Yamakasa.

Guess what? This sushi stuff is swell! What? A guy can't change his mind? The adventure — doing sushi, as in "Do you do sushi?" — now has me hooked. If you knew sushi, like I now know sushi, you'd do sushi too. And, talk about freshness. Needless to say it's paramount with sushi. If it's not, well... you know what happens.

At most sushi bars, the varieties of cold, pristine fish are displayed in glass cases atop cubed ice. Mr. Yamada (or just Fred as he's known to his customers), a master sushi chef, too, says the fish, et al., are displayed in this manner so the customers can see the freshness, and (perhaps more



**Fred Yamada shares some secrets of traditional Japanese cooking.**

importantly) point to what they want, since most folks are not on a first name basis with the finned family.

"Sushi," says Fred, enlightening me as to its correct definition, "is seasoned rice with a piece of the fish on top of the rice. That's sushi. Sashimi is slices of fresh fish by itself, no rice. Then there's the roll (California, tuna, etc.) which uses seaweed paper and different things inside.

"A lot of people say they are afraid to eat sushi, but I tell them, 'No, no, no. It's really OK. We've been eating sushi for a couple thousand years now.



**How to make a California Roll, Step one.**

We know what to do."

He says they start most people — the easily spotted befuddled beginners — with a California roll that's made with cooked crabmeat. Then they offer a roll with cooked shrimp and, if all goes well, on to an eel roll. (Egads! Eel?) In short time, they're on the road to raw — tuna and other fish.

Since most of Fred's customers are repeat fans of this repast, he says, "I'm very picky about the fish. If it's not fresh, we don't have it."

"Do they want to know what is



**Step two**

fresh anyway?" I ask.

"Yes, and I point at each [fish] and say, 'This is good, this is good, this is good... and on down the line.'"

Well, I know I'm convinced, because Fred has been slicing, dicing, rolling and wrapping fish for twenty-something years. I believe he knows his fish, inside and out.

"Say... would you teach me how to do a California roll?" I ask Fred, thinking it can't be too tough.

Without hesitation, he graciously consents to the impromptu instruction.

Well, I should have learned my lesson with that tempura incident. There is definitely skill and talent involved with rolling the rolls, too. With ingredients and tools in place, the lesson went something like this:

After laying a sheet of seaweed paper (approximately four inches by six inches) on a miniature bamboo mat, wet your mitts with water, grab some sticky rice (about tennis ball size) and spread it in a one-inch-wide line across the center of the seaweed paper. Then, working quickly, spread the rice to within a half-



**Step three**

inch of the top of the seaweed paper. Then repeat the procedure by spreading the bottom half of the paper with rice.

Master sushi chef Fred's dexterous digits move with trained grace and ease, making the procedure look so simple that it could easily be accomplished by a child. The student's fingers, though, porcupined with sticky rice, clumsily stumble about the rice with the speed of sleepy snails. But I did manage to quicken my spreading pace (up to that of wide-awake snails) with the remaining rice.

(Note: Quick assembling of the rolls is essential, as the seaweed paper absorbs moisture from the rice and, as though developing a mind of its own, the paper begins to curl at the edges. You know, I believe one of the curled edges actually sneered at me.)

With the rice expertly spread, smear on a dab of wasabi paste (sinus-clearing Japanese horseradish) along the imaginary center line. Stack the crab pieces and avocado slices on the line, and shake on some sesame seeds. Now, roll the mat up, with the bottom edge of the mat just meeting the top edge of the seaweed paper. Gently squeeze the log so it will hold its shape, unroll the mat and voilà! If everything goes well, you'll have produced a stuffed, dark green, perfectly shaped cylinder.

Fred has.

The student? Well, mine is rounded on three sides. Do I get extra points for artistic interpretation?

Next, the master sushi chef slices the roll into six equal pieces, sets each piece upright and aligns all. The student slices his just-completed cylinder into six pieces, sets each upright, aligns all and stands back to admire his work.

The sushi master's example is perfect — all equal in height and of like roundness with the crab and avocado positioned dead center. The student's project is noticeably different. The height of each piece varies (resembling the downtown skyline), the supposed-to-be-wheel-like shapes surely will not roll (not with square corners) and the pieces of crab and avocado drifted out of the center, coming to rest in the square corner.

OK, so much for looks. What about taste?

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*Recipes courtesy of Fred Yamada and Yamakasa Restaurant.*

## TEMPURA

*Serves four*

- 12 large shrimp, shelled and deveined (slit the underside to prevent shrimp from curling)
- 12 ounces white flesh fish — cod, halibut, flounder, bass — cut into bite-sized pieces
- 4 medium-sized fresh shiitake mushrooms
- 2 cups thinly sliced mixed vegetables — zucchini, carrot, green pepper
- Peanut or canola oil

### Tempura Batter:

- 1 egg
- 1 1/2 cups ICE COLD water
- 2 1/4 cup all-purpose flour

### Dipping Sauce:

- 1 1/4 cups vegetable broth
- 5 Tablespoons soy sauce
- 3 1/2 tablespoons Mirin (Japanese rice wine)
- 1 cup grated daikon radish
- 2 Tablespoons grated fresh ginger

Heat two inches of peanut oil in a large, heavy bottom pot or electric wok to 350 degrees. (A candy thermometer works well.)

# The Master's Recipes for Three Popular Dishes

Prepare tempura batter: Place egg into a mixing bowl; add ICE COLD water and mix with only one or two strokes. Sift in flour and barely combine. The batter should be lumpy and undermixed.

Pat dry shrimp, fish, and vegetables. Using tongs, dip items in the batter, letting excess batter drip off, then slide into the hot oil. Fry pieces, in batches, 2 to 3 minutes, or until lightly golden. Remove pieces from oil and place on paper towels to drain. Serve with dipping sauce.

To prepare dipping sauce: combine broth, soy sauce and Mirin in a small saucepan, and heat till warm. Sauce is served warm with a little grated daikon and ginger on the side. Guests add the daikon and ginger according to their tastes.



## BEEF TERIYAKI

*Serves four*

*Although most of us are used to teriyaki dishes being broiled or grilled, Fred says they tend to become tough and dry. He prefers the following method of teriyaki cooking.*

20 ounces of beef sirloin or round steak  
Beef suet (or substitute 2 Tablespoons canola or peanut oil)

3 Tablespoons soy sauce  
1 Tablespoon sugar  
4 Tablespoons sake or white wine

Cut beef into thin slices. Heat a non-stick frying pan over medium-high heat and grease with suet (or add the canola or peanut oil). Add the beef, in batches, and saute just until no longer pink. While beef is cooking, combine soy sauce and sugar in a small bowl or cup and set aside.

Add sake or white wine to pan to deglaze; stir in the soy sauce/sugar mixture and cook until the mixture thickens and coats the beef. Serve immediately.

For a variation, try sliced salmon or chicken.



## SHABU SHABU

*Serves four*

*A popular party dish, shabu shabu is named for the sound that is made as the ingredients are swished about in steaming water. Guests, using chopsticks, select an array of vegetables and paper-thin slices of beef from decoratively arranged platters then dip the items into a communal pot of boiling water. Upon retrieving, the beef and veggies are dipped into a sauce and eaten.*

20 ounces beef sirloin or round steak, very thinly sliced  
1/2 medium-sized napa cabbage, cut crosswise into strips  
1 bunch green onion, trimmed  
1 cake tofu, cut into 6 to 12 pieces  
1/2 bunch spinach, washed and trimmed  
3 to 4 ounces rice or saifun noodles, soaked in hot water for 5 minutes  
4 medium-sized fresh shiitake mushrooms, sliced

### Ponzu Sauce:

1 cup soy sauce  
1 cup rice vinegar  
1 teaspoon hondashi  
(powdered fish broth)

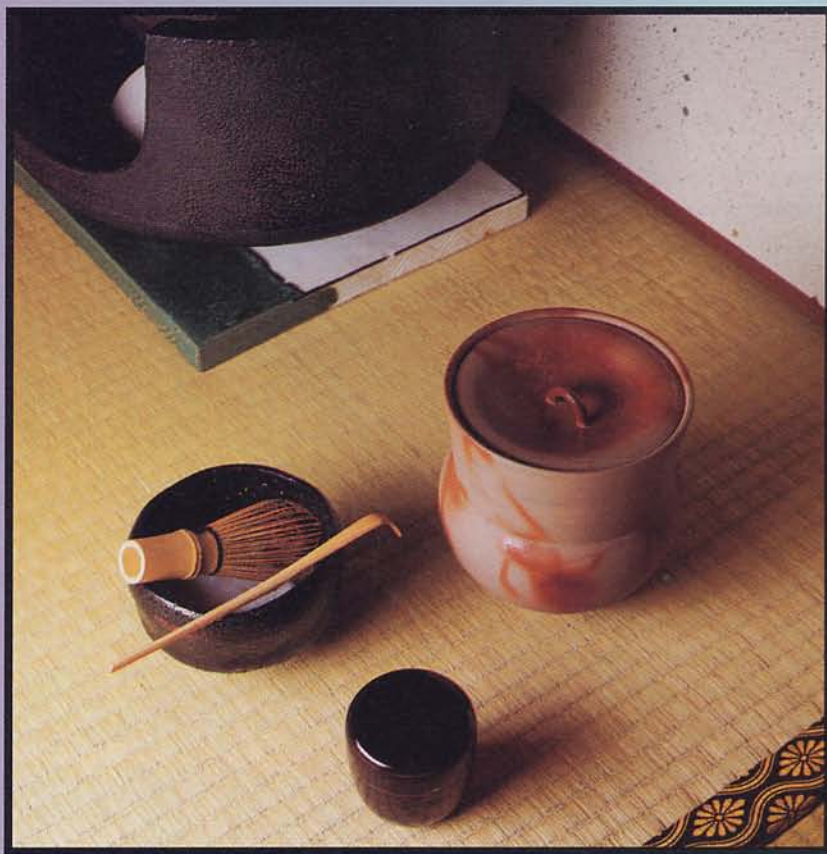
1 cup grated daikon radish  
1/4 cup chopped green onion

Neatly arrange beef slices on a platter. On another platter, carefully arrange the napa cabbage, green onion, tofu, spinach, noodles and shiitake mushrooms.

Prepare ponzu sauce. Combine soy sauce and rice vinegar and divide equally among four small bowls. Place daikon and green onions on separate plates to be added to the sauce as desired.

Fill an electric wok half-full with water and bring to a boil. Guests drop in the vegetables and swish around the slices of beef. Once food is retrieved from the pot (wok), it should be dipped into the ponzu sauce and eaten.

NOTE: Most of the items used in the recipes can be found at local grocery stores. Other ingredients can be found at Oriental markets.



## Steeped in Tradition

To learn more about traditional and contemporary Japanese arts, culture, history and businesses, plan to attend the America Japan Week '93 festival, June 6 through 13. Among highlights will be demonstrations of aspects of the fascinating traditional Japanese tea ceremony.

"The tea ceremony," says Dale Slusser, a representative of Ura Senke, the oldest of the Japanese tea houses, "has had an important role in the cultural arts [of Japan] for over 400 years. It is a social art, and what's most important is the relationship between yourself and the other people involved. The main idea of the tea ceremony is harmony, respect, purity and tranquility. These ideals come out in the food, the tea and the choice of utensils."

Slusser briefly describes a full tea celebration ritual as a gathering of three to five guests which lasts about four hours. After everyone is introduced, a meal is served using a specific style of cooking, called *kaiseki*, which emphasizes freshness and simplicity. The foods presented, separately and throughout the ceremony, usually include rice; miso soup, a clear broth containing fish, vegetables or meat; grilled fish; and several other dishes.

The tea is emerald-green, frothy and slightly bitter. According to Slusser, one bowl of the tea is made and shared among the guests — it is called "thick tea." However, the tea that will be served to visitors at the America Japan Week '93 tea demonstrations is "thin tea," the all-purpose, thirst-quenching variety most Japanese consume. Tea demonstrations will take place at Phoenix Civic Plaza North, June 9 through 13, 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. and 5 p.m. to 7 p.m., daily.

For more information about the tea ceremony or other festival events, refer to *Calendar*, page 20, or contact America Japan Week '93 at 266-5465, ext. 3000.

—D.D.



Step four

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Trust me on this, there is a difference here, too. Rolled too tightly, it's tough, chewy and dull. Too loose, and it collapses under pressure from a chopstick's squeeze, leaving not a lot left to taste.

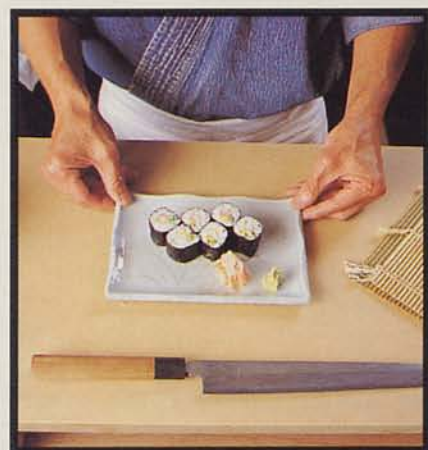
The master sushi chef grades the student's work and (out of kindness, I'm sure) says, "Not bad. You're a quick learner."

"So how long does it take to become a sushi chef?" I ask, while fumbling with my chopsticks (yet another practiced art) trying not to embarrass myself by flinging a soy-soaked slice of the freshly made roll over my shoulder.

After correcting my chopstick death grip, Fred tells me his sushi chefs have at least four years' training before they can occupy a coveted station at the sushi bar.

Let's see... if I count this lesson, I'll only have 1,459 more days before I achieve sushi chef-hood. Hmm, I think I'll stick to just mastering the art of eating sushi... and sashimi, and tempura, and...

PM



Step five