

BENTO PICNIC

HOW TO RECLAIM YOUR CREATIVITY, PALETTE & HEALTH
BY PRACTICING WASHOKU



**+ 16 DELICIOUS JAPANESE-INSPIRED MENUS
(WITH SAKE PAIRINGS!)**

A practical guide to the ancient Japanese practice of Washoku and a one-of-a-kind cookbook of beautiful bento meals paired with expert sake recommendations.

LEANNE VALENTI

Author, Educator
Chef Owner of Bento Picnic
(512) 589-0153
leannevalenti@gmail.com
Austin, Texas

MONICA SAMUELS

Contributor, Sake Expert
Vice President of Vine Connections
& Komé Collective
(562) 331-0128
monica@vineconnections.com
New York, New York

Table of Contents

OVERVIEW	3
ABOUT THE TEAM	6
BOOK DETAILS	12
AUDIENCE	13
PHOTOGRAPHY & DESIGN	16
MARKETING & PROMOTION	21
COMPARABLE TITLES	26
BOOK TABLE OF CONTENTS	34
CHAPTER DESCRIPTIONS	35
SAMPLE MATERIAL	40

OVERVIEW

“LEANNE VALENTI IS ONE OF THE GREAT PRACTITIONERS OF WASHOKU.”

— *ELIZABETH ANDOH*

I hesitate to tell you this story because I cannot recreate this dish. I have no recipe to offer you. I can hardly remember the ingredients. I share it because I want you to understand why I love Washoku, the subtle yet significant power inherent in Japanese culinary traditions, and what it feels like to lead with your senses and allow yourself to enter one of those rare and beautiful states where creativity flows effortlessly.

I was a few months into my first homestay in Japan. I'd spent many mornings helping Shigeyo, my best friend Naoko's mother, prepare the family meals. Many times I'd work alongside her, chopping vegetables and stirring broth. On this particular day, both of Naoko's parents were busy at the family bakery in Izu, so I was left to prepare lunch for the family on my own. With a full garden and stocked fridge, I had my choice of high-quality ingredients.

I don't read in Japanese and in 2011 translation technology wasn't widely available. That left me with only my gut as a guide. I pulled a stiff, silvery fish out of the freezer and began simmering a broth. I wish I could tell you more; How I sliced the freshly-pulled root vegetables or what kind of springy herbs I sprinkled on top. But over a decade later, I just don't remember.

What I will never forget is Shigeyo's reaction. Shock. Surprise. Disbelief? “Did you put Shio Saba in soup?” she asked as she sat down to eat. I stumbled in response, “I don't know. Did I?” She gently informed me this was simply not done. “Omoshiroi,” Naoko's Dad, Hirotaka, chimed in. Omoshiroi translates to “interesting or funny” in Japanese. But forever the consummate hosts, they gave the briny soup a try.

A few silent moments passed. My host parents shared a look, and to my relief, their eyes lit up. “Very goooooood,” they said. Within a few days, Shigeyo and Hirotaka had told all of their neighborhood friends about my “invention.” Strangers were stopping me on the street asking when I was going to open my Shio Saba soup shop, because of course, it would make me famous.

This moment encapsulates the early days of feeling my way through Japanese cuisine. Only 26 at the time, I was still a novice in Japanese cuisine, unaware of how much I had left to learn. Without the restraints of cultural expectations, I was able to work creatively within the ever-forgiving framework of Washoku — the Japanese practice of using five colors, five tastes, and five techniques to prepare a meal.

I never made this soup again — not because it wasn't delicious, but because my curiosity led me to experiment with something new everyday for the duration of my homestay. And once I returned to the States, without ready access to Shio Saba and other foods unique to Japan, I began to iterate on Washoku with ingredients that were locally available in Texas.

What began as a fun creative challenge to cook with all the colors, tastes and elements grew into a fascination as I realized what a reliable formula it was for making meals that were equally delicious and healthy. As I continued to practice Washoku at home, I found myself experiencing enhanced moods, freedom from cravings, greater clarity, and a profound sense of gratitude.

The more I followed my senses, the more intuitive I became in the kitchen, and the more my confidence grew as a chef. Eventually an undeniable desire to share the fruits of my labor inspired me to open my own bento shop — Bento Picnic — which I ran as a sole proprietor in Austin, Texas from 2015 - 2023.

I remember the moment when the two animating concepts of my restaurant came together. I was boarding the Shinkansen leaving Tokyo for Izu when I picked up a grab-n-go meal at the train station. The carefully-prepared bento box was a beautiful collage of vegetables, seafood, and rice. As I ate, my breathing instinctively slowed and I chewed attentively, savoring each bite.

The humble bento box, with its alluring pockets and complementary fillings, is a natural way to showcase the beauty and diversity of Washoku. Able to be prepped in advance and kept at room temperature, bento boxes are also a practical way to create meals that can be eaten anywhere. At my restaurant, I took on the creative challenge of working within Washoku's constraints to produce bento boxes using a mixture of Japanese staples and Texas produce.

Drawing from a decade of using Washoku to design menus for my restaurant, *Bento Picnic* aims to shine light on how Japanese menu design is the gold standard in its ability to produce harmonious meals that are visually stunning, deeply nourishing, and reliably delicious.

Just like an artist who understands color theory is better equipped to create aesthetically striking and emotionally resonant pieces, anyone who practices Washoku (和食) — the Japanese philosophy of designing menus with 5 colors, 5 tastes and 5 elements — has a leg up when it comes to making mealtime magic.

Following Washoku generates a synergistic effect that extends beyond the pleasures of beauty and deliciousness. The health benefits of the colors, tastes, and elements are continually being proven by modern science as helpful indicators for how to nourish our bodies and our mental health.

Fans of the wildly popular health hacks published by Jessie Inchauspé, aka the *Glucose Goddess*, will be intrigued by *Bento Picnic*'s scientific explanations of how Washoku can help curb cravings and

enhance awareness. And readers of *An Everlasting Meal* by Tamar Adler, will be drawn to the revolutionary nature of *Bento Picnic* since it is designed to be a self-empowerment tool that inspires home cooks to get creative and gain confidence in the kitchen.

Bento Picnic will delight eaters with its practical framework for creating healthy, satisfying meals without sacrificing flavor or enjoyment. Whether overwhelmed with contradictory advice from fad diets, or looking for ways to eat more vegetables without going fully vegan, *Bento Picnic* is for readers who are already interested in the basic principles of healthy eating but are looking for a reliable structure to make delectable and diverse vegetable-forward meals.

The 80+ enclosed recipes are grouped into 16 bento menus, each showcasing a unique interplay of all 5 colors, 5 tastes and 5 elements. To set readers up for maximum success and enjoyment, we're also including the following bonus features:

- [Elizabeth Andoh](#), the IACP-award winning author of *Washoku* (Ten Speed, 2005), will offer her endorsement of *Bento Picnic* by writing the Foreword.
- Monica Samuels, one of the only female Sake Samurai in the world, will contribute her expert sake recommendations for each of the menus — making *Bento Picnic* the only English-language cookbook to include sake pairings.
- We will also include vegan substitutes and non-alcoholic beverage options for all the menus so that folks who have made certain health commitments can enjoy *Bento Picnic* as well!
- For enhanced accuracy and easy scaling, all the ingredients and yields for the recipes will be listed in both weight (grams) and volume (US standard).
- We will provide a complete meal-planning guide for each menu to share pro insights for how to maximize efficiency, pace the prep and flow between recipes so that readers can manage their time well, sidestep stressors, and fully enjoy the fruits of their labor.

Thank you for taking time to review our proposal! We are invested in the mission of sharing the benefits of Washoku with mainstream English-speaking audiences and will mobilize our resources and communities to reach as many people as possible with our message.

- Leanne

ABOUT THE TEAM



LEANNE VALENTI is the chef owner of Bento Picnic, a beloved Japanese-inspired eatery specializing in bento boxes and premium sake that was open in East Austin from 2015-2023. She is an enthusiastic disciple of Washoku — the Japanese tradition of designing balanced meals — which became the cornerstone of her personal culinary philosophy when she was living in Japan in 2011.

In 2023, Valenti closed her bento shop to take a sabbatical — which has given her the opportunity to revisit in Japan, journey through India, and ideate around the future of her brand and career. Her intention with this cookbook is to share sought-after recipes from the restaurant, and shine new light on Washoku — revealing what makes Japanese menu design so successful in terms of its ability to produce

meals that are visually stunning, deeply nourishing and reliably delicious.

In addition to running her own restaurant, Valenti has also worked with award-winning chefs and authors over the past 15 years, including Elizabeth Andoh, Jesse Griffiths, Gerard Craft, Rene Ortiz, Laura Sawicki, and Chad Sarno, plus many more from her days of managing a weekly supper club featuring new chefs and rotating menus each week.

Particularly relevant to this project is the work that Valenti has done with Elizabeth Andoh, the “Julia Child of Japanese Cuisine.” Valenti led a team of volunteers to conduct recipe testing for Andoh’s most recent cookbook, and she helped garner international attention for Andoh’s work by organizing events stateside — including an interactive TEDx Talk in Austin, Texas in 2013. Immediately after Andoh delivered her talk about Washoku on the TEDx stage, Valenti activated the idea by executing a bento-style lunch with 5 local chefs for 500+ attendees.

More importantly than *what* work Valenti has done, is *how* she has done it. For her, work is love made visible. Wherever Valenti goes, she naturally builds community, cultivates lasting relationships, and celebrates moments throughout the day. In fact, when Valenti was working for an educational afterschool program right out of college, she received the first ever Tulaine Montgomery Village Builders Award — which has continued to be given to one staff member annually who “demonstrates exceptional village building by acting as a bridge or connector for staff, students, and the community.”

She has been featured in Austin Food and Wine Festivals's Chef Showcase and deemed a Net-Zero Hero by the city of Austin. Her expertise in the Japanese philosophy of Washoku has been profiled in Forbes Magazine, Edible Austin, and the Austin Chronicle. Leanne also lives, cooks, and hosts elaborate dinner parties with her partner in their beautifully-designed 1930's home spotlighted on *Architectural Digest Online* in 2022 and 2023, and in print twice with an 8-page spread in *Better Homes & Gardens: Cottage Style Fall 2023*, and a 4-page spread in *Better Homes & Gardens: The Complete Guide to Color* in 2024. Valenti also recently starred in a 40-minute episode of Homeworthy where she gave cooking demos and dinner party tips (91k views).

As a lifelong learner and passionate cook equipped with a Masters in Education from Lesley University and Chef's Certificate from the Natural Epicurean Academy, Leanne's vision for *Bento Picnic* is choc full of delicious menus, approachable accounts of her intercultural coming-of-age experiences, and intimate details of what it was like to bootstrap a bento shop as a solopreneur.

To learn more about Leanne, visit her **Website** and **LinkedIn**.



More About Bento Picnic



“AN EXPERIENCE UNLIKE ANY OTHER IN TOWN, OFFERING DELICIOUSLY NOURISHING AND BALANCED MEALS, A CULTURALLY RICH ENVIRONMENT, AND A DRIVE TO PROVIDE THE COMMUNITY WITH HEALTHY AND REFRESHING MEALS WITHOUT SACRIFICING FLAVOR.”

-FORBES MAGAZINE

Providing farm-to-table fare with Japanese flair, Bento Picnic was a truly unique Austin experience born out of Valenti’s love for Washoku and a dedication to supporting local farmers. Specializing in healthy Japanese bento boxes and scratch gluten-free pastries, Valenti’s creations were distinctly delicious, beautiful, and consciously-created with high-quality ingredients and seasonal produce.



Bento Picnic’s mission statement, as it was co-written by the entire team, was “To connect customers with memorable experiences. Whether sharing the harmony of Washoku with a nourishing bento box unique to Central Texas, or creating access to high-quality wines, sake, and non-alcoholic options that are hard to find elsewhere, we endeavored to make a warm & lasting impression by being one-of-a-kind destination, welcoming and memorable.”

Steeped in the rituals of Japanese home cooking, Bento Picnic put extra care into every aspect of their menu. Even the miso soup was made from scratch daily; Soaking kombu to make a vegan dashi broth, whisking in organic white miso, and ladling the broth over wakame, tofu, and scallion once tepid (but before it simmers) to keep the probiotics in the miso alive. A foundational element of her philosophy, Valenti’s menus are

intentionally designed to preserve the health benefits of each thoughtfully-sourced ingredient.



A bootstrapped neighborhood spot acclaimed for having old Austin vibes, Bento Picnic was the kind of place that attracted regular customers who often visited daily and ordered the same thing each time.

Valenti recounts, “Like clockwork, Coleman would come in for the House Salad with Braised Brisket and Extra Avocado, Elaine would get the Noodle Bento with Broiled Salmon (but she would sometimes order extra kale instead of the noodles 😊), and Paul almost always got the Rice Bento with Chicken Tsukune and extra Firecracker Sauce. Laura couldn’t swing by the shop without picking up two (or six!) Mochi Butter Buns, and whenever Elle came in with her team, we knew we were going to need to put more Miso Chocolate Chip Cookies in the oven.”



Valenti was also the owner of Saba San’s bottle shop and wine club tucked just behind the counter-service bento shop. Saba San’s offered a curated selection of artisanal sake, craft beer, and low-intervention wine that paired beautifully with the menu at Bento Picnic.

After 8 years of running Bento Picnic as a sole proprietor, Leanne decided in 2023 to sublease her restaurant space to another concept and entered into a sabbatical. It is rare for someone in the restaurant industry to be able to take a


sabbatical, and the circumstances for how this opportunity came about for Valenti is quite the story in and of itself.



During COVID, Valenti started subleasing the private dining room of her restaurant to a 10-seat sushi concept to make up for lost catering revenue. In an unexpected turn of events, her subtenant’s waitlist grew overnight to 20,000 people after Joe Rogan tweeted it was “the best sushi he has ever had.” So Valenti extended their sublease, and they proceeded to run their swanky sushi speakeasy under the same roof as her bento shop for 2+ years.



As the years went on, reservations were still in such high demand for their sushi. They consistently held the #3 spot in the nation on Tock for how quickly seats sold out, and it became increasingly clear that the most strategic business move would be to turn Valenti's entire space over to her subtenant.



The space itself, a 1920's craftsman bungalow just shy of 1800 square feet, was ultimately a much better fit for their high-end sushi omakase than it had ever been for Valenti's bento operation. The size and layout had always presented challenges to Valenti and her team for the volume of bento boxes that they endeavored to make on a daily basis.

Even though it made strong financial sense to turn her space over, it was still not an easy decision. She had poured so much love into it and established a loyal following over the course of 8 years. Ultimately, the allure of adventure and the unknown won out, and Valenti is now embracing her newfound freedom and experiencing a joyous upsurge in her creative energies.

In the time that has elapsed, she has returned to Japan, journeyed through India, and penned this cookbook proposal. She also continues to offer select catering events and private dinner parties. In the next iteration of her business, she envisions Bento Picnic as an aspirational lifestyle brand providing design inspo, recipes, and access to resources that empower cooks around the world to integrate Washoku into their day-to-day.

Bento Picnic supports a loyal, engaged following with monthly newsletters, regular Instagram activity, media appearances, an active blog, private catering events, and ever-growing partnerships. It was named one of the most missed restaurants of 2023 by both the Austin Chronicle and Eater.

The image is a screenshot of the Austin Chronicle website. At the top, there is a navigation bar with the site's logo, a hamburger menu icon, and a search icon. Below the navigation bar, a banner reads "Ad served by Google". Underneath this, there are three buttons: "Ad options", "Send feedback", and "Why this ad?". The main heading "FOOD" is displayed in large, bold, black letters. Below the heading, the article title "Top 10 Dishes We'll Miss, Plus 2024 Openings We're Excited About" is written in a large, bold, black font. The author's name, "Fare thee well, and pleased to meet you soon", is written in a smaller font. Below the author's name, the byline "BY DEVEN WILSON, FRI., DEC. 15, 2023" is displayed. The article content begins with a paragraph starting with "Bento Picnic closed in February (photo by John Anderson)". The image shows the top portion of the article, including the header, navigation bar, and the beginning of the text.

Austin Dining Experts Reminisce on the Saddest Restaurant Closures of 2023

Fare thee well to these restaurants, food trucks, bakeries, and more

by **Erin Russell** | Dec 19, 2023, 12:16pm CST

Raphael Brion, Texas senior editor, **the Infatuation**

Losing **Bento Picnic** as a healthy-ish lunch spot/charming patio workplace hurt the most to me, personally. **Seoulju** was also surprising. I have a feeling both will make it back in some form or another soon though.

Jane Ko, blogger, [A Taste of Koko](#)

Nau's Enfield Drug. I loved this iconic neighborhood diner. Also the closing of Bento Picnic— this was a go-to spot for me when I wanted a healthy meal that tasted really good.



MONICA SAMUELS is one of the country's most accomplished sake professionals - including being named "Top 40 Under 40" by Wine Enthusiast Magazine and holding the prestigious title of Sake Samurai awarded by the Sake Samurai Association in Japan. Monica has been in the sake business for over fifteen years and currently oversees the strategy, marketing, sales, and education of the Japanese sake and spirits portfolio at Vine Connections and Kome Collective. Monica's education in sake includes studying under John Gauntner and his Sake Education Council, where she received both Certified and Advanced Sake Professional distinctions; she is also a WSET certified Educator for the Level 3 Award in Sake. She is currently a Senior Judge for the International Wine Challenge sake category, and a judge for the US National Sake Appraisal. Her expertise has been featured in a regular column for *Serious Eats*, Sotheby's "A Drink With" series, *The Chicago Tribune*, *The Aspen Times*, *Feast Magazine*, *Eater* (97k views), among many other publications.

Monica was born in Los Angeles and spent summers in Tokyo at her grandmother's house growing up. As a bilingual individual with a unique perspective on two very different cultures, she has been particularly successful in demystifying sake for the US audience. Her years in the hospitality business and ingrained passion for the restaurant industry have given her an exceptional understanding of pairing sake with food, particularly outside of the traditional Japanese setting.

To learn more about Monica, visit her **Website** and **LinkedIn**.

BOOK DETAILS

Because the nature of Washoku involves multiple dishes presented as one meal, we have opted to group *Bento Picnic*'s 80+ recipes into 16 menus. By gathering the recipes for each menu together across one centerfold, our aim is to present readers with the most streamlined, stress-free cooking experience. For additional organization, we have further subdivided the menus by their associated staple: rice, noodles, and grain-free bentos (including squashes, quinoa, and potatoes).

Our goal is that the cooks who interact with *Bento Picnic* feel well-resourced to expand their repertoire with the tried-and-tested Washoku meals that this book inspires. *Bento Picnic* will be an interactive body of work that invites contemporary readers to bring Japanese culinary practices into their day-to-day life with easy-to-follow recipes, alluring infographics, and digital companion materials. As of now, we envision the following:

- 200 to 250 pages
- 80 to 100 recipes
- 16 bento menus with 16 sake pairings (including multiple pairing options for each menu)
- The book will contain a foreword written by Elizabeth Andoh, plus an introduction, a sake tasting guide, essays to introduce each of the five chapters, and headnotes for each recipe and bento menu.
- Large color photos of each complete menu as well as accompanying sake bottle shots. Our contributor Monica Samuels of Kome Collective will make sake-related photos from their extensive archive available for use by the publisher.
- Digital illustrations of Washoku concepts including the components of the five tastes, colors, and elements.

We will illuminate the little-understood concept of Washoku for English-speaking audiences through the inclusion of informative essays, educational infographics, and photo illustrations. Though we hope to stay true to the established aesthetic of *Bento Picnic*'s brand, we are open to input on design elements from the publisher. We would like to include sidebars with meal planning tips and boxes with explanations of the Washoku concepts embodied in each menu throughout the book. Each menu will also contain 3-4 sake recommendations that include tasting notes and serving suggestions.

Timeline

The final draft will be completed within 12 months of receipt of the advance.

AUDIENCE



BENTO PICNIC FOLLOWERS

One of the driving forces behind this project is the demand from former Bento Picnic clientele for the recipes they've been missing since the shop closed in February 2023.

Valenti has served a wide range of clientele through her farmer's market stand, Bento Picnic brick and mortar location, Saba San's bottle shop, and catering business. Her followers continue to engage with her culinary pursuits on her blog, newsletter, and in media appearances including a recent episode of *Homeworthy* which has garnered 91,000 views.

In a recent poll of Bento Picnic's audience, we received 200 responses from people interested in beta-testing our recipe content. An aggregate of the data indicates Bento Picnic followers are interested in cooking and food, personal development, self-improvement, gleanable valuable insights from experts in various fields, and light-hearted, entertaining content.



SAKE ENTHUSIASTS

As Vice President of Sake & Spirits at Vine Connections and the leader of the Komé Collective team, Monica Samuels has worked with hundreds of retailers to distribute and sell premium saké from an ever-growing portfolio.

Bento Picnic will interest both retailers and their clientele as a practical guide to pairing sake with home-cooked meals. Komé Collective will promote *Bento Picnic* at trade events and consumer-facing festivals and use it as a supplemental tool for wine and spirits courses.

Komé Collective also plans to purchase copies for use in events with partners and make the cookbook available on their direct-to-consumer website drinkpourtal.com.



HEALTH CONSCIOUS HOMECOOKS

Bento Picnic is geared towards health-conscious readers who are open to learning from other cultures as a way to expand their repertoire in the kitchen and get back into natural rhythms.

The massive uptick in health-conscious cookbooks in the last decade is obvious in bookstores who now contain entire bookcases labeled "Healthy Cooking," but *Bento Picnic* will stand out from other healthy cookbooks on the market because it's not an advertisement for some new fad diet.



The principles of Washoku offer readers a “new” style of eating that's not actually new; It's ancient, but most Westerners haven't heard of it. For anyone who has never heard of Washoku, chances are it will be revolutionary for the issues of modernity including: Reclaiming our palettes from processed foods, Feeling comfortable in our

bodies, Mental wellness, Clearing creative blocks, Developing intuition, Dealing with stress, and How to engage in contemplative practices.

Rather than champion a single-minded approach, *Bento Picnic* offers everyone an evergreen approach for how to make balanced meals no matter their dietary preference, be they high-protein, plant-based, grain-free or dairy-free.



JAPANOPHILES AND AESTHETES

Some of the best selling cookbooks on the market today are escaping the kitchen and making their way onto coffee tables thanks to beautiful and intentional storytelling and visual design.

With eye-popping typography, full-color photos and intriguing illustrations, *Bento Picnic* will animate the concept of Washoku in an interactive manner that has not

previously been done. Those who love Japan and appreciate works of art will seek out *Bento Picnic* as a design specimen to add to their collection and to keep out on their coffee tables.

**IN SUMMARY, *BENTO PICNIC* IS DESIGNED FOR THE MAINSTREAM AUDIENCES
ACROSS THE FOLLOWING SEGMENTS:**

- **Omnivores & flexitarians**
 - ... who want to expand their repertoire to include more vegetable-forward Asian recipes,
 - ... and get fresh inspiration for healthy, nutritious fare to make for parties, picnics, and everyday meals.
- **Intuitive eating advocates**
 - ... who want to use the framework of Washoku to reclaim their palette and tap into their own senses to compose balanced meals
- **Home cooks with dietary preferences**
 - ... especially those who are Locavores, Gluten-Free, Dairy-Free, and/or Vegan.
- **Professional chefs and culinary students**
 - ... who are seeking a reference on Washoku principles and Japanese cuisine.
- **Japanophiles & international travelers**
 - ... who collect cookbooks to learn about the culinary traditions of different cultures.

PHOTOGRAPHY & DESIGN



Photography

It is our desire to feature full color photography by photographer Ransom Ashley in Valenti's historic craftsman home in Austin, Texas where her custom kitchen was featured in Architectural Digest and Better Homes & Gardens.

Ransom Ashley is a photographer, multidisciplinary creative, and the creative director of Son of Rand a design studio/shop which he founded in 2018. He has shown work internationally (in New York, London, Brighton and Budapest) and been included in shows at the New Britain Museum of American Art, Fort Wayne Museum of Art, and Masur Museum of Art, among others. He has also been featured in select publications such as Teen Vogue, Deadline, Wonderland Magazine, Metal Magazine, and Dazed and Confused Magazine.

Ashley's most recent publication project was sold worldwide, carried by the Louvre in Paris, and debuted at Les Rencontres d'Arles alongside the work of industry greats like Stanley Kubrick, William Klein, Joel Meyerowitz, and Martin Parr.

In addition to Ashley's many qualifications, he also happens to be Valenti's neighbor (and they share a birthday!). More times than not, whenever Valenti is making a meal to share with friends, he is at the table. In fact, the photos featured above were shot by Ashley at one of Valenti's recent dinner parties.

If we are able to work with Ashley on this project, it would give the book such a dynamic quality, especially compared to most cookbooks on the market which are shot over the course of a weekend in a rented studio, because we'll be able to capture more seasonal, organic content through his unique vantage point.

Design

We are committed to making *Bento Picnic* deliciously digestible through smart design choices, typography, and visuals.

Bento Picnic takes a deep dive into the Japanese food philosophy with plenty of context, interesting asides, and easter eggs. The design and layout will be critical to engaging audiences as we endeavor to offer readers the most complete coverage of foundational aspects of Washoku that has ever been made available to English-speaking audiences.

We would like to collaborate with Ransom Ashley and his team at Son of Rand for the design for this project because they share our vision for what will make *Bento Picnic* unique. Since we already have an established working relationship with Ashley, and we admire Son of Rand's ability to present material in an elevated manner that sparks curiosity and joy, we would like to pursue having Ashley oversee both the design and photography for this cookbook.

We believe Ashley's involvement could also help to expand the demographics our readership by making *Bento Picnic* available in Son of Rand's online shop — alongside their treasure trove of beautifully-designed gifts, books, and artifacts — and by promoting the book on their social platforms which are followed by 68.3k individuals.

Additionally, we plan to curate a collection of homewares from Japanese makers that will be used to create visual content for the book and that will later be shoppable through Son of Rand. We are also exploring launching a few exclusive pieces that can expand on our marketing initiatives and give readers yet another way to bring *Bento Picnic* into their homes.

Bento Picnic's Design Artifacts

****Add a note that these visuals are for reference only and not reflective of our visual treatments or the identity of the Bento Picnic Cookbook. I.e. that they serve as examples of formats through which we have (or hope to) present information.**

For the *Bento Picnic* cookbook, we will endeavor to portray Washoku and its many benefits in the most visually engaging manner by drawing upon the most successful aspects of Valenti's previous iterations, some of which are featured below.

EXHIBIT I



This Bento Picnic original was designed by Leanne Valenti and photographed by Amy Weiss.

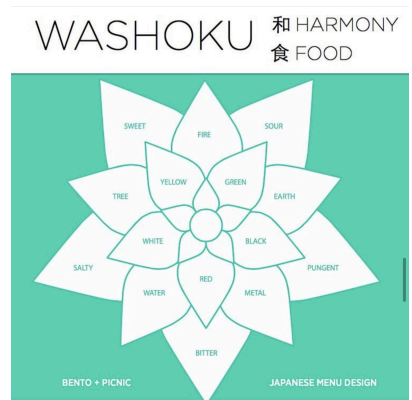
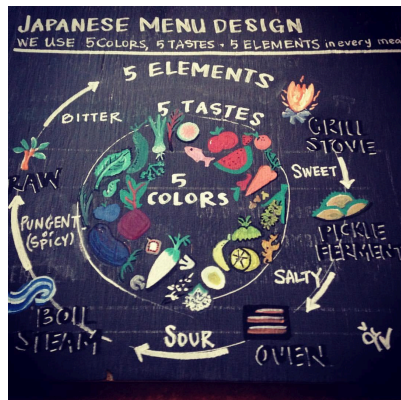
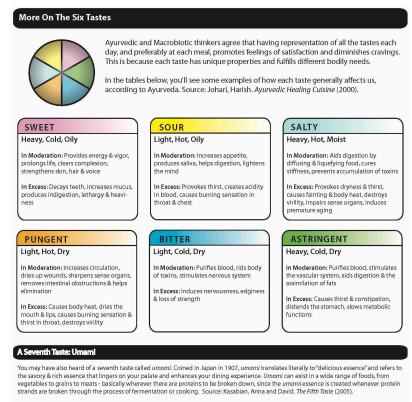
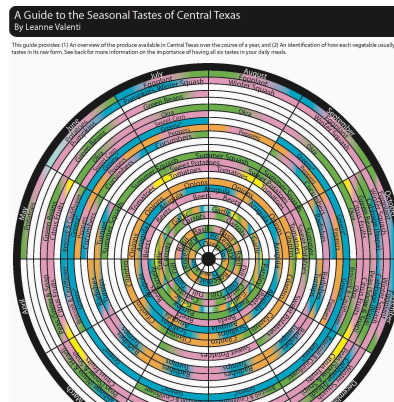
It hung on the wall next to the register with this description:

Washoku is the Japanese tradition of using the five colors, five tastes, and five elements to craft meals that are balanced, delicious and nourishing. At Bento Picnic, we follow this tradition using a variety

of high-quality ingredients, many of them local to Central Texas.

Bento Picnic's Design Artifacts

EXHIBIT II

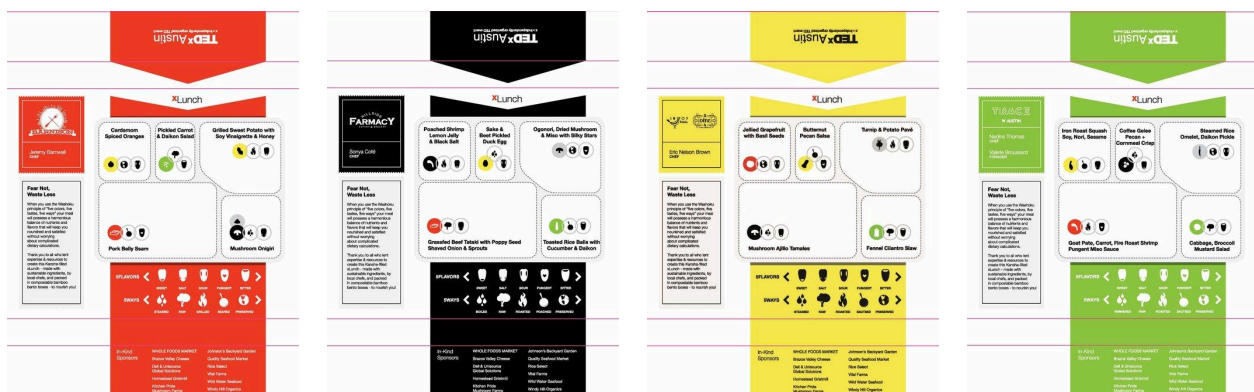


While Valenti was in culinary school, she got extra credit for designing and developing the above resource entitled “Tastes of Central Texas” to share with her class. 🧐 And for the past decade, she’s not only been showcasing Washoku in her restaurant and catering menus; She’s also developed a

variety of visual aids to help educate her customers about Washoku and has led workshops on the topic.

Bento Picnic's Design Artifacts

EXHIBIT III



In 2013, when Valenti had a leadership role with TEDxAustin, she recruited Elizabeth Andoh to give a TED Talk about why Washoku is “an idea worth sharing.” Then she organized a large-scale bento lunch where each of the 500 attendees got to enjoy a Washoku-inspired meal made by one of five local chefs. To spark conversation and awareness for Washoku, Leanne worked with designers to create these labels for each of the boxes.

MARKETING & PROMOTION

Through deep industry connections and a strategic marketing campaign, Valenti and Samuels are committed to ensuring *Bento Picnic* hits the stands with a splash and becomes a highly successful project. With an expansive network of professional connections in the food and beverage industry across the country (restaurant patrons, direct-to-consumer retailers, food and wine festivals, trade events, wine and spirits courses, etc.), we are prepared to leverage our specific expertise, invest our energies, and engage our communities in a strong PR and marketing campaign to kick off the book's inception.

PUBLIC RELATIONS

Our plans for promoting the book include:

- Pre-release announcements to personal and professional networks to generate early exposure including **promotional mailings** to targeted booksellers (including those focused on culinary literatures such as Now Serving LA, Kitchen Arts & Letters, Book Larder, Bold Fork, and Omnivore Books on Food) and food bloggers (including Just One Cookbook, Chopstick Chronicles, Kitchen Princess Bamboo, La Fuji Mama, Just Hungry, and Urban Sake).
- Post free excerpts to Scribd and launch **giveaway campaigns** on Goodreads and Amazon to incentivize readership; offer a **pre-order bonus** of a downloadable PDF of recipes for the top five best-selling Bento Picnic desserts.
- Excerpts and recipes from *Bento Picnic* will be sent to:
 - Magazines** (*Bon Appétit*, *Food & Wine*, *EatingWell*, *Edible Austin*, *Sake Today*, *Magazine F*, *So Good*, *Milk Street*, *Texas Monthly*, and *Austin Woman Magazine*),
 - Newspapers** (*Austin Chronicle*, *Austin-American Statesman*, *Dallas Morning News*, *Houston Chronicle*, in addition to national periodicals such as *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Boston Globe*),
 - Online Publications** (*Forbes*, *Sake Times*, *Austin360*, *Epicurious*, *Delish*, *CultureMap Austin*, *Eater*, *Serious Eats*, and *Austin Monthly*).
- We will pitch complementary stories to the above publications with angles such as:
 - How Washoku Can Transform Your Mind and Body

- How to Eat the Rainbow without Breaking the Bank
- How to Pair Sake with Vegetarian Meals
- 7 Sake Brewers Breaking the Mold in Japan
- You Don't Need to be an Expert to Appreciate Sake
- How Sake Samurai Protect Japan's Ancient Art of Sake
- We will send out printed galley proofs to prominent individuals for **blurbs** (including John Gauntner, Sonoko Sakai, Rie McClenny, Sawako Okochi, Elizabeth Andoh, Rachel Zierzow, Jane Ko, Aaron Franklin, and Tadashi Ono).
- We will reach out to popular **food & beverage podcasts** including:
 - Good Food
 - Milk Street
 - Radio Cherry Bombe
 - Salt + Spine
 - A Couple Cooks
 - Feast Meets West
 - Japan Eats!
 - Bento & Co's Japanese Food
 - Sake Revolution
 - Sake on Air
- We will also reach out to thought leaders who host **health pop & life-enhancing podcasts** to expand the demographics of our readership beyond foodies. Conversation topics will include how Washoku can help us reclaim our palette from processed foods, and how it promotes enhanced awareness, stokes creativity, and can bolster the mental health of those who practice it.
 - Tetragrammaton with Rick Rubin
 - The Skinny Confidential Him & Her Podcast
 - Diary of a CEO with Steven Bartlett
 - The Great Creators with Guy Raz
 - I'm Not Dead with Sarah Clary & Christina Glickman
 - On Purpose with Jay Shetty
- We will engage in a multi-city **book tour** focusing on their respective home territories (Texas and New York) with targeted events outside of these locations. There are significant opportunities to host local events in Austin, Texas in places such as: Book People, First Light Books, The Training Kitchen and Sustainable Food Center. We will also engage in select

cooking classes and tasting events both online and in person to generate sales and interest in the cookbook.

SOCIAL MEDIA

With Instagram being our platform of choice, our current following has a total reach of 15,670+ followers.

Bento Picnic: 6,900+

Leanne Valenti: 1,400+

Kome Collective: 700+

Vine Connection: 2,700+

Monica Samuels: 3,800+

We will also leverage our personal networks to do cross promotion and book launch support. For example, Valenti will reach out to members of her community, including influencers like:

- Olivia Adriance (@olivia.adriance, 1.2M followers)
- Rachael DeVaux (@rachaelsgoodeats, 766k followers)
- Camille Styles (@camillestyles, 219k followers)
- Jane Ko (@tasteofkoko, 212k followers)
- Nick Gray (@nickgraynews, 70.7k followers)
- Alex Reicheck (@chekmarkeats, 24k followers)
- Sara Kim (@thatsarakim, 19.4k followers)
- Emma K Morris (emmakcreative, 16.2k followers)
- Shveta_Moller (@atx_bites, 16.2k followers)
- Claire Siegel (@claire_siegel, 13.7k followers)
- Tierra Neubaum (@tierraonfox7, 11.5k followers)
- Jesse Griffiths (@sac.a.lait, 54.6k followers)
- Fermin Nunez of Suerte (@chiefnunez, 15.4k followers)
- Nina Gordon (@takeheartshop, 16.1k followers)
- Emily Eisenhart (@emily.eisenhart, 16.2k followers)

WEBSITE AND BLOG

We will showcase the cookbook on our respective websites and blogs, and will promote reader engagement through giveaways. Komé Collective will feature the book on their direct to consumer website drinkpourtal.com for purchase. Ahead of the book's release, the *Bento Picnic* website will feature the book cover, sample recipes, photos, and other promotional engagements. Valenti will

continue to maintain the *Bento Picnic* blog and newsletter (of 3,300+ subscribers) which will include topics and articles relevant to the cookbook as well as partner recipes that act as teasers and encourage visitors to purchase the book.

BEVERAGE RETAILERS

Bento Picnic will be promoted to Komé Collective's clients and partners and promoted at trade events, consumer-facing festivals, and used as a supplemental tool for wine and spirits courses.

Praise for Bento Picnic

“Bento Picnic offers an experience unlike any other in town, offering deliciously nourishing and balanced meals, a culturally rich environment, and a drive to provide the community with healthy and refreshing meals without sacrificing flavor.”

— *Claudia Alarcón, Forbes Magazine*

“What people are coming back to is the diversity and convenience of bento (the word originally meant "convenience") within a streetside setting that seems like something out of Austin's more relaxed past.”

— *Wayne Alan Brenner and Jessi Cape, Austin Chronicle*

“Washoku . . . is an apt description for a style of cuisine that not only balances flavors like salty and umami, but also takes great care in the presentation of each dish. At Bento Picnic, this translates to colorful salads like the edamame garden bento full of guacamame (we bet you can guess what that is), greens, seasonal pickles, and Japanese pumpkin or the tofu rice bento with shredded carrot, organic kale, crispy shallots, quinoa sticky rice, and sesame tamari dressing.”

— *Brandon Watson, Culture Map*

“Leanne creates edible tableaus that leave guests nourished and light. Stop in for breakfast and enjoy a smoothie bowl with a base of sweet potato puree whose mauve hue is complemented by the toasty brown of Leanne's homemade granola and is speckled with freeze-dried raspberries, shredded coconut, and rimmed with sliced banana.”

— *Jessica Devenyns, Eastside Magazine*

Praise for Leanne Valenti

“I’ve seen first-hand how Leanne leads with compassion and love. Whether she’s hosting community events at her shop, hosting training sessions for her team, or supporting Les Dames d’Escoffier’s fundraising efforts, she always operates from a joyful place that acts as a magnet to bring people together. I love spending time in the oasis that she’s carved out in our East Austin community, and I always feel nourished after each visit.”

— *Stacy Franklin, Chief Operating Officer of Franklin BBQ*

“In the course of my career I have worked with thousands of aspiring culinary professionals, and I recognize something unique and outstanding about the energy and attention that Leanne brings to her culinary pursuits. Her curiosity and creative energy is so palpable that it draws others into the kitchen and encourages discovery and discourse.”

— *Ken Rubin, Chief Culinary Officer at Rouxbe Online Culinary School*

“I’ve known Leanne since 2011, and have had the pleasure to see her develop as a chef, restaurateur, and an exemplary practitioner of Washoku over the past decade. She navigates the kitchen with poise and purpose, displaying reverence for the food she prepares and respect for those with whom she shares workspace. She also has an exceptional ability to take care of others and build community -- through her well-chosen words and nourishing food.”

— *Elizabeth Andoh, Taste of Culture and IACP-Award Winning Author of Washoku*

COMPARABLE TITLES

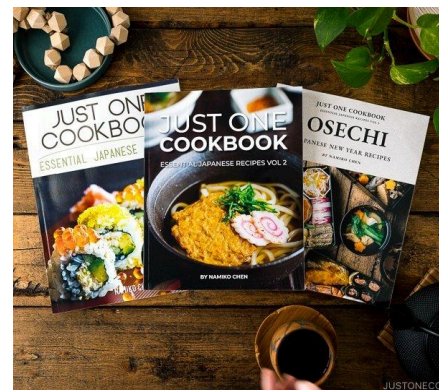
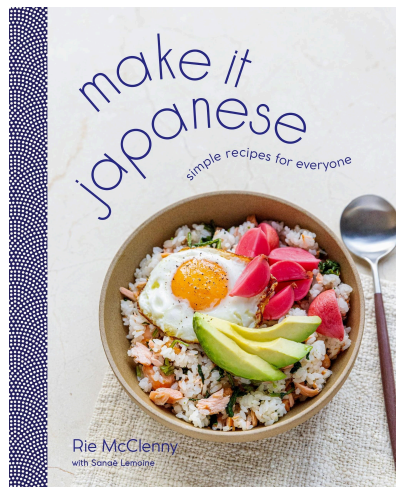
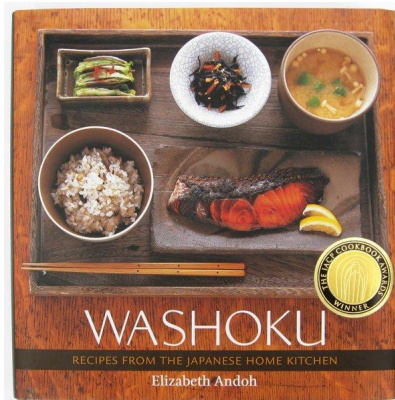
Bento Picnic will engage readers who are drawn to genres including: Washoku cookbooks, bento cookbooks, holistic Asian cookbooks, menu-based cookbooks, “nerdy creative” cookbooks, and design-forward coffee table books.

For as many niches as *Bento Picnic* fits into, it is a rare piece of work in that it exists at the nexus of so many intersections with a unique vantage point that has not previously been expressed. Even without any prior knowledge of *Bento Picnic*’s restaurant, this eponymous cookbook will spark joy, inspire culinary greatness, and potentially initiate a paradigm shift for all readers who are drawn to thumb through its colorful pages of intriguing design practices and delicious recipes.

In addition to all the ways that *Bento Picnic* will stand out from all these comp titles detailed below, it will also be the first cookbook published in English to include sake pairings.

Homestyle Washoku Cookbooks

For anyone looking to dive into the world of Japanese cuisine, ingredients and cooking techniques, authors like **Elizabeth Andoh** (the IACP-Award winning author of *Washoku*), **Namiko Chen** (prolific blogger and author of *Just One Cookbook*), and **Rie McClenny** (Star of BuzzFeed’s Tasty and author the newly-minted *Make it Japanese*) have done masterful work documenting traditional Washoku recipes following a familial, anthropological approach, and sharing classic homestyle recipes from their ancestors.

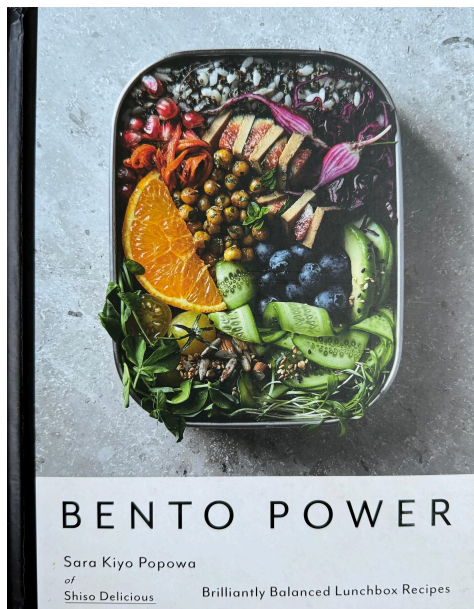


- [*Washoku: Recipes from the Japanese Home Kitchen*](#)
by Elizabeth Andoh (Penguin Random House 2005)
- [*Make It Japanese: Simple Recipes for Everyone*](#)
by Rie McClenny (Clarkson Potter 2023)
- [*Just One Cookbook Series*](#)
by Namiko Chen (Independently Published 2013 & 2021)

Bento Picnic will also fit into the category of Homestyle Washoku Cookbooks, but it will take a differentiated approach from these traditional titles. *Bento Picnic* will focus on Washoku's often unspoken rule of using 5 colors, 5 tastes, and 5 elements in every meal — so that readers can learn to apply Washoku broadly and use it no matter where they live, what ingredients they have access to, what their heritage is, or what their dietary preferences are. *Bento Picnic*'s coverage of Washoku does not aim to encompass all of Japanese culinary tradition, but rather Valenti's personalized account of the craft.

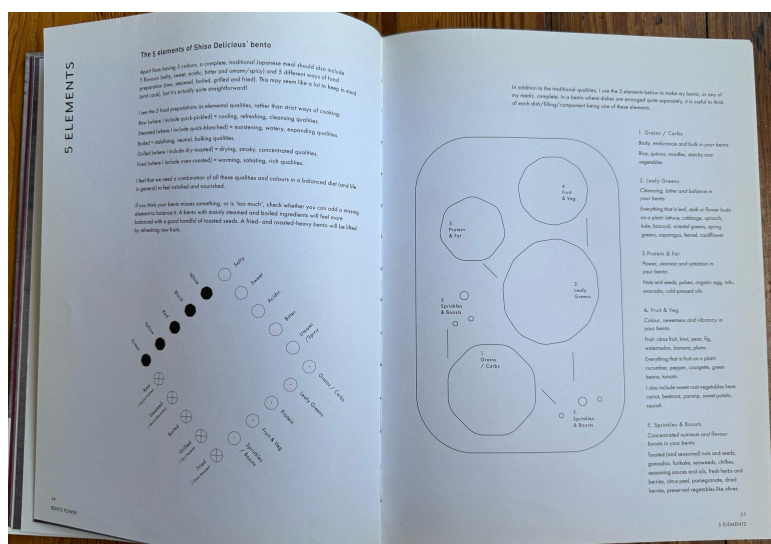
Bento Cookbooks

Most bento cookbooks are geared towards busy moms cooking for kids, but there are two recent bento cookbooks publications that are geared towards adult audiences, like *Bento Picnic* will be: *Power Bento* by **Sara Kiyo Popowa** and *Bentos & Bowls* by **Tim Anderson**. However, *Bento Picnic* will stand out from both of them in key ways — explained below.

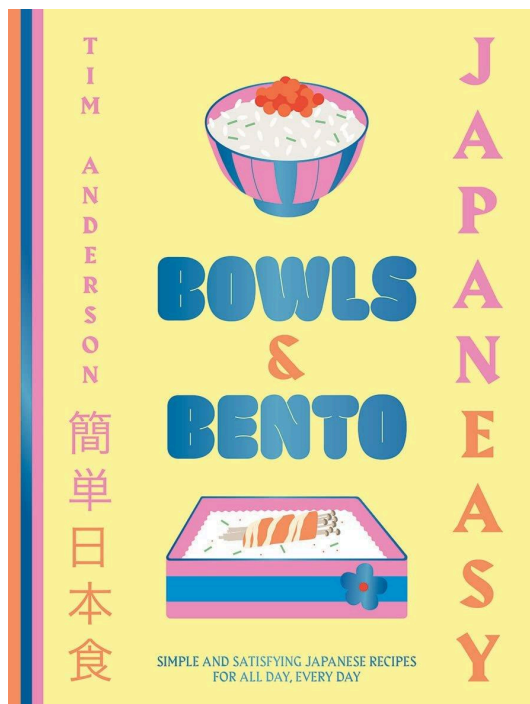


[*Bento Power: Brilliantly Balanced Lunchbox Recipes*](#)
by Sara Kiyo Popowa (Kyle Books 2019)

Akin to *Bento Picnic*, the recipes in *Bento Power* draw inspiration from Washoku to teach readers how to make healthy & creative meals using all five colors, five elements, and five tastes. However, *Bento Picnic* is not exclusively plant-based nor does it reflect the same aspirational recipe orientation. Rather than focusing on vegan packed lunches, *Bento Picnic* is designed to empower home cooks with complete menus and plating suggestions so that they can successfully integrate Washoku principles into their omnivorous lives and social gatherings. Therefore, *Bento Picnic* will have wider appeal and be more accessible to a broader audience.



Here is an excerpt from *Bento Power* by Sara Kiyo Popowa on the principles of Washoku. By contrast, *Bento Picnic* will contain more visually gripping infographics that spark more curiosity and intrigue for this concept that is not well understood by English-speaking audiences.



JapanEasy Bowls & Bento: Simple and Satisfying Japanese Recipes for All Day, Every Day
by Tim Anderson (Hardie Grant 2022)

The main reason readers would seek out Anderson's cookbook is for novelty's sake. It gives excellent guidance for readers who want to expand their current repertoire to learn how to make Japanese bento specialties. That being said, many of the recipes in *JapanEasy Bowls & Bento* can be found at Japanese restaurants, so potential readers may opt to go out to eat instead of buying the cookbook. Comparatively, *Bento Picnic* features more unique homestyle recipes that people cannot find in restaurants.

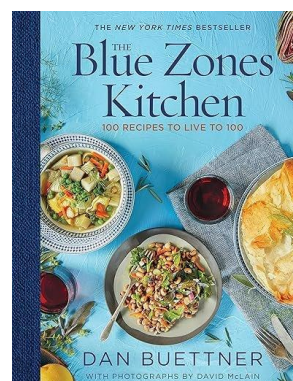
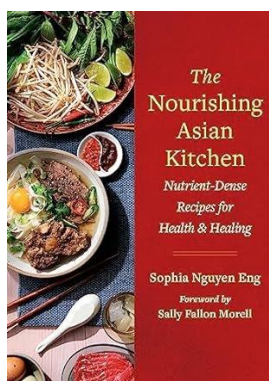
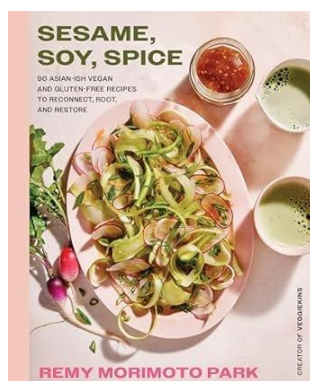
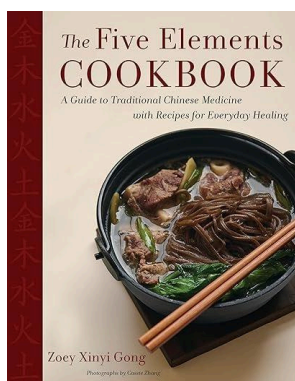
Also *JapanEasy Bowls & Bento* offers recipes that can be used interchangeably in a range of bentos. We feel this modular approach makes for a clunky user experience

because readers have to flip between multiple sections of the book to create a single bento. In contrast, *Bento Picnic* is organized by menus that curate 3-5 specific recipes that compliment each other and correspond with 3 expertly-chosen sake pairings. By laying out a clear vision for each bento menu across the same centerfold, *Bento Picnic* will present readers with a more streamlined, stress-free cooking experience.

Holistic Asian Cookbooks

The aim of *Bento Picnic* extends beyond offering readers Eastern novelties to spice up their cooking routine. Our main objective is to empower readers to lead thriving lives, and we are on a mission to get *Bento Picnic* into the hands of people who are looking for guidance around natural pathways that they can take to reclaim their physical health and mental well-being.

We consider authors such as **Zoey Xinyi Gong** (Five Elements Cookbook), **Remy Morimoto Park** (Sesame, Soy, Spice), **Sophia Nguyen Eng** (The Nourishing Asian Kitchen), and **Dan Buettner** (Blue Zones Kitchen) as allies on the path toward modernizing and contemporizing ideas from Asia's heritage of wholesome, healthy living. As we collectively raise our voices and share our unique perspectives on this path, we hope to add to this rich conversation that is presently coming into mainstream awareness.

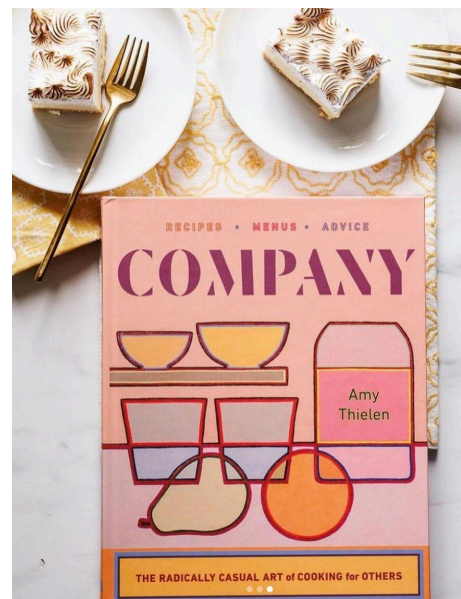


- [*The Five Elements Cookbook: A Guide to Traditional Chinese Medicine with Recipes for Everyday Healing*](#)
by Zoey Xinyi Gong (**Harvest 2023**)
- [*Sesame, Soy, Spice: 90 Asian-ish Vegan and Gluten-Free Recipes to Reconnect, Root, and Restore*](#)
by Remy Morimoto Park (**William Morrow Cookbooks 2024**)
- [*The Nourishing Asian Kitchen: Nutrient-Dense Recipes for Health & Healing*](#)
by Sophia Nguyen Eng (**Chelsea Green Publishing 2023**)
- [*The Blue Zones Kitchen: 100 Recipes to Live to 100*](#)
by Dan Buettner (**National Geographic 2019**)

Menu-Based Cookbooks

Tables & Spreads by **Shelly Westerhausen Worcel and Wyatt Worcel and Company**: *The Radically Casual Art of Cooking for Others* by **Amy Thielen** are particularly masterful examples of recipes grouped by menus intended for entertaining guests.

In a similar fashion to *Bento Picnic*, these books' graphics and prep tips empower readers with the resources they need to host effectively without causing them to reach a state of overwhelm. Though an increasingly popular way to format cookbooks, there is little to no representation of English-language Asian cookbooks in this category. This is a niche that *Bento Picnic* strives to fill.

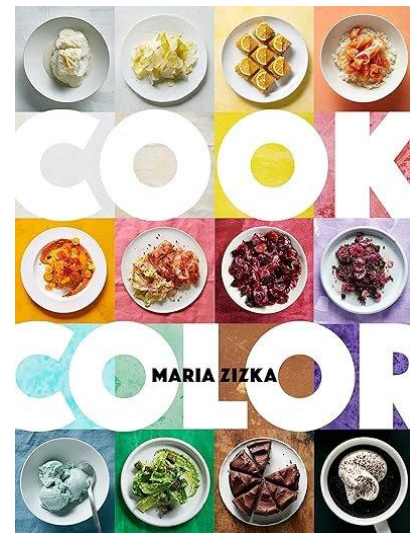
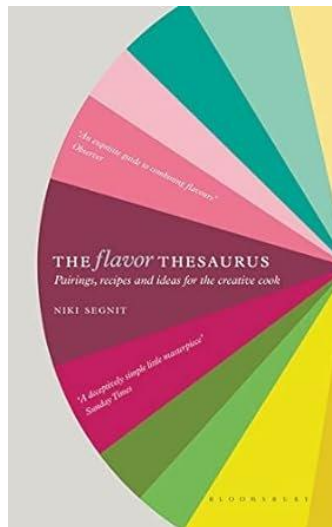
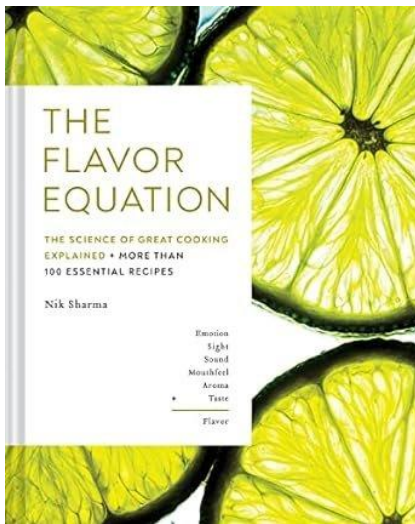


- [*Tables & Spreads: A Go-To Guide for Beautiful Snacks, Intimate Gatherings, and Inviting Feasts*](#) by Shelly Westerhausen Worcel (Chronicle Books 2021)
- [*Company: The Radically Casual Art of Cooking for Others*](#) by Amy Thielen (W. W. Norton & Company 2023)

“Nerdy Artistic” Cookbooks

The kitchen increasingly became a creative outlet during COVID, and America alone is currently home to 32 million food bloggers — with 75% of them stating that they are merely for personal satisfaction. Cooks and chefs like Angie of Kitchenistics and One of Everything’s Abhi, Kim, and Nick are turning to resources like *The Flavor Equation* by **Nik Sharma**, *The Flavor Thesaurus* by **Niki Segnit**, and *Cook Color* by **Maria Zizka** to nerd out and get fresh inspo to fuel their culinary pursuits.

Similarly *Bento Picnic* will appeal to DIY’ers and professional chefs who want to use the framework of Washoku to tap into their own senses and compose balanced meals in an intuitive way.

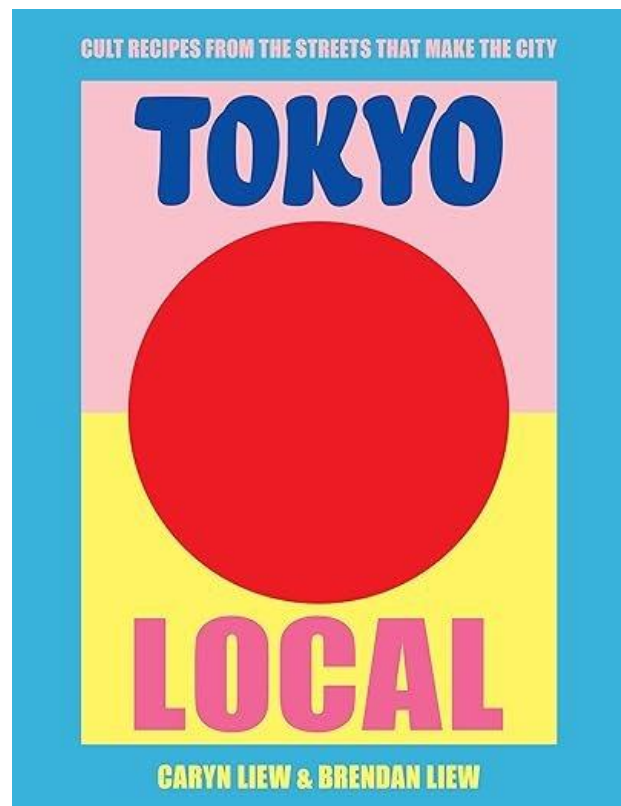
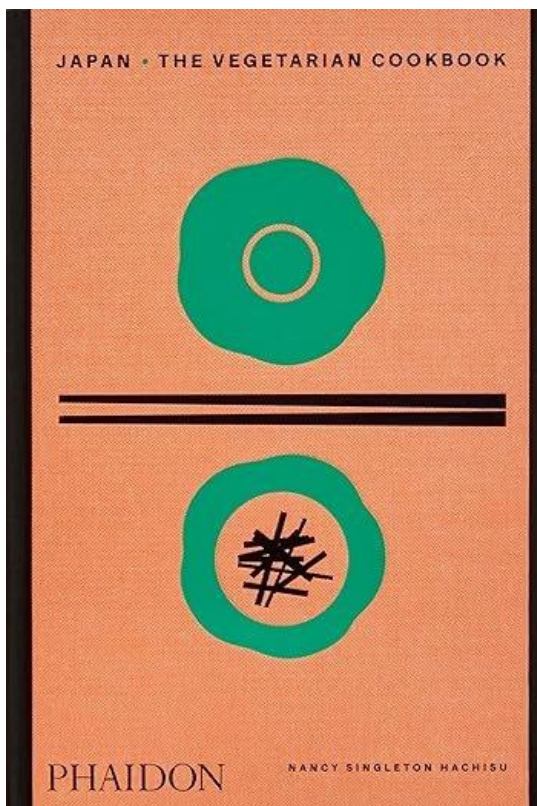


- [*The Flavor Equation: The Science of Great Cooking Explained + More Than 100 Essential Recipes*](#) by Nik Sharma (**Chronicle Books 2020**)
- [*The Flavor Thesaurus: Pairings, Recipes and Ideas for the Creative Cook*](#) by Niki Segnit (**Bloomsbury 2012**)
- [*Cook Color*](#) by Maria Zizka (**Artisan 2023**)

Design-Forward Coffee Table Cookbooks

Some of the best selling cookbooks on the market today are escaping the kitchen and making their way onto coffee tables thanks to beautiful and intentional storytelling and visual design. With eye-popping typography, full-color photos and intriguing illustrations, *Bento Picnic* will animate the concept of Washoku in an interactive manner that has not previously been done.

Similarly to *Japan: The Vegetarian Cookbook* by **Nancy Singleton Hachisu** and *Tokyo Local* by **Brendan and Caryn Liew**, those who love Japan and appreciate works of art will seek out *Bento Picnic* as a design specimen to add to their collection and to keep out on their coffee tables.

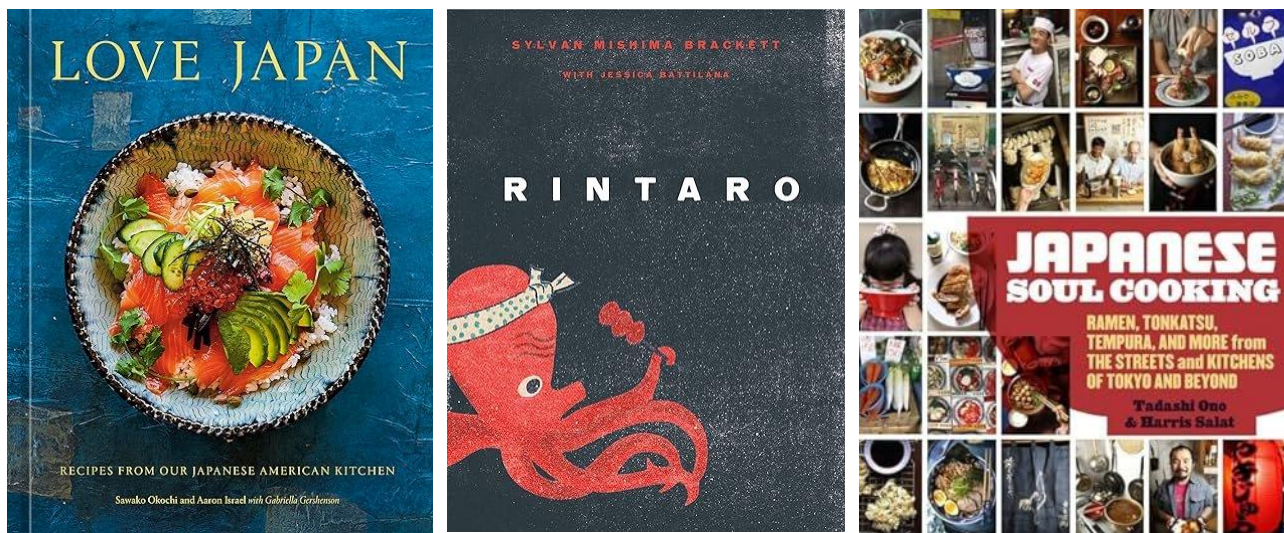


- [*Japan: The Vegetarian Cookbook*](#)
by Nancy Singleton Hachisu (**Phaidon Press 2023**)
- [*Tokyo Local*](#)
by Brendan and Caryn Liew (**Smith Street 2018**)

Japanese Restaurant Cookbooks

Titles like *Love Japan* by **Sawako Okochi and Aaron Israel**, *Rintaro* by **Sylvan Mishima Brackett and Jessica Battilana**, and *Japanese Soul Cooking* by **Tadashi Ono and Harris Salat** showcase the work of chefs and restaurateurs whose recipes are appealing to both restaurant clientele and readers who have never heard of their establishments. They build on bestselling recipes by offering a mix of achievable and aspirational dishes.

Featuring recipes from its beloved Austin restaurant which Forbes called “an experience unlike any other in town, offering deliciously nourishing and balanced meals, a culturally rich environment, and a drive to provide the community with healthy refreshing meals without sacrificing flavor,” *Bento Picnic* will appeal to former patrons and new audiences alike.



- [*Love Japan: Recipes from Our Japanese American Kitchen*](#)
by Sawako Okochi and Aaron Israel (**Ten Speed Press 2023**)
- [*Rintaro*](#)
by Sylvan Mishima Brackett and Jessica Battilana (**Hardie Grant 2023**)
- [*Japanese Soul Cooking: Ramen, Tonkatsu, Tempura, and More*](#)
by Tadashi Ono and Harris Salat (**Ten Speed Press 2013**)

BOOK TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

Sake Tasting Guide & Resources

The *Bento Picnic* Pantry & Equipment

Base Recipes

Chapter 1: Rice Bentos

Chapter 2: Noodle Bentos

Chapter 3: Grain-Free Bentos

Chapter 4: Sweets

Chapter 5: Teas & Mocktails

Resource Guide

Acknowledgements

Index

CHAPTER DESCRIPTIONS

INTRODUCTION

With thoughtful storytelling and detailed explanations, this section will introduce Leanne Valenti and her journey to becoming steeped in Washoku including her first homestay in Japan and her orientation as a curious American cooking Japanese food. We will set the context for how *Bento Picnic* is different from other bento cookbooks. Then we will explain the foundational concepts of Washoku — the use of five colors, five tastes, five techniques in every meal — by illustrating the corresponding foods, nutrient profiles, and methods of cooking with text and visuals. This section is meant to grab and hold readers’ attention through a personal connection to Leanne, thoughtful references to relevant scientific studies, and stunning visuals demonstrating Washoku’s principles.

SAKE TASTING GUIDE & RESOURCES

In addition to offering practical advice on how to serve, drink, and store sake, this section will warm readers to the magnetic personality of our contributor, Monica Samuels, and draw them in with her seasoned approachability. This section is meant to attract readers to the lesser-known intricacies of contemporary sake production and empower them to experiment with their own sake pairings. We will also include an in-depth overview of each of the bottles featured in the book along with interesting tidbits about the sake brewers that can serve as conversation starters!

THE *BENTO PICNIC* PANTRY & EQUIPMENT

In this section, readers will learn about the essential items needed to prepare the recipes in *Bento Picnic*, along with informative excerpts about Leanne’s favorite ingredients and trusty gadgets. We will include topics like which rice varieties boast the most nutrient bioavailability and how using a kitchen scale simplifies clean-up.

BASE RECIPES

In honor of Leanne’s commitment to reducing waste, this section will detail the base recipes used repeatedly throughout her bento menus as well as the best storage methods to preserve the flavors and health benefits. In addition to Japanese classics like Homemade Dashi and Mentsuyu, we will also share *Bento Picnic* originals such as:

- **Firecracker Sauce:** *A gluten-free teriyaki glaze made with tamari, mirin, agave, whole mustard seeds and aleppo pepper*
- **Umami Oil:** *A simple blend of coconut aminos, olive oil, and sesame oil used as a soy-free flavor enhancer*

- **Everything Gomashio:** *A condiment that you'll want to put on everything featuring goma (sesame), shio (salt), crispy shallot, dried garlic and poppy seeds.*

CHAPTER 1: RICE BENTOS

The word "gohan" in Japanese means both "rice" and "meal." They have a shared connotation because rice has traditionally been such a vital aspect of Japanese meals. As such, Leanne will showcase 8 different ways to prepare rice to serve as the foundation for these bento meals.

- **ESSENTIAL WASHOKU**

Miso Baked Fish
Lion's Mane Takikomi Gohan
Gomashio
Koyadofu Ohitashi
Hijiki Pickles

- **FOR HIROTAKA**

Yuzukosho Corn Onigiri
Chawanmushi with Shiitake & Ham
Ume Miso Agebitashi with Green Beans and Eggplant

- **SHIGEYO'S SUMMERTIME SPECIAL**

Umami Burger Sliders
Shigeyo's Tomato Salad
Curry Yakionigri
Okra Ohitashi

- **WEEKNIGHT WASHOKU**

Shrimp & Yuba Stir Fry
Avocado Salad with Nori Wasabi Dressing
Soft Brown Rice
Kukicha Twig Tea

- **HAPPY HOUR BENTO**

Chicken Tsukune Skewers with Firecracker Sauce
Tamagoyaki with Ancho Dipping Sauce
Inarizushi with Everything Gomashio

- **AUTUMNAL BENTO FEAST**

Carrot & Parsnip Kinpira
Persimmon Shira-ae with Tamari Activated Sunflower Seeds
Crispy Skin Salmon with Wasabi Furikake
Grilled Kale
Koshihikari Rice with Seasoned Nori Crisps
Miso Soup with Mushrooms & Scallion

- **SNACK BENTO**

Whipped Tuna Dip
Sesame Gochuchang Dip
Miso Cream Cheese Dip
Homemade Rice Crackers
Rice Vinegar-Pickled Veggies

- **MOTTAINAI!**

Kitchen Sink Salad with Shiokoji Kombu Dressing
Okaka Furikake
Radish Top Furikake
Sriracha Salmon Flakes

CHAPTER 2: NOODLE BENTOS

With these 4 bento menus, Leanne will demonstrate the versatility of noodle dishes across the seasons using soba, udon, harusame, and ramen noodles.

- **SPRING STEAK SALAD**

Strip Steak Tataki
Grilled Asparagus with Yuzukosho
Glass Noodle Salad with Zippy Carrot Slaw
Crispy Shallots

- **SUMMER HIYASHI CHUKA**

Chilled Ramen Salad with Honeybaked Ham & Heirloom Tomatoes
Kinshi Tamago
Pickled Watermelon Rind
Hiyashi Chuka Sauce

- **FALL SOBA SALAD**

Soba Salad with Seasonal Greens, Scallion & Pickled Ginger
Homemade Mentsuyu
Golden Seared Tofu
Enoki Mushroom Confit

- **WINTER UDON STROGANOFF**

Braised Beef with Udon Noodles & Fresh Herbs
Yuzu Yogurt Sauce
Preserved Horseradish Beet

CHAPTER 3: GRAIN-FREE BENTOS

Although rice and noodles play a central part in Japanese cuisine, Leanne shares 5 menus in this chapter to show how you can still enjoy Washoku even if you've eliminated grains from your diet.

- **MR. FANCY PANTS**

Roasted Duck Breast with Ponzu
Arugula with Yuzu Honey Vinaigrette
Miso Roasted Butternut Squash
Pink Shiokoji Pickled Daikon

- **MACRO SALAD**

Simmered Soybeans
Sesame Tamari Sauce
Sautéed Shiitake Mushrooms
Steamed Kabocha Pumpkin
Takuan Daikon

- **POWER BENTO**

Braised Tofu with Firecracker Sauce
Kale with Pepita Gomashio & Umami Oil
Toasted Quinoa
Kabocha Potato Salad
Pickled Red Onion

- **HOUSE BENTO**

- Kale & Avocado Salad with Everything Gomashio
 - Bento Picnic's Perfect Carrots
 - Juicy Seared Chicken Breast
 - Creamy Shiitake Soup

- **SOBORO BENTO**

- Lettuce Wraps with Ground Chicken or Tempeh
 - Pickled Lotus Root
 - Roasted Japanese Sweet Potato
 - Edamame with Shichimi

CHAPTER 4: SWEETS

In addition to designing the bento boxes for Bento Picnic, I also created a scratch pastry program. Because our kitchen was otherwise safe for celiacs, I kept within the same gluten-free constraints when developing these recipes.

- Mochi Butter Buns with Okinawan Sweet Potato Swirl
- Matcha Flan with Nut Crumble
- Black Sesame & Matcha Cake Cookies
- Miso Chocolate Chip Cookies
- Japanese Sweet Potato Brownies

CHAPTER 5: TEA & MOCKTAILS

One of the hallmarks of Japanese hospitality is never to let your guests' glass go dry. Here are some of my favorite non-alcoholic sippers to serve when I have company over.

- Yuzu Amazake on the Rocks
- Iced Fruit Hojicha
- Kukicha Cold Brew with Rose Petals

RESOURCE GUIDE

This section will contain references for further reading as well as recommendations for where to source the wares featured in the photos, ie. place settings, bento boxes, chopsticks, sake glasses, etc.

SAMPLE MATERIAL



Introduction

I hesitate to tell you this story because I cannot recreate this dish. I have no recipe to offer you. I can hardly remember the ingredients. I share it because I want you to understand why I love Washoku, the subtle yet significant power inherent in Japanese culinary traditions, and what it feels like to lead with your senses and allow yourself to enter one of those rare and beautiful states where creativity flows effortlessly.

I was a few months into my first homestay in Japan. I'd spent many mornings helping Shigeyo, my best friend Naoko's mother, prepare the family meals. Many times I'd work alongside her, chopping vegetables and stirring broth. On this particular day, both of Naoko's parents were busy at the family bakery in Izu, so I was left to prepare lunch for the family on my own. With a full garden and stocked fridge, I had my choice of high-quality ingredients.

I don't read in Japanese and in 2011 translation technology wasn't widely available. That left me with only my gut as a guide. I pulled a stiff, silvery fish out of the freezer and began simmering a broth. I wish I could tell you more; How I sliced the freshly-pulled root vegetables or what kind of springy herbs I sprinkled on top. But over a decade later, I just don't remember.

What I will never forget is Shigeyo's reaction. Shock. Surprise. Disbelief? "Did you put Shio Saba in soup?" she asked as she sat down to eat. I stumbled in response, "I don't know. Did I?" She gently informed me this was simply not done. "Omoshiroi," Naoko's Dad, Hirotaka, chimed in. Omoshiroi translates to "interesting or funny" in Japanese. But forever the consummate hosts, they gave the briny soup a try.

A few silent moments passed. My host parents shared a look, and to my relief, their eyes lit up. "Very goooooood," they said. Within a few days, Shigeyo and Hirotaka had told all of their neighborhood

friends about my “invention.” Strangers were stopping me on the street asking when I was going to open my Shio Saba soup shop, because of course, it would make me famous.

This moment encapsulates the early days of feeling my way through Japanese cuisine. Only 26 at the time, I was still a novice in Japanese cuisine, unaware of how much I had left to learn. Without the restraints of cultural expectations, I was able to work creatively within the ever-forgiving framework of Washoku — the Japanese practice of using five colors, five tastes, and five techniques to prepare a meal.

I never made this soup again - not because it wasn't delicious - but because my curiosities led me to experiment with something new everyday for the duration of my homestay. And once I returned to the States, without ready access to Shio Saba and other foods unique to Japan, I began to iterate on Washoku with ingredients that were locally available in Texas.

What began as a fun creative challenge to cook with all the colors, tastes and elements grew into a fascination as I realized what a reliable formula it was for making meals that were equally delicious and healthy. As I continued to practice Washoku at home, I found myself experiencing enhanced moods, freedom from cravings, greater clarity, and a profound sense of gratitude.

The more I followed my senses, the more intuitive I became in the kitchen, and the more my confidence grew as a chef. Eventually an undeniable desire to share the fruits of my labor inspired me to open my own bento shop - Bento Picnic - which I ran as a sole proprietor in Austin, Texas from 2015 - 2023.

I remember the moment when the two animating concepts of my restaurant came together. I was boarding the Shinkansen leaving Tokyo for Izu when I picked up a grab-n-go meal at the train station. The carefully-prepared bento box was a beautiful collage of vegetables, seafood, and rice. As I ate, my breathing instinctively slowed and I chewed attentively, savoring each bite.

The humble bento box, with its alluring pockets and complementary fillings, is a natural way to showcase the beauty and diversity of Washoku. Able to be prepped in advance and kept at room temperature, bento boxes are also a practical way to create meals that can be eaten anywhere. At my restaurant, I took on the creative challenge of working within Washoku's constraints to produce bento boxes using a mixture of Japanese staples and Texas produce.

It is my honor to share with you some of my favorite menus from the past decade of using Washoku to develop recipes for Bento Picnic. Our customers have shared that they are “perfectly arranged” “umami delights” that keep you “feeling good” after each meal, and I hope that you agree!

-Leanne Valenti, Chef Owner of Bento Picnic

What Problem Does Washoku Solve?

Growing up in America in the 1990's during the rise of dieting culture, I commonly encountered conflicting messages about food and health. Unlike countries with a well-defined food culture, America's ubiquitous grocery stores offer a vast array of culinary options from around the globe, with the majority of them being processed food products, rather than whole food ingredients.

The abundance of unhealthy convenience foods flooding modern society has been linked with the development of lifestyle diseases — as well as psychological burdens like guilt, stress, and dissatisfaction with body image — which has given birth to a dieting industry that is worth billions of dollars.

Many Americans oscillate between periods of indulgence and deprivation, symbolized by weekends of excess and weekdays of dieting. As this cycle of dietary extremes perpetuates, we experience the oxymoronic existence of being overfed yet undernourished.

As I was coming of age and starting to cook for myself, I was lucky to meet Naoko and discover Washoku, a middle path to the dietary extremes I had grown up knowing.

Naoko and I met while volunteering on a vegetable farm in Austin, Texas and she quickly became one of my best friends. In exchange for helping harvest vegetables on Sundays, we would earn two bushels of local veggies and then immediately return to Naoko's apartment to prepare meals for the week.

Gradually by following Naoko's lead week by week, I got into the rhythm of Washoku. As I put traditional Japanese foodways into practice in my own life, I found more joy and creativity in the process of cooking, plus my moods balanced and my cravings diminished. These unexpected results that initially piqued my curiosity would lead me to enroll in a Macrobiotic chef's program, spend months at a time in Japan, and start my own bento shop over the course of the next 15 years.

I would come to learn that Japanese cuisine is unique in that it was designed around an incredible bounty of ingredients. Because of its geography, Japan has more varieties of fish, cultivated veggies, and wild edibles than anywhere else in the world.

Perhaps it is because of the plethora of culinary options in Japan that they became masters of "the edit." At the core of Washoku is an incredibly clever design principle: Use 5 colors, 5 tastes, and 5 elements per meal. This seemingly simple rule of thumb leads to an infinite array of culinary compositions that are satisfyingly delicious and deeply nourishing.

By following this principle of Washoku, I've discovered the foundation for my personal culinary philosophy, which is not subject to the ebb and flow of fad diets, but rooted in humanity's ancestral

awareness of how to honor life's delicate balance — the environment all around us, and the ecosystem within us — while creating delicious meals with the constraints of a craftsman.

What is Bento?

BENTO (弁当) IS JAPANESE FOR “LUNCH BOX.”

For most people the word bento conjures up the idea of a cute lunch box that you can bring along with you to work or send with your kids to school. One of the defining attributes of bento cuisine is that it can be prepared in advance — featuring curated recipes that often taste better or just as good chilled or at room temperature.

With this collection of *Bento Picnic* menus, my premise is to demonstrate how the virtue of make-ahead bento cuisine can be applied to make beautifully-plated meals anytime of day without last-minute fuss. It's my hope that by following the menus in this book, you'll feel free to be present with your company, and enjoy mealtime in a relaxed way - having done all the work up front.

“But aren't bentos a lot of work?” — This is a question that people often ask me. Yes, there is earnest effort involved in making bento boxes. But engaging in a task that results in something tangible and delicious can be a gift in and of itself. In fact modern science has shown it to be critical to our mental health.

Kelly Lambert, a Ph.D. in behavioral neuroscience, has spent over a decade researching the brain's effort-based rewards circuit. Dr. Lambert's research sheds light on the importance of exerting physical effort for mental well-being. In her studies, she has found that if we don't regularly engage in the types of “activities that our ancestors needed for survival — like nurturing, cleaning, cooking, and farming — we make ourselves more vulnerable to depression and other emotional disorders.”

As Dr. Lambert published in *Scientific American* in 2008, our brains are “programmed to derive a deep sense of satisfaction and pleasure when our physical effort produces something tangible, visible and meaningful.”

On the flipside, prolonged inactivity in the accumbens-striatal-cortical network — the crucial system that connects movement, emotion and thinking — that Dr. Lambert calls the effort-driven-rewards circuit can lead to symptoms that are all too commonplace in modern societies, such as: loss of pleasure, feelings of worthlessness, slowed motor abilities and difficulty concentrating.

Today, with the convenience of technology, we often opt for sedentary activities over physically demanding tasks. Especially if our life's work is computer-based, we often opt to stay wed to our keyboards instead of participating in any domestic duties. When we need food, we have an app for that. We forgo engaging in the complexity of movement and thought processes of cooking and thereby allowing the parts of our brain responsible for our sense of psychological well-being to go dormant.

The key to activating the effort-based rewards circuit is that there needs to be a tangible, visible result that the worker can enjoy — Which explains the sense of joy I derive from putting forth the effort to design and create healthy bento meals for myself and others.

This is where the ‘picnic’ part of *Bento Picnic*’s proposition comes in. For as much work as ‘bentos’ are thought to be, the word ‘picnic’ brings to mind at least an equal if not greater association with sheer pastoral pleasure and delight. In other words, enjoying the picnic is what makes all the effort of bento worth it.

Picnic is the yin to Bento’s yang, and *Bento Picnic* invites you to:

1. Do your best to prepare. (It doesn’t have to be perfect.)
2. Then simply enjoy.



ANOTHER ASPECT OF BENTO CUISINE THAT I FIND LIBERATING IS ITS CONSTRAINTS.

By focusing on making bento boxes using Japanese menu design early in my career, it gave me a strong focal point within which I began to explore the near-infinite combination of colors, tastes and elements that I could fit within the perimeter of each dish.

In retrospect, taking on the constraints of bento and Washoku as a creative challenge was a helpful way to channel my energy, quiet the noise and distractions of my excessive society, and grow in my confidence as a chef.

As any painter knows, a blank canvas can be intimidating — even paralyzing at times. I’ve found the same is true with menu design. It can be helpful to have some kind of prompt or structure to draw forth the best ideas.

Rick Rubin speaks to this in his book, *The Creative Act*. Based on his experience in the music industry, Rubin reflects on how “the energy of wonder and discovery can get lost when treading the same ground over and over again.”

Rubin goes on to suggest that imposing rules can help structure our awareness for how to define a given project. He emphasizes that by using self-imposed rules to cull the unnecessary excess, we can set our work “apart from past efforts with potential for groundbreaking results.”

Using Washoku as a framework for crafting bento menus has offered me the perfect balance of structure and freedom to exercise my creativity, explore culinary possibilities, and design unparalleled dining experiences. Plus this traditional Japanese approach empowers me to come up with unique menus on the fly while shopping the farmers market -- which is one of my greatest joys.

My hope for you, dear reader, is that you too will experience the excitement of discovering novel ways to incorporate five colors, five tastes, and five elements into your own seasonal creations. If Washoku resonates with you the same way it has for me, it can even become a contemplative practice — inviting you to drop into your senses and enter states of enhanced awareness three times per day.

In the pages that follow, I will share with you 16 of my favorite menus to give you an array of examples for all the ways you can put Washoku to use, but first let's delve into the concept itself and the science behind it.

Washoku Explained

WASHOKU HAS TWO TRANSLATIONS: 'JAPANESE FOOD' AND 'HARMONY FOOD.'

'Wa' (和) can mean either 'Japan' or 'Harmony,' while 'Shoku' (食) means 'Food.'

Let's look first at the significance of Washoku as it refers to 'Japanese Food.'

In 2013 UNESCO designated Washoku (Japanese Food) as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

This designation celebrates all of Japanese cuisine from across the archipelago -- which has incredible agricultural and aquatic diversity due to unique geographical traits:

- Unparalleled access to seafood (Japan has 18,000 miles of coastline!)
- Varied altitudes and terrain (70% of Japan is mountainous)
- Rich range of climates and vegetation (Because the elongated shape of Japan reaches from the chilly north to the subtropical south)

Being an island nation, Japan has also been able to preserve more of its culinary heritage than many other parts of the world because it is not as susceptible to globalization.

For a deeper understanding of Washoku traditions, Elizabeth Andoh's extensive library of English-language books on Japanese cuisine provides invaluable insights. With a career spanning five decades, Elizabeth offers an anthropological exploration of Japan's culinary heritage, making her work an essential resource for anyone interested in delving deeper into Washoku, as it pertains to Japanese foodways.

Here is how Elizabeth illuminates the nature of Washoku in the introduction of her IACP-Award winning cookbook *Washoku: Recipes from the Japanese Home Kitchen*.

While the Washoku approach can be applied to any cuisine, specific Washoku recipes emerged from a rich Japanese food tradition. The stories and legends associated with these dishes are acquired quite naturally by anyone brought up in a Japanese

household. They are experienced, not taught, and are rarely taught across the culinary culinary divide.

However, far from a rigid set of rules that constrict the creative process, the underlying principles of Washoku provide a convenient framework for considering the many practical issues and aesthetic possibilities inherent in meal preparation.

If you enjoy lavishing time and creative energy on preparing food for yourself and others, the Washoku planning process will excite and energize you.

And when you feel pressed for time, a well stocked Washoku kitchen lets you throw together balanced meals — they do not have to be Japanese ones — in short order.

Even before I met Elizabeth in person, I learned so much about Japanese cuisine by pouring through the pages of her books. I feel lucky to have mentors like her — as well as my dear friend Naoko and her mother Shigeyo — who have bridged the cultural culinary divide and shared their knowledge of Washoku with me.

Now let's explore what is meant by Washoku when translated to 'Harmony Food.'

A key aspect of Japan's culinary identity is designing menus for harmonious eating experiences with reverence for nature -- no matter the region, season or climate.

Distilled to its essence, Washoku (Harmony Food) is a creative framework for making balanced menus with whatever happens to be in season wherever you are by using 5 colors, 5 tastes and 5 elements in every meal.

Lucky for us, we don't need to be living within the Japanese archipelago to utilize this tenant of Washoku to create mealtime magic. In fact, I developed the recipes in this book by adhering to Washoku while using ingredients that I have locally available to me in Texas. This adaptation highlights the universality of Washoku principles in creating balanced and delicious meals.

My coverage of Washoku in this cookbook is not intended to represent all of Japanese cuisine, but rather to show how I've used Washoku as an organizing principle to create menus that are harmoniously balanced, healthy, and delicious — even though I live outside of Japan.

Drawing from a decade of using Washoku to design menus for my restaurant, *Bento Picnic* aims to shine light on how Japanese menu design is the gold standard in its ability to produce harmonious meals that are visually stunning, deeply nourishing, and reliably delicious.

Just like an artist who understands color theory is better equipped to create aesthetically striking and emotionally resonant pieces, anyone who practices Washoku -- the Japanese philosophy of designing menus with 5 colors, 5 tastes and 5 elements -- has a leg up when it comes to making mealtime magic.

Following Washoku generates a synergistic effect that extends beyond the pleasures of beauty and deliciousness. The health benefits of the colors, tastes, and elements are continually being proven by modern science as helpful indicators for how to nourish our bodies.

In the following sections, we'll explore how the colors, tastes, and elements of the foods we consume are not incidental details. They can actually serve as a roadmap to vibrant health based on the latest scientific research.

5 Colors

We eat with our eyes first, and bright pops of color add excitement to the dining experience, but aesthetics aren't the only reason to add color to our plate. Eating a meal with the full spectrum of colors means we get an array of healthy nutrients because each color represents a unique nutritional profile.

The colors (and tastes) of our foods are created by volatile compounds made up of nutrient blocks such as amino acids, fatty acids, flavones and carotenoids. In other words, vibrant colors (and rich flavors) are tell-tale signs of nutrient density. We'll get into the tastes in the next section, but let's dive into the colors first!

THE 5 COLORS

Each color corresponds to a unique nutritional profile.

So when you include the five major colors in each meal, you will maximize your intake of vital nutrients and antioxidants.

YELLOWS

Yellow foods are high in potassium, vitamin C, vitamin A, iron, and B vitamins

WHITE OR LIGHT HUES

White foods are rich in potassium, fiber, beta-glucans, lignans, and EGCG

BLACK OR DARK HUES

Black foods are high in protein, anthocyanins, calcium, thiamin, and riboflavin

GREENS

Green foods contain high levels of vitamin A, vitamin K, vitamin C, and folate

REDS

Red foods contain high levels of minerals, polyphenols, and antioxidants

IMPORTANT NOTE:

As you strive to eat the rainbow, be mindful **ONLY** to consume *NATURALLY OCCURRING* colors. Artificial dyes don't come along with any vitamins and nutrients, and they can end up doing more harm than good.

The National Academy of Sports Medicine (NASM) emphasizes the importance of consuming a diverse range of foods from all major food groups to maximize micronutrient intake and prevent deficiencies. It asserts that meeting daily recommended amounts of the 30+ micronutrients is equally essential as hitting your daily macros.

However, even though NASM publishes a plethora of healthy eating guidelines, the data clearly and repeatedly shows that most Americans are not getting enough variety in their diets, and are thus falling short of vital micronutrients which can lead to chronic disease and other health issues.

When you eat an array of colors at every meal, you're likely to get more of the vitamins and minerals needed to build and protect your body *and* your mind.

In her recent publication, *Unprocessed: How the Food We Eat is Fueling Our Mental Health Crisis*, psychologist Kimberley Wilson explores the profound impact of nutrition on mental well-being. Wilson emphasizes the crucial role of diverse nutrients, including vitamins, minerals, and phytochemicals, in supporting healthy brain function and mood regulation. She highlights the alarming statistic that fewer than 4.5% of young people in the UK are reportedly obtaining the complete range of essential nutrients necessary for optimal mental health.

Wilson's research underscores the importance of consuming a varied and minimally processed diet rich in colorful fruits, vegetables, whole grains, nuts, and seafood to provide the brain with the essential nutrients it needs for growth, maintenance, and resilience against mental health issues. By incorporating a rainbow of colors into our diets, we can nourish both our bodies and minds, promoting overall well-being and vitality.

5 Tastes

When you stimulate all of your taste buds in one meal, it not only makes for a more exciting and

satisfying dining experience. Incorporating a balance of tastes in each meal signals to the brain that you've consumed sufficient nutrients, promoting satiety and reducing the desire to overeat.

The purpose of eating is not just to fill our stomachs. The real reason we eat is to provide essential nourishment to every single cell in the body. Seeing as the different tastes correspond with specific nutritive properties, the biological role of tastes is to signal to the brain whether we've consumed sufficient nutrients for our cellular health. We can only feel truly satiated once the full spectrum of tastes hit our tongue.

As Gastroenterologist Dr. Nina Nandy explains in a recent interview with Live Science, the taste buds and smell receptors collectively signal to the brain when enough food has been consumed, thereby regulating hunger. Incorporating a balance of tastes in each meal can promote satiety, even before reaching full stomach capacity.

THIS SCIENTIFIC FINDING ALIGNS WITH THE OLD JAPANESE ADAGE, “HARA HACHI BU,” WHICH TRANSLATES TO: “EAT UNTIL YOU’RE 80% FULL.”

Before I knew the power of Washoku, the idea of eating until I was only 80% full sounded like torture. However, now I understand that I can feel 100% satiated even if my belly is only 80% full, as long as my meals include a full spectrum of nutrient-dense flavors.

THE 5 TASTES

Eastern teachings go into elaborate detail on how each of the tastes affect the body and mind based on the quantity with which we consume them.

SWEET

In Moderation: Provides energy & vigor, prolongs life, clears complexion, strengthens skin, hair & voice

In Excess: Decays teeth, increases mucus, produces indigestion, lethargy & heaviness

PUNGENT (OR SPICY)

In Moderation: Increases circulation, sharpens sense organs, removes intestinal obstructions & helps elimination

In Excess: Causes body heat, dries the mouth & lips, causes burning sensation & thirst in throat, destroys virility

SALTY

In Moderation: Aids digestion by diffusing & liquefying food, cures stiffness, prevents

accumulation of toxins

In Excess: Provokes dryness & thirst, causes fainting & body heat, destroys virility, impairs sense organs, induces premature aging

SOUR

In Moderation: Increases appetite, produces saliva, helps digestion, lightens the mind

In Excess: Provokes thirst, creates acidity in blood, causes burning sensation in throat & chest

BITTER

In Moderation: Purifies blood, rids body of toxins, stimulates nervous system, aids digestion & the assimilation of fats

In Excess: Causes thirst & constipation, Induces nervousness, edginess & loss of strength

Reference: Johari, Harish. Ayurvedic Healing Cuisine (2000)

UMAMI

You may have also heard of a sixth taste called “umami”. Coined in Japan in 1907, umami refers to the savory essence that enhances the dining experience. It can be found in various foods, from vegetables to meats, and is created during the breakdown of protein strands through the process of fermentation or cooking. To make sure you have plenty of umami in your meals, turn to the ELEMENTS section to see how to incorporate a variety of preparation styles in your cooking.

Warning: There are a lot of artificial seasonings that food manufacturers put on their products to make them more craveable and increase their sales. Processed foods made with high levels of sugar, salt, saturated fat, and artificial flavorings can hijack our palette and cause us to feel insatiable which can lead to unconscious overeating.

But don’t worry! Your taste buds are resilient! You can reclaim them and restore balance to your system by mindfully consuming REAL foods along the 5 taste spectrum.

5 Elements

Utilizing all five elements involves employing a diverse range of cooking techniques, resulting not only in delicious umami flavors and appealing textures but also maximizing nutrient absorption. Each cooking method influences the digestibility and bioavailability of nutrients in our food, so using the full suite is a blueprint for culinary excellence and nutritional benefits.

For example, by balancing heavier cooking techniques from EARTH & METAL with lighter approaches from FIRE & TREE, you can craft healthier and more satisfying meals. Plus, adding in pickled components from WATER helps build a healthy gut biome and aids digestion!

THE 5 ELEMENTS

According to the Yin Yang Theory of Macrobiotics, each of the 5 elements corresponds with specific cooking methods based on the directional flow of energy.

EARTH

Enclosed Cooking Methods, with Moisture

ie. Steamed, Boiled, Braised, Pressure Cooked
[Downward Energy]

METAL

Enclosed Cooking Methods, Dry

ie. Dehydrated, Baked, Roasted, Smoked, Deep Fried
[Compressive Energy]

WATER

Pickled / Fermented

ie. Traditionally fermented condiments like vinegar or soy sauce
As well as foods preserved in salt brine or served in miso broth
[Floating Energy]

TREE

Raw

ie. Chopped, Juiced, Puréed
[Upward Energy]

FIRE

Open-Air Cooking Methods

ie. Blanched, Dry Toasted, Grilled, Sautéed
[Expansive Energy]

Just because the Nutrition Facts chart indicates certain nutrient values in our foods, doesn't guarantee that our bodies absorb them fully. The bioavailability of nutrients can vary depending on factors like food preparation methods, whether it's consumed raw, cooked, or combined with other foods.

BIOAVAILABILITY REFERS TO A NUTRIENT'S ABILITY TO BE ABSORBED AND UTILIZED BY THE BODY.

For example, take gomashio — the quintessential Japanese condiment made of sesame seeds and salt. The act of toasting and grinding the seeds to make gomashio transforms the structure of its amino acids, making the protein in the seeds more bioavailable and enhancing their umami flavor.

In other words, toasting sesame seeds until golden and aromatic, then grinding them with salt, partially breaks down the sesame seed proteins into easily digestible amino acids.

When amino acids are partially broken down during cooking, it gives your body a break from having to do so much digestive work and renders the nutrients in the ingredients more bioavailable.

Since consuming readily digestible foods is biologically advantageous, our taste buds provide positive reinforcement. Thus we experience foods — like gomashio — as delicious and savory, or as the Japanese call it umami.

Consider the strain on your digestion if you exclusively consumed deep-fried foods for a month.

Functional medicine practitioner Ayla Barmmer explains that fats, being the most slowly digested macronutrient, require abundant enzymes and digestive juices like bile and stomach acid for breakdown, and an excess of deep-fried food can overtax the digestive system, causing bloating, nausea, and discomfort.

On the other hand, consuming only raw foods may seem healthier, but it can limit overall nutrient intake. Jennifer Nelson, Director of Clinical Dietetics at the Mayo Clinic, highlights the importance of a balanced diet. A diet restricted to raw foods may lead to nutritional deficiencies, particularly in vitamins B12 and D, selenium, zinc, iron, and omega-3 fatty acids.

While raw foods are an essential part of a nutritious diet, cooking can actually enhance the bioavailability of nutrients in certain foods by breaking down fibers and cellular walls. For example, cooking tomatoes increases the bioavailability of lycopene, an antioxidant. Similarly, cooking carrots enhances the body's absorption of beta-carotene. Cooking also reduces chemicals in vegetables that inhibit mineral absorption. Cooking spinach, for instance, makes more iron and calcium available.

Most people who turn their nose up to the idea of eating a salad for dinner, are just thinking of sitting down to a plate of raw veggies. However, if you apply Washoku to compose a salad, you can make a delectable dinner!

Imagine a hearty salad that encompasses all five elements with farm-fresh greens (TREE), homemade vinaigrette (WATER), and toppings like cooked grains or beans (EARTH), roasted nuts or croutons (METAL), and grilled proteins or sautéed mushrooms (FIRE).

Here's another example of using all 5 elements to create a harmonious meal:

Grill or sauté a centerpiece (FIRE).

Cook a grain like rice or noodles (EARTH).

Add a pinch of fermented pickle or condiment for digestion (WATER).

Include raw veggies for a salad or herb garnish (TREE).

Roast additional veggies or finish with a dehydrated seasoning like furikake (METAL).

Eat Local

In addition to the 5 colors, 5 tastes & 5 elements, another core tenant of Washoku is eating local foods.

The absolute best practice is to consume a rainbow of flavorful foods that are grown within a walkable range from your home because Nature has an uncanny way of knowing exactly what nutrients we humans need, and making them available to us through the food sources that grow in the lands where we live.

Not only are local foods customized to our nutritive needs, they are also typically fresher and more nutritious overall since they spend less time in transit than their counterparts. With today's industrialized agriculture, many grocery store shelves are stocked with commodity crops that often lack flavor. Scientific testing shows that flavor deficiency correlates with a decrease in nutrient density. On the other hand, fresh ingredients cultivated in nutrient-rich soil consistently offer the most vibrant flavors and essential nutrients. Therefore, whenever feasible, seek out locally grown foods for unparalleled taste and nutrition.

Bonus: When you opt for locally sourced foods, you're not only enhancing your personal health but also supporting the health of the environment. By purchasing from local farmers and producers, you're reducing the carbon footprint associated with long-distance transportation, thereby mitigating environmental impact and contributing to sustainability efforts. Additionally, supporting local agriculture fosters community resilience and economic vitality, as it helps sustain small-scale farmers and businesses, preserving farmland and local food traditions for future generations.

So, by embracing locally sourced foods, you're not just nourishing yourself—you're nurturing a healthier, more sustainable food system for all!

These are all the benefits that locavores have long rallied around, but have you ever considered that when we honor the constraints imposed by Mother Nature by sourcing the majority of our food locally, we inherently become resourceful, adaptable and creative — like Nature herself!

Nature, the ultimate creator, exemplifies boundless resourcefulness and adaptability.

I, for one, am keenly aware that when I practice resourcefulness, adaptability, and creativity in my cooking, I feel divine! My senses awaken, my systems rejoice with nourishment and rejoin healthy natural rhythms, and I experience a magnificent upsurge in my gratitude for creation.

In fact, during the times in my life when I've been most in tune with Nature in my day-to-day, I've sensed an unparalleled connection to the world around me that recalls one of my favorite Mary Oliver poems:

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
and calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting —
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.

And I'm not alone. Nancy Singleton Hachisu, the James Beard Award-winning author of five Japanese books, opened her most recent book, *Japan: The Vegetarian Cookbook*, by sharing that she feels, "a sense of spirituality in touching the just-picked vegetables as they naturally come together in simple, flavorful dishes."

For those seeking a deeper sense of belonging, I encourage you to embrace your role as an agile creator in harmony with Nature and see what unfolds for you.

**For the most delicious, nourishing, and soulfully-satisfying meals,
choose the foods less traveled.**

Conclusion

Washoku is an age-old method at the heart of one of the most successful food cultures on the planet, so it's no surprise that there's so much science showing how beneficial it is for our health and well-being.

It's my intention to present Washoku here as a mindset shift — not an all or nothing practice. I encourage you to start with the colors, and as you feel comfortable, add in the tastes and elements. As you get into a rhythm with Washoku, you'll notice an increase in your creativity in the kitchen as well as your awareness of what you are eating.

If you tend towards perfectionism, please keep in mind that Washoku is meant to be a source of stress or an unachievable standard with which to measure each meal. It is a forgiving philosophy.

For example, if previously you were only eating two colors in the course of the day, and now you eat three colors at every meal, this is a meaningful step forward. If you were inhaling your food without paying attention to the flavors, and you start to notice the mix of tastes with each bite, this increased level of awareness is a win.

FINALLY, WASHOKU IS NOT SOMETHING TO EXPECT OR TAKE FOR GRANTED.

Having the time and resources to compose a meal with all five colors, five tastes, and five elements is truly a gift — and one to receive with immense gratitude. We won't always have every color of the rainbow in our refrigerator or unlimited time to make an elaborate meal, but we can receive so much of Washoku's benefits simply being present with what we do have. Taking time to express gratitude before eating works wonders at regulating the nervous system so that the digestive system can function optimally. So, take a moment to say thanks before digging in.

Sake Tasting Guide

As VP of Kome Collective — one of the largest importers of craft sake in the US — I have the joy of introducing some of the best sake coming out of Japan to restaurants and retailers around the nation. The popularity of sake in the US has grown exponentially in the twenty years that I've spent working with sake in restaurants, wholesale, and importing. From 2007 to 2022, the value of sake exports grew 579%, and it's still continuing at a steep ascent!

This spike in the international interest in sake has motivated brewers to innovate on their centuries-old art and experiment with new iterations and techniques, which has been an incredible thing to bear witness to. It is my honor to introduce you to the work of some of the world's most exciting sake breweries in the pages that follow; Like Yuho Brewery, which under the leadership of my dear friend Miho Fujita, has earned a reputation for producing creative, experimental sake with strong acidity that actually taste better and better as they age -- something previously unheard of in the sake industry.

Sake is composed of just a few simple ingredients.

RICE: The type of rice has a huge impact on flavor as well as mouth feel

YEAST: The qualities of the yeast used impact aroma and acidity

KOJI: The character of the koji determines umami and sweetness

WATER: The water impacts mouth feel as well as the overall fermentation process

The fact that sake is made of just these few natural ingredients makes it all the more astonishing that the sensory experiences of drinking different sake can vary so widely. How the brewer handles the interaction between each of these elements is where the art of brewing truly begins, and will determine whether their sake exudes a range of possible profiles: from honeysuckle and tropical fruits to foraged mushroom and baking spice!

As much as I love to nerd out about the differences between each sake, one of the reasons I love sake so much as a category is because of how well it goes along with food! It honestly pairs better with most foods than wine. In essence, because the amino acids in the rice break down during the brewing process, sake is like a liquid umami bomb with the uncanny ability to accentuate a wide range of foods.

In more ways than one, sake is the ideal beverage to drink alongside the healthy Washoku-inspired meals presented in this cookbook.

- Because it's made out of rice, sake has lower acidity than wine and no tannins, which gives it food-pairing superpowers, especially when it comes to complementing superfoods -- like all the vegetables of the rainbow.
- The presence of amino acids in sake helps to accentuate the flavors of food so it will be your ally as you begin to explore and savor new ingredients & recipes with enhanced perception.
- Since sake doesn't oxidize as quickly as wine, there's not the same pressure to finish a whole bottle of sake in one sitting. So you can feel free to open more bottles than one as an exercise in heightening your perception of which brews bring out different aspects of each menu.
- Also because sake has significantly less acid than wine and very low histamines, it tends to cause far less hangover symptoms than other alcoholic beverages.
- It's also naturally gluten-free and sulfite-free!

How to choose sake. Trust your palette. Your experience of a particular sake will depend greatly on your personal preferences. I highly encourage you to open multiple bottles of sake at once, give them each a taste, and decide for yourself which one you prefer with your meal. In this book, I offer multiple sake options for each menu so you can decide for yourself which elements of the food you want to accentuate. If you are drawn to the briny or tangy flavors in a meal, you may be drawn to a different sake than if you prefer the sweet and creamy elements. When trying out a pairing, be sure to taste the sake and food simultaneously.

Start with the recommendations I provide, and pour yourself a glass of each. Take a small sip, not a big gulp, hold it in your mouth, and swirl it around. Suck in a bit of air through your teeth to accentuate the flavors. You can also smell the sake and notice each flavor note. Do you pick up citrus? Olive? Sandalwood? Toffee? Lemongrass? Fresh cheese? Seaweed? If you trust your intuition and

your personal taste, you will be able to tell which sake you prefer. Don't be afraid to drink multiple bottles with the same meal.

How to drink sake. Ideally, you should never pour your own sake. Start with the guest of honor and use two hands to fill their cup. Once everyone's cup is full, raise a glass and say "Kanpai!" If you are drinking in your own home, no one will know if you skip these rituals. It does give you an opportunity, however, to experiment with which vessels highlight the elements of each sake.

Some sakes require a burgundy glass to allow the flavors and aromas to really shine. Go ahead and put your whole nose in the glass. You will be thrilled to discover an array of distinct scents in a single cup. Other sakes, often warmed, come to life in earthenware that makes you feel closer to its raw ingredients. I'll provide servings recommendations for each sake, but I encourage you to sample different vessels for yourself.

A bottle of sake can generally stay open for a month after opening, some much longer. Generally, the more air on the liquid, the more the flavors mature. Again, trust your gut. If a bottle of sake isn't good for drinking anymore, throw it in a stir fry sauce or marinate salmon. If it still smells good but is past its prime, pour a little into your bath or mix it with lotion. Used topically, sake can help improve the appearance and texture of your skin. I'm of the opinion that there's never a reason to throw out sake.

How to serve sake. The temperature of sakes can have a pleasant effect on the flavors and aromas in each cup. In general, lower acid sakes that have more pronounced fruit and floral aromas are best served chilled in a wine glass to optimize their flavor notes. And as with wine, the thinner the glass, the more luxurious the experience is of drinking.

Any sake that I recommend at room temperature is also a great candidate for slightly warming. Drinking out of unfinished ceramic is an earthier, more rustic drinking experience and should be paired with sakes that have similarly earthy and rustic characteristics; these sakes are generally also higher in umami and acidity. Unfinished ceramic is also great at retaining and conducting heat, so that the natural heat from your hands can continue to warm the sake or stabilize its temperature.

Don't forget to enjoy yourself. Artisan sake production is all about people. Brewers have fun with their craft and are dedicated to spreading the joy of creating sake more than anything else. That is why I want to encourage everyone to be experimental when pairing sake with food, to open more than one bottle at a time, and above all, enjoy each sip to the fullest.

Your intuition is your greatest friend. Part of the joy of sake is tailoring each experience — each cup — to the moment in front of you. You don't need a sommelier to dictate your experience. I encourage you to discover your preferences and curate a unique drinking experience for yourself.

-Monica Samuels, VP of Kome Collective

SAMPLE MENU #1



Quinoa Power Bowl with Braised Tofu

VEGAN, GRAIN-FREE, DAIRY-FREE

The recipes that make up this dish are in essence pretty simple. They are just a couple of ingredients each. But when you bring the mosaic of recipes together, you get a symphony that is greater than the sum of its parts. To me, that's what makes Washoku & bento cuisine so deeply satisfying.

Ingredients per Person

- 2/3 cup Toasted Quinoa (115g)
- 2/3 cup Kale with Pepita Gomashio (35g)
- 1/2 cup Kabocha Potato Salad (150g)

1 Tbsp Pickled Red Onion (12g)
4 oz Braised Tofu (100g)
1 oz Firecracker Sauce (30g)

Instructions

Prepare the sub recipes. Plate and serve!

Meal Planning Guide

- Make Pickled Red Onions the day before so that the flavors have time to marry. Or better yet, keep a jar on hand at all times!
- Toasted Quinoa, Kale with Pepita Gomashio and Kabocha Potato Salad can all be prepared in advance since they keep well in refrigeration!
- Braised Tofu can be served hot or room temperature, depending on your preference.

SUB RECIPES



Braised Tofu with Firecracker Sauce

[Follow link to preview this recipe.](#)

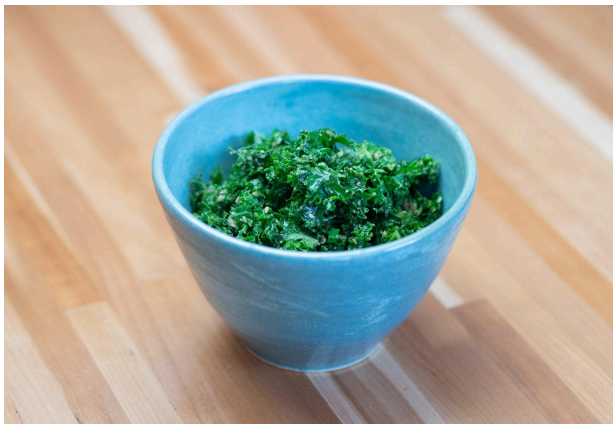
Password: bento-forever



Kabocha Potato Salad

[Follow link to preview this recipe.](#)

Password: bento-forever



Kale with Pepita Gomashio

[Follow link to preview this recipe.](#)

Password: bento-forever



Toasted Quinoa

[Follow link to preview this recipe.](#)

Password: bento-forever



Umami Oil

[Follow link to preview this recipe.](#)

Password: bento-forever



Pickled Red Onion

[Follow link to preview this recipe.](#)

Password: bento-forever

SAKE PAIRINGS



Chiyonosono “Shared Promise” Junmai

Serve room temperature in wine glass or pottery with an unglazed, rustic texture

The creamy texture and gentle sweetness of sweet potato are front and center with nuanced umami notes of white mushroom and floral hop aromas evocative of pilsner beers. Shared Promise pairs perfectly with the kabocha potato salad and highlights the sweet, tangy flavors coming from the firecracker sauce and pickled onions.

Fukucho “Forgotten Fortune” Junmai

Serve slightly chilled in a wine glass

This sake’s uniqueness comes from the heirloom strand of sake rice called “Hattanso” — which was extinct until single handedly revived by female sake brewing pioneer Miho Imada. Because of the delicate minerality of the revived rice and the ultra-soft water of the Akitsu region, this sake is surprisingly crisp and gentle at the same time! Its notes of dried pineapple, chalk, and white flowers play beautifully with the vinegar and mustard notes in this dish as well as the creamy texture of the kabocha and potato.

Kawatsuru “Olive” Junmai Ginjo

Serve chilled in a wine glass

The fruity, grassy notes on this sake are due to the yeast being isolated from Sanuki Olives, the first olive to be cultivated in Japan over 100 years ago on the island of Shikoku. Bright and green without a hint of bitterness, this sake is a great foil to the supple, vegetal qualities of the kale salad, pepita gomashio, and pickled onions.

SAMPLE MENU #2



Autumnal Bento Feast

GLUTEN-FREE, DAIRY-FREE

Delight dinner guests with an elevated arrangement of Japanese bento specialties using a variety of seasonal produce. Pulling together these six recipes requires earnest effort, but the majority of the work can be done in advance which will free you up to be present with your friends when they arrive!

Ingredients per Person

- 4 oz Crispy Skin Salmon
- 2/3 cup Japanese Rice
- 1/2 cup Grilled Kale
- 1/2 cup Carrot Parsnip Kinpira
- 1/2 cup Persimmon Shira-ae
- 1 cup Miso Soup with Mushrooms

Dietary Notes: This menu is naturally gluten-free and dairy-free. To offer a vegan option, simply replace the salmon with a fresh half of avocado. Fan the avocado after slicing and sprinkle with nori furikake for a stunning presentation.

Instructions

Prepare the sub recipes. Plate and serve!

Meal Planning Guide

- The dressing for the shira-ae salad is better once it's chilled so be sure to make it in advance.
- Be sure to marinate the salmon at least for one hour (or overnight).
- The grilled kale and carrot parsnip kinpira are warm salads that can be prepared up to a couple hours in advance and served at room temperature.
- You can make the rice a couple hours ahead of time and keep in the rice cooker on 'keep warm' or in a heavy-lidded donabe until ready to serve.
- You can prepare all of your mise en place for the miso soup ahead of time so that all you need to do when it's time to plate is ladle the warm broth into each bowl.

- You can slice the persimmons ahead of time but wait to toss them with the shira-ae dressing until it's time to plate.
- The salmon should be served soon after cooking, so it's best to make this menu with a friend, so that one of you can take the lead on plating while the other one sears the Crispy Skin Salmon. As long as all the other components are plated, the salmon can go right on top of the rice and dinner will be ready!

SUB RECIPES



Crispy Skin Salmon with Japanese Rice

[Follow link to preview this recipe.](#)



Grilled Kale with Carrot Parsnip Kinpira

[Follow link to preview this recipe.](#)



Persimmon Shira-ae with Sunflower Furikake

[Follow link to preview this recipe.](#)

SAKE PAIRINGS



Tentaka “Hawk in the Heavens” Tokubetsu Junmai

Serve room temperature in wine glass or unglazed ceramic

With classic umami aromas of braised shiitake mushrooms, walnut skins and bittersweet chocolate, this sake finishes with a surprisingly decadent pistachio gelato flavor and mouthfeel - which accentuates the tenderly-braised parsnip in the kinpira as well as the nutty, smooth quality of the shira-ae dressing.

Kanbara “Bride of the Fox” Junmai Ginjo

Serve slightly chilled in wine glass

I *love* how the notes of autumnal fruit and grilled nuts play off of the persimmon shira-ae. Bride of the Fox also has a distinctly maritime umami and lingering sweetness that goes beautifully with the charred salmon skin. Although this region of Japan is known for clean, crisp styles of sake this brew bucks the trend with its fleshy, vibrant fruit characteristics with steady umami woven throughout. Sake’s answer to Oregon Pinot Noir and French Red Burgundy.

Yuho “Rhythm of the Centuries” Kimoto Junmai

Serve room temperature in wine glass or unglazed ceramic

Aged 4 years, the mature notes of this sake present as honeyed and accentuate the characteristics of ripe Fuyu persimmon as well as the toasty edges coming from the charred salmon skin, crispy nori, caramelized root vegetables, and toasted sesame seeds. This sake is brewed by a proudly irreverent woman who entered the industry in an unexpected way; her sakes, accordingly, are brewed in defiance of tradition, imprecise and endlessly soulful.