

Teaching Japan through Restaurant Menus

by Willa Zhen

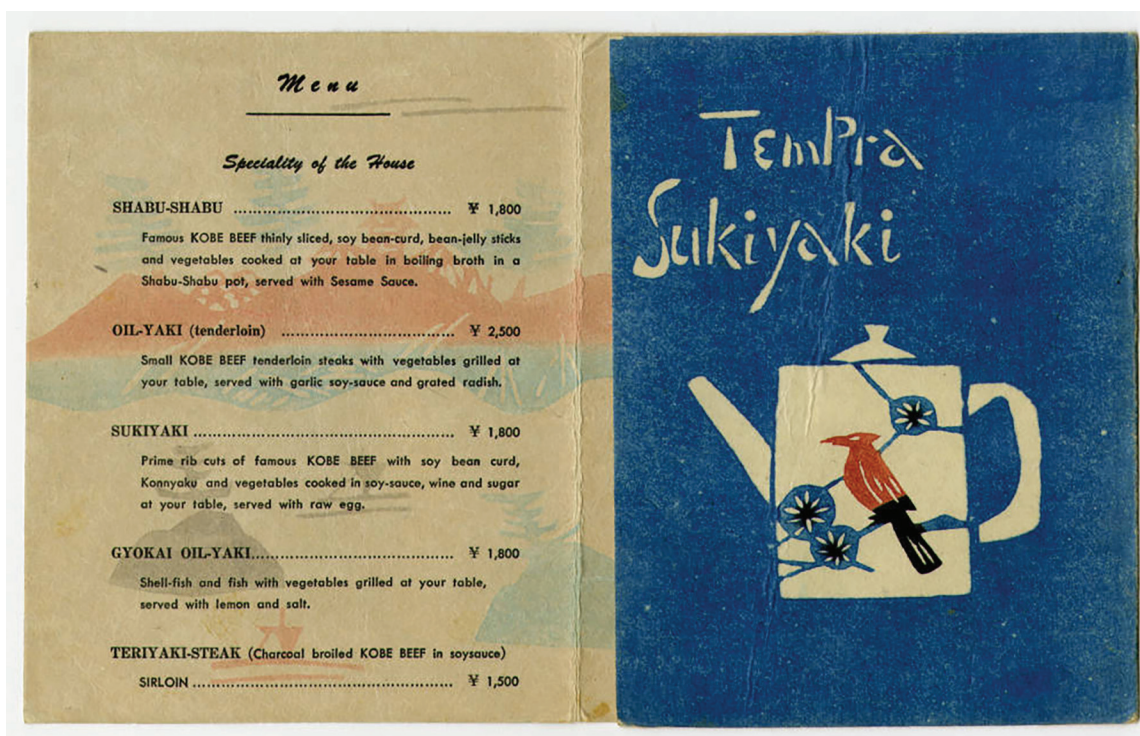


Figure 1: "Zakuro." Menu, undated. Japan. Courtesy of the Culinary Institute of America.

Abstract

This article examines the pedagogical value of studying restaurant menus as a way of exploring Japanese culture. Menus are not simply informational documents—lists of dishes and their prices. They serve as important and rich cultural texts that embody the real, as well as the imagined and idealized aspects of Japanese society. This article proposes a framework for utilizing menus as educational tools to explore key cultural concepts including language, seasonality, gustatory tastes, and visual aesthetics. Some menus provide instruction on dining etiquette and cultural norms, while others may evoke folklore or tradition. By “reading” menus through multiple lenses, educators and students can gain deeper insights into Japanese culture.

Willa Zhen, PhD is Professor of Liberal Arts and Food Studies at the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, NY. Trained as a sociocultural anthropologist, she researches and teaches classes on food and culture. She is the author of *Food Studies: A Hands-on Guide* (Bloomsbury, 2019).

Introduction

Japan's global soft power is felt through art, anime, manga, movies, music, video games, and consumer goods. One of its most popular exports is its food and cuisine. There are approximately 187,000 Japanese restaurants outside of Japan¹ and approximately 23,000 in the United States alone.² Clearly, Japanese food has become a global food phenomenon.

Yet what exactly is Japanese food? How can menus be used in the classroom to explore Japanese culture? Menus can be used as important teaching tools. Because menus sit at the intersection of food, culture, and identity, they offer students an accessible way to explore culture. This article provides support for high school and undergraduate teaching by providing a guided lesson plan. First, it provides an overview of Japanese food including suggested readings. Next, it provides a lesson plan that instructors can use and modify as a framework for classroom instruction. Lastly, there is a list of resources including digital archives with Japanese menu collections.

What is Japanese Food?

There are different ways to approach the study of Japanese food. The task is to help students understand that food extends beyond the material aspects of cooking. Before diving into menus, it is useful to spend time establishing what makes Japanese food Japanese. This lesson approaches Japanese food through three frameworks: geography and environment, ingredients and foodstuffs, and cuisine.

Geography and Environment

Japan is an archipelago of 3,600 islands. Collectively, these islands are about 2,174 miles long, roughly the size of the state of California. The coastline stretches roughly 18,480 miles and no location is more than 93 miles from the coastline. Approximately four-fifths of the land is mountainous with very little arable land. This geography thereby shapes what the Japanese can access for food. A proverb declares that Japanese food is “*umi no sachi, yama no sachi*”: food from the seas and food from the mountains. Fish and seafood have historically been the primary forms of animal protein in Japan.

The geography and environment of Japan shape the outlook towards eating and culinary practices. The scarcity of natural resources and challenges of growing food in Japan have also resulted in a deep respect for seasonality and appreciation for available ingredients, resulting in the Japanese philosophy of *mottainai*—the sentiment that everything is precious and has value: in other words, “waste not, want not”. The Japanese celebrate the ephemeral nature of seasonal foods and rejoice in each region's special delicacies. Instructors may opt to pair this lesson with Theodore Bestor and Victoria Bestor's article “Japan and the Sea”³ and Monika Dix's “Water, Tradition, and Innovation: Flowing through Japan's Cultural History”⁴ to provide broader framing.

Ingredients and Foodstuffs

We also consider how geography and the environment, as well as trade and economic exchange, impact what is grown and eaten. Rice is the core staple of the traditional diet and one of the most important foods in Japan. Yet rice is not an indigenous crop. Rice cultivation is believed to have originated in the Yangzi River Delta in China around 9,000 years ago and later spread to Japan around 2,400 years ago either via the Korean peninsula or directly from China. It has since become essential to Japanese senses of identity. Japanese civilization developed around rice cultivation, including the formation of rituals and religion and a calendar system based on rice production. During the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, rice has been subjected to protectionist economic policies, with consumer and government resistance towards imported rice due to the deep symbolic importance to cultural identity. Instructors may choose to assign selections from Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney's book *Rice as Self: Japanese Identities through Time*⁵ or Richard Moore's article, “The Japan Rice Paradox”⁶ to support the lesson.

Cuisine

Next is the concept of Japanese cuisine as a cultural creation. There are different ways of speaking about food in Japan. The term *nihonshoku* (literally “Japan-food”) is all encompassing, ranging from everyday foods, regional specialties, and formal traditional meals. *Nihonshoku* includes foreign-influenced *yoshoku* (Western-style dishes) like curry rice and *tonkatsu* (fried pork cutlet), and *chuka ryori* (Chinese-style dishes).

Nihon ryori and *washoku* are terms that emerged in the late nineteenth century to distinguish Japanese food from foreign foods, particularly Western dishes. *Nihon ryori* is often translated as “Japanese cuisine,” and is defined by skilled techniques, seasonal ingredients, artistic presentation, and formal traditional dining. *Kaiseki*—a highly choreographed, ritualistic, multi-course fine dining meal that centers around seasonality, tradition, as well as craftsmanship and artistry in its presentation—is sometimes seen as the pinnacle of *nihon ryori*. Historically associated with tea ceremony, *kaiseki* today is often considered an exemplar of Japanese cuisine.

Washoku also refers to Japanese cuisine. Recognizing its connection to nature and sustainable use of resources, UNESCO inscribed *washoku* as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. UNESCO declares *washoku* “a social practice based on a set of skills, knowledge, practice, and traditions related to the production, processing, preparation and consumption of food” that incorporates respect for nature and sustainable principles.⁷ Historian Eric Rath notes that *washoku* is less a designation for food and more about the customs and rituals of eating.⁸ The typical way of Japanese eating is described as *ichiju-sansai*, or literally “one soup and three dishes.” This traditional dining format includes a bowl of steamed white rice, a soup (often miso soup or broth-based soup), a small plate of pickled vegetables (*tsukemono*), a main dish (usually a protein), and two side dishes (often vegetables). Scholars have observed that the boundaries between *nihon ryori* and *washoku* are not always easily distinguishable.⁹

Lesson Plan: Bringing Menus into the Classroom

This lesson plan is designed around the use of menus. Depending on the students’ language abilities, English-only, bilingual, or Japanese-only menus can be used. For language classes, bilingual menus or Japanese-only menus can aid in building vocabulary related to food and dining out. Instructors can exercise a lot of creativity in their choice of menus and mix up selections based on classroom objectives.

Where possible, physical copies of menus are preferred as students can engage with the materiality of these objects and think about them as artifacts to study. Some places to look for physical menu collections include local public libraries, local historical societies, local restaurant associations, or Japanese or Japanese American community groups. Another option is to collect your own or encourage students to bring some to class. eBay and Etsy are two places to purchase vintage menus online. Crowd-sourcing menus through friends, family, and community members—even students—is another way to build a collection.

This assignment can also be completed with digital collections. Several resources are identified at the end of this article. While students will engage differently with online collections, losing that physical connection to the materiality of the menus, they will still be able to learn a lot about menus through digital scans.

Estimated Time:

Two class periods of approximately 60 minutes. This can also be held as one extended 90-minute session or otherwise modified according to class needs.

Learning Objectives:

- Students will learn to analyze a restaurant menu as a primary source document
- Students will learn to identify cultural assumptions embedded in a menu

Materials:

- Japanese menus
- Writing instruments and paper

Activity 1: Opening Discussion and Brainstorming

Nearly all students have eaten some form of Japanese food before. Common responses include familiarity with ramen (of both the instant and labor-intensive varieties), snack foods (such as Pocky), and sushi. Students' lived experiences can be used to start a dialogue about what they do and do not know about Japanese food.

Discussion prompts for Activity 1:

- What do you know about Japanese food?
- Where and how did you learn about Japanese food?
- Have you ever eaten at a Japanese restaurant before? Where was it? What was that experience like? How did it compare to what you've learned about Japanese culture and traditional Japanese food?
- What makes a food "Japanese"? Can a dish become Japanese even if it originated elsewhere?

A useful distinction to draw in this opening discussion is between what students *know* about Japanese food and what they have personally *experienced*. Students may have heard about many foods through media or social media without having had the opportunity to try them. For instance, students may have heard of *okonomiyaki*, a savory cabbage pancake. This dish is most closely associated with Osaka and Hiroshima, each of which has its own style of *okonomiyaki*. But most students have never had the opportunity to try it because *okonomiyaki* restaurants are uncommon outside of Japan. Instructors may wish to pair this activity with Theodore Bestor and Victoria Bestor's "Cuisine and Identity in Japan Contemporary Japan"¹⁰ as they work through distinguishing their ideas of Japanese food versus how a Japanese person or a scholar of Japan might approach it.

Activity 2: "Reading" the Menu

After the opening activity, we then analyze the menus. Each student is given a menu to "read" and are asked to take notes on what they observe (and are told that these notes will be shared in class). This activity can be completed in different ways depending on class size and structure. Options include assigning students to work together as a think-pair-share to examine and discuss, or students can work on menus individually with their thoughts to be shared back with the larger class.

A productive constraint for this activity is to ask students to set aside their technology and refrain from using Google, AI tools, or other Internet tools during their initial close reading. The goal is to simply *be with the menu*; to let the menu reveal information through careful reading. Encouraging students to record and trust their own observations before seeking external validation helps build confidence in their own analytical instincts and reinforces their skills in primary source analysis.

Discussion prompts for Activity 2: General questions

- What do you immediately notice about your menu?
- How would you react if you were handed this menu at a restaurant?
- What is on the menu? What is included? How are things described?
- What language(s) are used? In what way?
- What time period is this menu from?
- Who would have eaten at this restaurant?
- What information is missing? What are things you do not know from the menu alone?

Discussion prompts for Activity 2: Materiality of the menu

- How big is the menu? What is the material the menu is printed on?
- What is the text like? Consider the fonts and use of printed text.
- Are there images? What is represented (or not)?
- Are there other marks or elements (burn marks, handwriting, food stains, etc.)?
- Does this menu have a smell or odor?

Discussion prompts for Activity 2: Japanese culture on the menu

- How is Japanese culture represented on the menu?
- How are Japanese foodstuffs and ingredients represented on the menu?
- How is Japanese cuisine represented on the menu?
- What does the menu (and establishment) assume about the customer's knowledge of Japanese culture and food?
- Is this a menu for Japanese customers or for non-Japanese customers? Can you tell the difference?

The image on the following page illustrates how these questions can be applied in practice. Tokyo-Tei was a restaurant in New York City and this menu is part of the archives at the Culinary Institute of America.¹¹ This undated menu is from the 1930s and the only menu in the collection from before World War II. Because it is undated, this menu offers an opportunity to discuss how archivists and others studying menus can still determine an approximate age of a document through contextual information like the addresses, telephone numbers, fonts, images, and prices. In this case, this menu still uses a telephone number that reflects a neighborhood switchboard system.

Tokyo-Tei is a 17 x 5 15/16-inch menu printed on now yellowing paper, a single sheet of rectangular paper devoid of illustrations. Its text is printed in black, with a special lunch set and two special sukiyaki dinners printed in red for emphasis. There are 49 items on the menu, plus the lunch special and two special dinners. The Japanese text is written in a mixture of kanji, hiragana, and katakana. The English translation is written in simple language with minimal descriptions. For instance, item 32 is "Noodle, Hot or Cold". There is no further information. This item is listed for 20 cents, which, adjusted for inflation, would be somewhere in the range of \$3.77 to \$5 today.

We then engage in a discussion. What does this menu assume about the clientele's knowledge of Japanese food? Who was the customer base? How might we classify the type of food represented here? Did this establishment serve *nihonshoku* or is it better described as *nihonryori* or *washoku*? Does this menu allow one to follow the *ichiju-sansai* pattern of eating? The straightforward format of the menu, limited descriptions, and low prices suggest that this establishment might have served primarily a working-class Japanese clientele who was familiar with the food.

Conclusion

Art critic John Berger noted, "The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled".¹² As this article has shown, Japanese restaurant menus function as far more than lists of dishes. They are rich cultural artifacts that reveal social values, tastes, customs, and identities. By engaging with menus as texts, students can develop a more nuanced understanding of Japanese food and culture, as the act of "reading" menus invites critical thinking and cultural empathy. They are invited to think about what they see and what they know through the process of interacting with menus. Japanese menus are a valuable and engaging resource for educators. Bringing menus into the classroom invites students into conversations and fosters critical thinking. It helps students hone skills in analyzing primary sources and allows them to approach an everyday object as a window into culture and history. Ultimately, studying menus helps us appreciate not only what is cooked, served and eaten, but also how food can communicate information about history, geography, and culture.

Table No.

TOKYO-TEI

Waiter

76 West 47th Street, New York City
Telephone LOngacre 5-8237

1	吸	物	SUIMONO, Clear Soup	.25
2	う	し	USHIO, Fish Soup	.20
3	味	汁	MISO-SHIRU, Japanese Bean Soup	.20
4	刺	身	SASHIMI, Fillet of Fresh Fish	.30
5	す	し	OSUSHI	.50
6	蒲	き	Broiled Eel with "Tare" Sauce	.75
7	鰻	井	Steamed Rice with Broiled Eel	.60
8	鹽	き	SHIO-YAKI, Plain Broiled Fish	.20
9	照	き	TERI-YAKI, Broiled Fish with Shoyu Sauce	.25
10	魚	で	GYODEN, Broiled Fish with Bean Paste	.25
11	ご	ま	GOMA-AYE, Vegetables in Crushed Sesame	.20
12	ひ	た	HITA-SHI, Steamed Vegetables	.15
13	お	ろ	Grated Japanese Radish	.15
14	や	の	Toasted Sea Vegetables	.15
15	湯	腐	YU-TOFU, Hot Bean Custard	.20
16	や	腐	YAKKO-TOFU, Cold Bean Custard	.15
17	天	羅	TEN-PURA, Fried Shrimps, Japanese Style	.35
18	天	井	TEN-DON, Steamed Rice with Fried Shrimps	.50
19	親	子	Steamed Rice with Chicken, Egg and Veg.	.50
20	や	肉	Broiled Beef with Sauce, Japanese Style	.55
21	や	鶏	Broiled Chicken with Sauce, Japanese Style	.80
22	や	豚	Broiled Pork with Sauce, Japanese Style	.50
23	ぬ	た	Pickled Fish, Vegetables with Sumiso	.25
24	酢	の	FISH SALAD, Japanese Style	.25
25	茶	煮	Boiled Chicken, Bamboo Shoots and Mush'm	.35
26	碗	し	Chicken with Japanese Vegetables Custard	.35
27	茶	鍋	Fish Chafing Dish with Rice	.75
28	寄	な	Chafing Dish of Chicken (with Rice)	1.25

****SPECIAL SUKIYAKI DINNERS ****
CHICKEN SUKIYAKI DINNER\$1.50
 Celery Heart and Queen Olives
 Clear Soup—Fried Shrimps with Grated Radish
 Chicken SUKIYAKI with Fresh Vegetables
 Japanese Tea—Dessert
 —O—
TENDERLOIN SUKIYAKI DINNER\$1.25
 Celery and Olives—Clear Soup
 Fried Shrimps with Grated Radish
 Beef or Pork Tenderloin SUKIYAKI with Fresh Vegetables
 Japanese Tea—Dessert

29	鶏	す	CHICKEN SUKI-YAKI (with Rice)	\$1.00
30	特	別	SPEC. BEEF TEND'LOIN SUKI-YAKI Rice	.85
31	豚	す	PORK SUKI-YAKI (with Rice)	.85
32	う	ど	Noodle, Hot or Cold	.20
33	天	ぶ	Noodle with Fried Shrimps	.30
34	鍋	焼	Pot-Boiled Noodle with Fried Vegetables	.35
35	月	見	Noodle with Poached Egg	.25
36	親	子	Noodle with Chicken and Egg	.40
37	鴨	な	Hot Noodle with Chicken or Duck	.35
38	さ	る	Cold Buckwheat Noodle	.30
39	御	飯	Steamed Rice	.10
40	奈	良	Wine Pickle	.20
41	し	ん	Plain Pickle	.10 up
42	晝	御	Japanese Lunch	.60
43	夕	御	Japanese Dinner	.75
JAPANESE DESSERT				
44	お	し	OSHIRUKO	.20
45	も	な	MONAKA	.25
46	羊	羹	YOHKAN	.25
47	水	菓	FRESH FRUITS	
48	び	一	Beer	
49	日	本	JAPANESE WINE (Sake)	.50

TOTAL

SPECIAL LUNCH Price 50 cents
 Soup **BEEF SUKI-YAKI**
 Bowl of Steamed Rice
 Japanese Green Tea—Rice Cakes
 —11 A.M. to 3 P.M.—

PRIVATE DINING ROOM UPSTAIRS

Figure 2: "Tokyo-Tei". Menu, undated 1930s. New York City.
 Courtesy of the Culinary Institute of America.

Notes

¹ Kyodo News, “No. of Japanese restaurants abroad triples in last decade to 187,000, November 19, 2023, <https://english.kyodonews.net/articles/-/44191?phrase=submarine&words=>

² Washoku Agent, “23,000 Japanese Restaurants in the United States?? Latest Information on the Japanese Food Industry in the U.S. in 2023,” *Washoku Agent*, <https://washoku-agent.com/en/23000-japanese-restaurants-in-the-united-states-latest-information-on-the-japanese-food-industry-in-the-u-s-in2023/>.

³ Bestor, Victoria Lyon, and Theodore C. Bestor. “Japan and the Sea.” *Education About Asia* 19, no. 2 (2014): 50–55.

⁴ Dix, Monika. “Water, Tradition, and Innovation: Flowing through Japan’s Cultural History.” *Education About Asia* 22, no. 2 (2017): 48–51.

⁵ See Ohnuki-Tierney, Emiko. *Rice as Self: Japanese Identities through Time*. Princeton University Press, 1993.

⁶ Moore, Richard. “The Japan Rice Paradox.” *Education About Asia* 9, no. 3 (2004): 10–13.

⁷ “Washoku, traditional dietary cultures of the Japanese, notably for the celebration of New Year,” UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage, accessed May 1 2026, <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/washoku-traditional-dietary-cultures-of-the-japanese-notably-for-the-celebration-of-new-year-00869>.

⁸ Rath, Eric C. *Japan’s Cuisines: Food, Place and Identity*. Reaktion Books, 2016.

⁹ See Cwiertka, Katarzyna Joanna. *Modern Japanese cuisine: Food, power and national identity*. Reaktion Books, 2006. The blurriness between *nihon ryori* and *washoku* is also discussed Eric Rath’s *Japan’s Cuisines*, cited above.

¹⁰ Bestor, Theodore C., and Victoria Lyon Bestor. “Cuisine and Identity in Contemporary Japan.” *Education About Asia* 16, no. 3 (2011): 13–18.

¹¹ “Tokyo-Tei, menu”. Menu. Undated. CIA 57-126. Conrad N. Hilton Library, Hyde Park, N.Y.

¹² Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. Penguin Books UK, 2008, 7.

Glossary

Chuka ryori: Chinese-style dishes like ramen, *gyoza* (pan-fried potstickers), and *chahan* (Japanese-style fried rice).

Ichiju-sansai: Literally “one soup, three dishes.” The traditional Japanese meal format consisting of steamed white rice, a soup, a main dish, two side dishes, and pickled vegetables.

Kaiseki: A traditional multi-course fine dining meal that celebrates craftsmanship, artistry, and seasonality. This meal is usually formulaic and ritualistic.

Nihon ryori: Japanese cuisine, defined by the use of skilled techniques, seasonal ingredients, and artistic presentation and formal traditional dining.

Nihonshoku: All food consumed in Japan, ranging from everyday dishes, traditional high end meals, and food with foreign origins.

Washoku: Traditional Japanese food culture, the customs, values, and practices surrounding food. Recognized by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2013.

Yoshoku: Western-style dishes that emerged during the late 19th century, such as Japanese curry and *tonkatsu* (fried pork cutlet).

Digital Menu Collections

Below is a list of some digital menu collections that include Japanese menus. Due to copyright restrictions, these menu collections focus on historic menus.

- **Culinary Institute of America: Digital Menu Collection**
<http://ciadigitalcollections.culinary.edu/digital/collection/p16940coll1>
 - **Los Angeles Public Library: Digital Menu Collections**
<https://tessa.lapl.org/c10>
 - **Seattle Public Library: Seattle Room Digital Collections**
<https://cdm16118.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p16118coll5>
 - **University of Hawaii Menu Collections**
<https://hdl.handle.net/10790/695>
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