



Tokaido Gojusan Tsugi no uchi Nihonbashi—Asa no Kei (Morning Scene at Nihonbashi, from the Fifty-three Stations on the Tokaido series) by Utagawa Hiroshige

A Chronological Record of the Edo-Period Diet

During the Edo period (1603–1868), Japan’s political system was radically transformed from regional to centralized rule, leading to development of an affluent society. The Tokugawa shogunate built the metropolis of Edo (modern Tokyo) over a portion of the vast Kanto plain and introduced a new era with the toil, effort, and assistance of a great many people.

It was during the Edo period that even the common people began to experience relative freedom in the preparation and enjoyment of meals. The amazing advances seen in the Japanese diet can surely be attributed to

the creativity and ingenuity of the people of the Edo period. However, those who enjoyed these benefits were primarily the well-to-do residents of large cities. The sophisticated food culture of the time did not reach rural farm, mountain, or fishing villages until the late Edo period, despite the fact that the fresh ingredients were available to these villagers.

The Edo period lasted for more than 260 years. This period can be further divided into several minor periods exhibiting different social features. The basis of the Edo shogunate was established from 1596 to 1644, the Keicho and Kanei eras. The system for regional rule was established between 1661 and 1681, the Kanbun and Enpo eras. Finally, a certain degree of prosperity was achieved from 1688 to 1704, the Genroku era. The combination of these five eras, when shogunate rule became firmly established and stabilized, is known as the early Edo period, while those following, when political and economic instability began to appear and various economic reforms were implemented, are known as the late Edo period.

Food Culture of the Edo Period from the Perspective of Cultural History

From the perspective of cultural history, the food culture of the Edo period reached several peaks between 1624 and 1830 with advances in both culinary culture and dietary habits. Advances during the early Edo period developed first among the regional lords, or *daimyo*, aristocrats, and wealthy merchants

between 1624 and 1644. They were not widely accepted by the new class of townspeople until around 1688–1704.

Poet and author of many well known stories Ihara Saikaku (1642–1693) strongly advocated the enjoyment of palatal pleasures within one’s

means. One of his stories depicts successful townspeople entertaining clients with luxurious full-course dinners. Another renowned poet, Matsuo Basho, had many dining- and drinking-related poems. As a kitchen servant, or possibly cook, in the

A Peek at the Meals of the People of Edo

Tracing the Diet of Edo—the Establishment of Japan’s Culinary Culture (Part One)

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home of a relative of the ruling clan of his native province, Matsuo was well versed in the culinary culture of high-ranking samurai families. The works of these two famous poets show that the upper classes of the early Edo period were enjoying their food culture. While political turbulence increased during the late Edo period, economic development progressed to create a society with a level of affluence incomparable to that of the early period. As the diet improved and the food culture spread throughout the society, however, three major reforms emphasized the spiritualistic ideal of frugality, condemning spending as a vice.

During the times between these reforms, a new culinary culture flourished with the aid of cookbooks and restaurants.



Ryōri Monogatari, the first cookbook published in Japan, 1643

Cookbooks of the early Edo period were technical manuals for professional cooks and introduced advanced knowledge and techniques for the culinary arts. During the late Edo period, however, cookbooks, in which the authors presented their knowledge about dishes and ingredients and offered discourse that even the common

reader found enjoyable, were published in great quantity. Restaurants multiplied in towns and exclusive restaurants offering unique floor plans with interior gardens, private rooms, or second-floor rooms appeared. In addition to these restaurants, the streets also abounded with a variety of food stalls and vendors that would serve anyone as long as they had money.

This atmosphere spawned such traditions as that of spending large sums of money to enjoy the first bonito of the season, as well as food becoming a form of pleasure for the commoner. The enjoyment of food was popularized by a social climate that considered spending a virtue. Underlining this trend was the policy of Tanuma Okitsugu (1719–1788), a senior counselor to the eighth shogun, who promoted commerce and trade as new sources of revenue preferable to conventional land taxes. Okitsugu and his son, however, were ousted and a series of conservative measures promoted by the Japanese statesman Matsudaira Sadanobu between 1787 and 1793 to restore the sinking financial and moral condition of the Edo shogunate were enacted. After Matsudaira's dismissal, however, the reforms were gradually undone and the culinary culture was revived. Spending was again welcomed and the commoners' culture flourished, bringing the culinary culture to full maturity. It was during the life of the eleventh shogun, Tokugawa Ienari (1773–1841) that Japanese cuisine seemed to reach an apex with all sorts of ingredients, techniques, and layout and presentation styles.

Unfortunately, with the initiation of new reforms (1841–1843) by Mizuno Tadakuni (1794–1851), the culinary culture was again silenced. Like a barren flower grown between political seasons, the richest cultural activities were suppressed in the name of political reform. Thus, the culinary culture that reached its prime in the period between 1804 and 1830 slipped into the shadows, never to return to mainstream society with the turbulence of the end of the Tokugawa shogunate. Yet, the prominent advancement of Japan's culinary culture and the general improvements in the diet achieved during the Edo period deserve historical recognition.

The City and People of Edo

The city of Edo (modern Tokyo) was built by the order of Tokugawa Ieyasu (1542–1616), the first shogun. A samurai district was formed by expanding the Edo castle compound for the residences of regional *daimyo* and their retainers and forcing farmers in the area to move to neighboring villages. Merchants and artisans were forced to relocate from more distant regions to lower parts of the city, created by reclaiming swamps and cutting channels that allowed for boat traffic, thus forming an urban district.



Edo Suruga-cho—Mitsui Gofuku-ten no Kaiwai (Suruga-cho, Edo—The Neighborhood around the Mitsui Silk and Textile Store; *Edo Meisho Zue*)

After the Great Fire of 1657, the urban district continued to expand and more and more people from throughout the country made their way to Edo. It was at the start of the late Edo period that Edo became a true metropolis with an enormous population. Census records of 1743 show roughly 310,000 men and 215,000 women forming the population of the townspeople, with roughly the same numbers making up the samurai population. Thus, it is presumed that the population of Edo at this time exceeded one million.

With the world's largest population in the 18th century, Edo's population was not balanced in terms of male and female. The male population was approximately 1.5 times that of the female population. Mathematically speaking, this means that a third of the male population was unmarried. The reason for this is that the majority of those arriving in Edo were single males searching for employment.

In the world of Edo townspeople, young bachelors working at large establishments were live-in employees. In the samurai district as well, the majority of the population were those in Edo for the alternate-year attendance required by the shogunate. Many of these left their families at home during their years in Edo. In addition to the live-in employees and samurai residing in Edo, the inflow of day laborers from local farming villages was enormous. It is thought that those engaged in small trading or day-labor jobs, artisans, and other such people living from hand to mouth accounted for a considerable portion of Edo's population.

To support such a large population, meals must naturally be served daily. Though some permanent employees may have been provided meals by their employers, they also may have eaten out as well. Bachelor day laborers would certainly have eaten out regularly. Edo was originally structured as a castle town consisting of a samurai district and a townspeople district. The samurai, including the shogun, however, were a purely consumer class that required an enormous and complex system to meet their food needs. Merchants and artisans were utilized to support the daily lives of the samurai and help ensure their monopoly of technology and materials. As the food supply system grew in both size and complexity with the rapid expansion of the population, a considerably large number of people were engaged in the food service industry. As the requirements of such an industry were fully established by the late Edo period, restaurants, food stalls, and other establishments serving food were thriving on an unprecedented scale.

The Edo Diet

Rowhouse Dwellers

The townspeople and artisans living in Edo rowhouses began their day with six rings of bells sounded roughly half-an-hour before sunrise, or at around 4:00 a.m. in the summer and 6:00 a.m. in the winter. The sounding of the bells, from ten towers throughout Edo, including one at Nihonbashi, signaled the beginning of the day's activities and the gates around Edo castle and doors to individual neighborhoods closed on the previous night were opened. As the bells were sounded, tofu shops opened and the calls of vendors could be heard throughout the



Edo *lida-machi*—Nakazaka and Kudanzaka (*lida-machi*, Edo—Nakazaka and Kudanzaka Slopes)
Two bell towers (circled in red) are visible. (Edo *Meisho Zue*)

city. Townspeople and artisans living in rowhouses would brush their teeth with toothbrushes made of willow and tooth powder made of flavored sand. Their wives would stoke kitchen stoves to prepare breakfast, sending smoke toward the sky. As the Edo morning fell into full swing, the cries of *natto* (fermented soybeans), clam, and vegetable vendors could be heard.

Breakfast for these common people consisted of rice, soup, pickles, and one or two dishes of dried fish, boiled dried *daikon* radish strips, deep-fried tofu with kelp, fried burdock roots, boiled beans, and other such dishes that remain familiar to the Japanese today. Particularly popular was clear soup with tofu. These main and side dishes may have been cooked at home or purchased from shops. The residents of the rowhouses were so friendly that they may have shared their dishes with their neighbors. Of the roughly 500,000 to 600,000 townspeople in Edo, approximately seventy percent would have lived in rowhouses. There seems to have been some variety in the class of rowhouses, with some consisting of single-room units of just six *tatami* mats (approximately 3.5m×2.63m/11.15 ft.×8.63 ft.) to those offering two floors—one for living and one for a business.

For lunch, artisans often had buckwheat *soba* noodles, sushi, tempura, or *unagi* (charcoal-broiled eel) purchased from food stalls, while their wives and children ate cold rice left over from breakfast with some side dish on hand. Dinner usually



The street (modern Chuo-dori Avenue) leading to the Nihonbashi fish market bustling with green grocers, grocery stores, bars, used-clothing shops, and street vendors selling fish, local produce, and medicine. (Kidayi *Shoran* scroll, property of the Berlin East Asian Art Museum)

consisted of the cold leftover rice with hot green tea poured over it and some pickled vegetables. Clearly, the commoners' diet was extremely frugal.

Employees of Large Stores and Private Alley Vendors

At the large stores lined up along main streets, kitchen employees were hard at work in the morning. The major streets of Edo flaunted a wide variety of businesses. Among them, the largest were those dealing in silk textiles retaining a large number of employees. Iwaki Masuya, for example, had 500 employees, the main Mitsui Echigoya store had 320 employees, Shimada Ebisuya employed 280, and Matsuzakaya employed 200.

The majority of these large stores were headquartered in the Kansai (Osaka, Kyoto) region with most of their Edo employees also originating from the Kansai area. These employees commonly worked as salesmen in the stores, having arrived in Edo in their teens and beginning as errand boys or apprentices hoping to rise to the position of assistant manager or manager. Kitchen employees, on the other hand, were basically male servants hired to prepare meals for those working in the front of the store, and made up roughly ten percent of the entire staff. Most of the sales staff were bachelors who ate in the store's kitchen. Dining in an all-male environment would have been efficient but dry. However, sake would have been served on special occasions such as annual festivals.

Records remaining from the Edo period for one such store tell us that when the store's warehouses were opened for the first time on the eleventh day of each New Year, a dinner was served to all employees. Even the agents who managed properties such as rowhouses owned by the store were invited so that everyone could get to know each other. Presumably, events like this were held at this store in March, June, September, and December as well.

The most basic form of trade in Edo was that of the street vendors and peddlers. They walked throughout the city of Edo peddling all sorts of daily necessities. Though Edo's merchants and craftsmen were primarily experienced and highly skilled, the simplest form of business was peddling. A proclamation issued by the Commissioner of Edo in January 1659 stated that anyone aged fifteen or younger, fifty or older, or having some physical disability was eligible for a peddler's license. The proclamation also defined the items for which a license was required. No license was required to peddle fish, tobacco, fruit, salt, candy, *miso* (fermented soybean paste), vinegar, soy sauce, tofu, *konnyaku* (devil's tongue), *tokoroten* (an agar seaweed jelly made into thin strips and eaten with vinegar), *mochi* (soft rice cakes), dried bonito, skewered sea cucumber, and salted salmon. This indicates rather loose control on the food trade of the time.

Morisada Manko, a work that describes the manners and customs near the end of the Tokugawa shogunate in both words and illustrations, depicts roughly fifty varieties of food peddlers. Typical items used in the preparation of meals include deep-fried tofu, fresh fish, icefish, vegetables, tofu, soy sauce, salt,

and *miso*. Other items mentioned include candies, handicrafts for children made from rice powder or wheat gluten, and seasonal ingredients such as the first bonito of the season, green soybeans, and *matsutake* and *hatsutake* mushrooms. Some of the street peddlers began setting up stalls to sell cooked foods and drinks. *Morisada Manko* depicts such stalls as selling charcoal-broiled eel and locusts, steamed sweet potatoes, buckwheat noodles, and sweet-bean paste soup with *mochi*.

The peddlers' diet was no different from that of merchants and craftsmen. For lunch they stopped by a street stall or restaurant on the way to the next alley. From approximately 1751 to 1830, restaurants serving set meals emerged. A storybook published in 1868 tells us that a restaurant named Hyakuzen offered a set meal of rice, minced fish-ball soup, a dish of boiled fish sausage, shiitake mushroom and green vegetable, and pickles. An essay and other publications issued near the end of the Tokugawa shogunate also tell us that the Sanbutei chain of restaurants were successfully offering set meals featuring sashimi, or broiled or boiled fish.

The Life of Samurai of All Ranks

The households of high-ranking samurai included a great number of vassals and retainers, meaning that their kitchens were on a completely different scale from those of commoners. The houses of *daimyo* contained several kitchens: one for the master, one for entertaining guests, and one for the vassals. The houses of lower ranking samurai, however, had just one kitchen as meals were prepared only for his immediate family, but also because space was limited. *Sekijo Nikki*, the ten-month diary of a low-ranking samurai beginning in June 1861, describes daily life after his stipend was suddenly reduced to a mere 1/5 that of the previous year. This family's meals were extremely frugal, typically consisting of soup, pickles, and rice with green tea poured over it. Sometimes a tofu or boiled vegetable dish was added, but egg or fish dishes were considered an extravagance. Even on New Year's Day, this family had no special dishes other than *mochi* boiled and served in vegetable soup. This sort of diet would have been common among the lower-ranking samurai.



Sekijo Nikki (by Ozaki Sadamiki, property of the Keio University Library)

On the other hand, the samurai nobility in attendance and serving at Edo castle enjoyed a completely different diet. This is clear from the meal boxes delivered to them on night duty at the castle. In his diary *Asahi Bunzaemon*, who served another Tokugawa family in present-day Aichi prefecture during the Genroku era (1688–1704), wrote that he and his colleagues took turns bringing dinner that was shared among those on night duty at Edo castle. These meals often consisted of dried strips of *daikon* radish, *arame* kelp, pickled plums, tofu, *konnyaku* (devil's tongue), yams, boiled burdock root, marinated freshwater clams, broiled striped mullet, and pickles. In addition, *miso* soup with dried *daikon* radish and sake were also served. As sake was permitted to those on night duty, the work of the samurai in those peaceful days must have been very relaxed.

The areas just outside of Edo castle's primary entrances were always busy with the waiting servants of the samurai working inside the castle. A proclamation issued by the Commissioner of Edo in May 1687, prohibiting the sale of cooked food at and around two major gates to Edo castle tells us that the number of both vendors and customers must have been great. In a book recalling the time of 1818 to 1844, Hori Hidenari states that street stalls sold a variety of dishes and drinks, including blocks of *konnyaku* jelly grilled with *miso*, sweet sake, clear sake, sushi, and sweets. He also notes that the items sold were all common to the lower classes of people.

Meals in and around Edo Castle

The main part of Edo castle was divided into three major sections; front, middle, and inner. Daily meals for the shogun were prepared in a kitchen in the middle section. After the food taster had confirmed that the dishes were not poisoned, the meals for the shogun and two pages were delivered to the shogun's dining room in the middle section of the castle.

The legal wife of the shogun received meals prepared for ten people: four portions for her and her food taster and six portions to the female servants attending the wife, in the inner section of the castle. A book from the period describes the breakfast served on one spring morning as consisting of one tray with steamed rice, *miso* soup with an egg, a tofu dish, a dish of steamed fish paste and walnut, finely shredded egg crepes, kelp, and a dish of sliced sea bream. On a second tray were broiled fish, fried egg wrapped in dried seaweed, stir fried tofu with vegetables, pickled squash, and *daikon* radish pickled in *miso*.

According to the testimony of those who served the shogun at the end of the Tokugawa shogunate, the shogun's meals were primarily based on simple steamed rice with few or no requests for special dishes, and he never ate all that he was served. For instance, if nine scoops of a boiled dish were served, he would eat about two scoops. As for fish, he often ate only one or two bites. The leftovers were offered to higher ranking servants.



A reproduction of the dinner Oda Nobunaga served Tokugawa Ieyasu at Azuchi Castle. Photo courtesy of The Asahi Shimbun Company.

While the diet of the fifteenth shogun, Tokugawa Yoshinobu, was unexpectedly simple and modest, records show that the eleventh shogun, Tokugawa Ienari, ate very luxuriously. For instance, during the first three days of the New Year, two varieties of soup and seven different dishes were served. Even on ordinary days, one soup and four dishes were served for breakfast and lunch, and five dishes, with no soup, were served for dinner. Served approximately 22 out of 29 days, sea bream, considered somewhat of a delicacy even today, was served more often than any other seafood.

Philip Franz von Siebold was a German physician posted at Dejima, a manmade island near Nagasaki and the only place in Japan where foreign trade was allowed during the majority of the Edo period, while Tokugawa Ienari was enjoying his sumptuous meals. In 1826 Siebold visited Edo and wrote of his experiences during the trip. In his book he mentions that prices in Edo were five times higher than in other castle towns. He also comments on the remarkable gap in the diets of the rich and the poor. For example, only the largest high-quality grains of rice were served to the *daimyo*. After the rice was cooked, only the best portion in the middle of the pan was served. While fish, vegetables, and alcoholic drinks were wasted in the grand residences of the *daimyo*, the lower classes were barely able to eke out a living in the cold of winter. Certainly only the best rice, hand selected grain by grain by four or five servants after milling, was delivered to the shogun's kitchen, and while Yoshinobu's meals may not have been as extravagant as Ienari's, there were still very elaborate and careful preparation processes occurring behind the scenes.

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All edited or written by Nobuo Harada

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