

Colourful nibbles of Japan

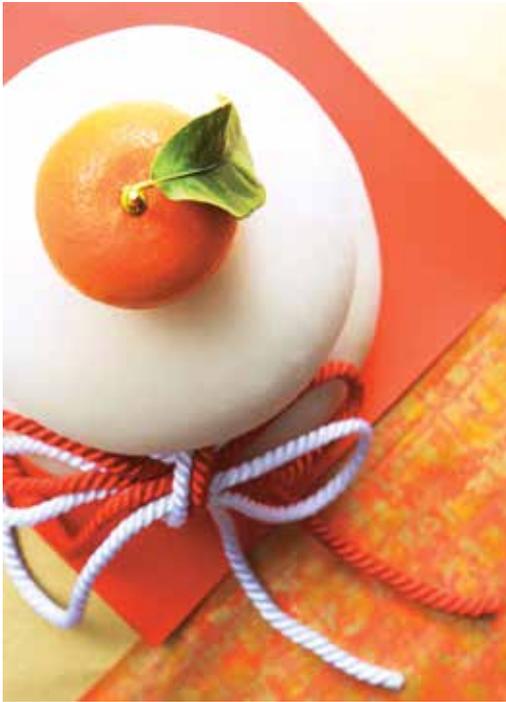
We all love our sushi and sake, but how often have we tried to satisfy our sweet tooth the Japanese way? Outside of Japan, the availability of wagashi (Japanese confections) is so rare, many of us often believe the Japanese don't have desserts. But nothing could be further from the delightful truth.

TEXT ARWEN JOYCE

When the Japanese gaze up at the full moon, they don't see a man's face—they see a rabbit standing on its hind legs, pounding out a sweet rice cake with a mortar and pestle. Such is the prominence of traditional confectionery in Japanese daily life. The folk tale about the rabbit on the moon dates back to the 10th century, but the Japanese's perfection of wagashi, or sweet confections, as an art form

came into its own seven centuries later. At that time, mighty samurai generals ruled Japan from its feudal capital, Edo, while the symbolic figurehead of the Emperor resided and held court in the Imperial Palace at Kyoto. Life in the Imperial Court revolved around entertaining and the arts, and, as a result, an appreciation of elegance and refinement flourished during this relatively peaceful time in Japan's history.

Sakuramochi, or cherry blossom mochi, is a piece of mochi dough wrapped around a dollop of *anko* (red bean paste) and topped with a fragrant, preserved, floral-tasting sakura leaf. *Sakuramochi* is often eaten at sakura-viewing occasions or on Japanese Girls' Day.



For the Japanese, wagashi represent so much more than just a sweet indulgence after a meal. Buddhist aesthetic principles such as *wabi* or simplicity, *sabi* or the beauty of imperfection, and *yugen* or sophistication and a touch of mystery, are woven into the fabric of daily life. It is not surprising, then, that Japanese wagashi embody all the grace of a traditional tea ceremony, the restraint of a haiku poem and the balanced subtlety of an ikebana flower arrangement. Leave it to the Japanese to elevate the practice of satisfying a sweet tooth to an edible art form fit for an Emperor.

Wagashi continue to be an important and delicious part of Japanese culture today, featuring prominently in Japanese hospitality, and on holidays and special occasions. Three popular categories of wagashi are sweet rice cakes, hard sugar candies, and desserts made of gelatine. These expertly crafted morsels are designed to appeal to more than just the taste buds—they enchant the eyes with an array of colours and shapes that reference nature and works of art; they delight the ears with

their lyrical names and the images they evoke; they please the nose with their delicate fragrance and the hint of flavours to come; and they engage the sense of touch with their texture, be it studded, soft or crispy. But do wagashi taste as good as they look, sound, smell and feel? Let's dig in and see.

MOCHI MAGIC

Sweet rice cakes or mochi are ubiquitous in Japan and come in enough flavours and varieties for every celebration and special occasion on the calendar. Mochi are prepared by pounding glutinous rice into a paste that can be moulded into shapes like leaves, blossoms or fruit, and then steamed. When they're finished, these little beauties evoke the rhythm of the passing seasons, which pass very quickly indeed when you follow the lunisolar calendar. Japan recognises 72 distinct periods each year with romantic names such as 'clear and bright season' and 'season in which geese fly north'. Creating mochi that beautifully elicit the distinct character of each of these seasons is no small feat.

Top left: *Kagamimochi* (mirror rice cake) is a traditional Japanese New Year dessert. It consists of two soft, round mochi cakes (signifying the outgoing and incoming years), and a bitter Japanese orange placed on top (signifying the continuation of a family across generations).

Top right: A stack of fruit-flavoured mochi, where the mochi is stuffed with a sweet filling of fruits and *anko*.

Below: Mochi flavoured with rose, made by boiling mochi paste with a rose-flavoured extract.



Mochi are malleable chameleons—a blank canvas that can be flavoured and stuffed with all manner of fillings and toppings. Green tea, cherry blossom, strawberry and chestnut often make an appearance along with the most popular filling of sweetened, dark red bean paste. If you prefer your mochi chewy, try *uiro*—steamed cakes of non-glutinous sweetened rice flour that have a smooth, glossy texture. If you like your mochi in small bites, try *dango*—petite mochi dumplings served on skewers in sets of three or four.

Clockwise from right: *Uiro* is similar to mochi but with a more chewy texture, and has been a part of the traditional Japanese tea ceremony since the 16th century; *Konpeito*, or Japanese sugar candy, is made with sugar, water and food colouring, and is immensely popular because of the way it looks; *Dango* are skewered mochi dumplings eaten year-round, but different varieties are traditionally eaten in different seasons.



SUGAR RUSH

If you ever find yourself a guest in the Imperial Palace, you will likely receive a small box of exquisitely packaged and wrapped *konpeito* as you depart. The name of this tiny confection comes from the Portuguese for ‘sugar candy’, and they have been much loved in Japan ever since Portuguese traders brought sugar and the technology to refine it to Japan’s shores in the 16th century. These tiny candies, which are 5–10 mm in diameter, look like bumpy marbles, and their natural texture lends the sweets a silly cartoonish quality. An assortment of *konpeito*—white, pink, purple, light green and turquoise all jumbled together—is happiness in a bowl.

In addition to importing white sugar, the Japanese also grow a special variety of sugar cane called *chikuto* that is cultivated only in certain parts of Shikoku, an island in southern Japan. The high quality, powdery sugar produced from this sugar cane in a painstaking manual process is pale ivory in colour and has a faintly sweet smell. The sugar is packed into moulds depicting seasonal symbols like



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ginkgo leaves, cherry blossoms and carp to produce small, pastel-coloured candies called *higashi* that melt on the tongue.

JELLY BEANS

Another Japanese sweet that provides much opportunity for artistic expression is a jelly dessert called *yokan*. The jelly is made of red or white bean paste, an algae gelatine extract, and sugar. Ingredients such as green tea powder and chopped chestnuts are often suspended inside. There is no end to the creativity of Japanese confectioners who build mini-masterpieces from this short list

of ingredients. A red wedge of *yokan* with a few red azuki beans artfully placed on top transforms into a slice of watermelon. A blue square of *yokan* with a jellied fish suspended inside and small beans underneath depicts a playful aquarium. *Yokan* can be coloured in layers, moulded into shapes or even served inside the skins of hollowed-out fruit.

One dessert served in this dramatic presentation is *natsukanto*. The *natsumikan* is a bitter fruit with a thick skin and lots of seeds that, when hollowed out and simmered in sugar solution, becomes the perfect vessel for a chilled *yokan* treat. Jelly the

Clockwise from top left: *Higashi*, often served at Japanese tea ceremonies, is dry, containing very little moisture. Of the many types available, *rakugan* is the most well-known, and comes in many colours and designs; *Yokan* is a thick jellied dessert that can be cut into thin slices and frequently given as gifts. Displayed here are bean paste *yokan*, sweet potato *yokan* and steamed chestnuts in *yokan*.



colour of the bright yellow citrus fruit is poured into the empty shell through a small hole at the top and allowed to set. When the chilled, doctored fruit is sliced open, the shiny jelly segments look, smell and taste much better than the original. No matter what form *yokan* takes, these sweets have a long shelf life and make popular gifts.

LET THEM EAT WAGASHI

In times past, wagashi were consumed exclusively by the Emperor's wealthy inner circle, but today, this edible art form is something everyone can enjoy starting from a young age. Imagine a young girl and her mother shopping in the quiet, understated neighbourhood of Kamishichiken, the oldest of Kyoto's five licensed geisha districts, on an evening in early March. As they enter Oimatsu, a shop famous for its exquisite wagashi near the east gate of the Kitano-Tenmangu Shrine, the little girl's eyes widen. Before her are row upon row of colourful confections made to look like small pink plums, bright orange persimmons and baby chicks hatching from speckled eggs.

Excitedly, she helps her mother choose the perfect assortment of wagashi for celebrating Hinamatsuri—Japanese Dolls' Day or Girls' Day. A favourite treat for this annual holiday is *sakuramochi*—a mochi ball dyed pink, filled with sweet red bean paste and wrapped in a salty cherry leaf. As they leave the shop, her mother carries

a carefully wrapped box of delicate wagashi and the little girl clutches one small bag containing a *sakuramochi* all for her very own. Walking home, the evening is cool but holds the promise of spring. The little girl looks up at the full moon, sees the rabbit there diligently pounding out sweet mochi, and smiles. ■

Right: Japanese confectionery and rice crackers for the Hinamatsuri festival, celebrated each year on March 3. Families with young daughters pray for their happiness and health, and set up a display of dolls inside the house.

Far right: A kimono-wearing Japanese Hinamatsuri doll called *hinaninyo*. During the festival, these dolls are traditionally placed on a tiered platform covered with red felt, where the top tier is reserved for the Emperor and the Empress.



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QUICK FACTS

GETTING THERE

Jet Airways flies daily to Hong Kong from Mumbai and Delhi. From Hong Kong, catch a connecting flight to Osaka via codeshare partner All Nippon Airways. Kyoto is about an hour from Osaka by train.

WAGASHI MASTERCLASS

Oimatsu's flagship store in the Kamishichiken district of Kyoto is one of the most famous purveyors of wagashi. The shop also offers confection-making classes for those who want to try their hand at crafting these delicate, tasty ornaments. Visit www.oimatu.co.jp and learn something excitingly unique!

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Log on to www.wagashi-net.de and www.jnto.go.jp