

SEAFOOD, HEALTH & JAPAN



Fishing Practices

Fishing has been a part of Japanese culture for thousands of years. With the Pacific Ocean, the Sea of Okhotsk, the Sea of Japan and the East China Sea, the waters have served as the main food source since the Jōmon period in 13,000 BCE, (Bestor).

These waters produced abundant fishing grounds all along the coast. During this time, dugout canoes were used and fishing was most likely done with spears and line fishing (UNESCO).

As time has gone on, seafood harvesting has evolved. During the Edo Period, sail seine fishing, tub boat fishing and nori and oyster farming started emerging. Oyster farming was started in Hiroshima Bay and nori farming started in Omori in Edo Bay (Obayashi Quarterly).

Another traditional way of fishing that has been used for the past 1,300 years and that is still used today is using cormorant birds, which is called ukai. With this technique, fishermen use fire to draw the fish near the surface, have the birds dive into the water, collect the fish and then remove the fish from the birds' mouths.

While some of these practices are still used today, they don't produce nearly enough food for the 124.5 million people living in Japan. This is where the importance of fisheries comes into play for the Japanese society.



Takifugu rubripes, also known as Japanese pufferfish lay for sale at the at Kuromon-Ichiba Market in Osaka.



Dried sardines for sale at Kuromon-Ichiba Market in Osaka.

Fisheries are places where fish and other sea life can be caught for commercial purposes. In Japan, there are an estimated 2,000 fishing ports. In 2023, the fishing industry generated 3.7 million tons of marine products, with marine fisheries generating the most product (Statista). The sardine was the most caught fish at 681 thousand tons. The fishing industry is vital to Japanese life, however, it does come with its criticisms. With these large amounts of fish being caught are also significant amounts of bycatch, such as sharks, dolphins and whales. Every year, nearly 300,000 cetaceans (worldwide) die due to bycatch (International Whaling Commission). In 2019, Japan withdrew from the International Convention on the Regulation of Whaling (ICRW) because the IWC would not allow the Japanese government to fish whale populations that they claimed were healthy and stable. It's estimated that only 2% of meat consumed each year is whale. It is sold at restaurants, and can be found at markets such as Tsukiji Fish Market in Tokyo. For the country, whaling culture itself is what holds the most importance (Leonard), not actually eating the whale.

For many, health is practicing their culture.

SEAFOOD INDUSTRY

&

HEALTH

TOKYO

A fish market worker prepares sashimi dishes at Tsukiji Fish market in Tsukiji, Tokyo.

Considering whale is available at fish markets, that's a good indicator that there is a wide variety of goods available.

Tsukiji Fish Market in Tokyo is one of Japan's largest markets with more than just seafood available. Tsukiji Fish Market sees around 50,000 people a day. There's nearly 500 vendors selling anything from retail items, sweet treats and other edible goods, aside from just wholesale fish.

So with all the talk of fish and fish markets, what makes it so healthy? What exactly about the Japanese diet contributes to their longevity?



A woman sells bonito flakes at their shop in Tsukiji Market in Tsukiji, Tokyo.



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A man fluffs bonito flakes up at his shop in Tsukiji Market in Tsukiji, Tokyo.



The crowded streets of Tsukiji Fish Market in Tsukiji, Tokyo.



Crabs crawl in their tank at Saito's Fish Market store in Tsukiji Market in Tsukiji, Tokyo.



On average, Japanese citizens live to be 84 years old compared to the US which is 77 years old. Their obesity levels for both adult and children are some of the lowest in the world. According to a graph from the World Obesity Federation, Japan is 191/200 countries for lowest obesity between both genders, with obesity affecting 5.57% of the population.

This is highly attributed to their lifestyle and diet. The Japanese diet is low in processed foods, and high in natural whole foods. Fish is a main staple to their diet.

Fish is low-fat and high protein. It is filled with omega-3s, minerals and vitamins. Omega-3s contribute to a healthy cardiovascular system and brain, and also has anti-inflammatory effects, which is thought to be a main reason behind so many diseases.

Even tempura --- fried food, isn't the same as American fried food. Japanese tempura differs because its batter is lighter and airier, and the frying process is much shorter (Atherton).

Tempura being made at Kuromon-
Ichiba Market in Osaka. A variety
of seafood is being fried, such as
squid and shrimp.



Although fried,
a stick of
shrimp tempura
is only around
58 calories.

Fish and other seafood
goods for sale at
Kuromon-Ichiba Market
in Osaka.



EVERYTHING BUT FISH DISHES



A bonito latte lays ready to drink.

Fish isn't just in the food, who thought that bonito flakes (dried tuna flakes) would ever make their appearance in a savory latte?



Linfield students Kami Echiverri and Riley Omonaka hold up taiyaki from a stand inside of the Sunshine City mall in Ikebukuro, Tokyo.

Seafood is so deeply ingrained in the culture in Japan, that you can find everyday material items that have a seafood theme to them. At gift shops, you can find stickers of onigiri with eyes, giving it life. You can find keychains, stuffed animals, play sets, office items and anything else you can think of that has some seafood twist to it. Even the dessert-like street food, taiyaki. The inside can be filled with chocolate, custard, red bean paste or cheese.

You can find taiyaki nearly anywhere in Japan. The outer casing is waffle-like grilled into the shape of a red seabream fish. And there is a reason for this. The word tai means sea bream. During the Edo Period, tai was a very expensive and sought after fish, and it's believed that the creator of taiyaki wanted everyday normal people to be able to taste this luxury fish. The sea bream fish is also considered to be lucky (McMahon0).

Sushi inspired everyday items for sale at Tsukiji Market in Tsukiji, Tokyo.

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CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE



At Hase-dera Temple in Kamakura, oyster shells have wishes and desires written on them by visitors.



The Kakigara-inari at Hase-dera Temple in Kamakura.

The significance of sea life is not only in the food, but in spiritual life too. At Hase-dera Temple in Kamakura, wishes and wants are written on oyster shells. At other temples, they are usually written on wooden plaques. However, it's different here. Legend has it that the Kannon statue arrived in Kamakura from the ocean, and was covered in shells that helped guide it to the shore. The other Kannon statue is located in Nara, and the Kamakura Kannon statue was thrown into the water in hopes it would wash ashore a place in need of saving. Since then, the Kakigara-inari (oyster shell shrine) has used oysters to write prayers and wishes. Visitors typically pay 300 yen for an oyster shell.

Besides the special oyster shrine at Hase-dera Temple, at many other temples, castles and shrines visitors will find more sealife --- specifically koi fish. Koi fish from China were originally bred in Japan as a staple food source during the winter months. To this day, people still eat them, but they also hold a much deeper meaning than just a food dish. They are seen as art. They are a symbol of perseverance, strength and ability to overcome challenges (because of their ability to swim upstream) (Kodama). Their presence at sacred grounds invites visitors to think about these symbols and use their aesthetic to find a feeling of peace and meditation. They are more than just a fish to eat, they are a significant cultural symbol.

**Koi fish swim in the mote waters
at Motorikyu Nijo Castle in
Kyoto.**



A market worker dishes up mochi at his stand. He was also selling shirts that reads, “NO SUSHI NO LIFE.”



The cultural significance revolving around food and fish is also great. Like this market worker shirt says, “NO SUSHI NO LIFE.” The role that sushi plays in Japanese culture and Asian culture is significant.

Sushi was originally created as a means of preserving fish in salt. It was first created in China and then the practice continued to spread. Around the eighth century, this practice spread into Japan. From here, the practice of sushi making grew, and it evolved from just eating the fish, to now eating a combination of different seafood encased in rice and wrapped in seaweed.

And it has completely globalized, spreading Japanese culture across borders. It wasn't until the 1970s that sushi became a hit in the United States, and thus, the California roll was born.



Japan continues to be one of the healthiest countries in the world, with their residents living a life of longevity. The limit of ultra-processed foods, walkable cities and close vicinity to the ocean for seafood, all of these factors contribute to the health of the Japanese society. And the practice of culture itself is vital for health. Japans close relationship to the ocean and commitment to to keep their people healthy continues to be reflected in their society.



Seafood for sale at the Kuromon-Ichiba Market in Osaka.

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