

ASIAN PICKLES

Japan



KAREN SOLOMON

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Japan

Recipes for Japanese
Sweet, Sour, Salty,
Cured, and Fermented
Tsukemono

KAREN SOLOMON


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Introduction

Japanese pickles rock. Many of the flavors are quite familiar to those of us who regularly rally around sushi, ramen, and donburi—soy sauce, ginger, the sweet quality of mirin cooking wine—and these ingredients are regularly used in making many Japanese pickles. When I lived in Japan in the 1990s, I bought and gobbled pickles voraciously, and when a meal came to my table with that special little dish of colorful cut-up morsels, I was a happy woman.

So if you have grown bored of the classic bread and butters and dilly green beans, I am pleased to pull back the curtain on a plethora of new pickling possibilities. There are hundreds, if not thousands, of varieties of tsukemono (the Japanese word for pickled foods), many of which vary from region to region, or from home to home.

In no way is this a definitive guide—think of it more as a mix tape of a selection of my favorites: some my own kitchen creations, some classic, and all delicious and not overly labor-intensive. And unlike most tsukemono you'll see on the grocery store shelf, these are all completely devoid of preservatives, artificial colors and flavorings, and other gunky stuff.

These recipes cover a lot of terrain. The first group of recipes are entirely traditional; the second batch are my pickled twists inspired by Japanese flavors and ingredients. Many can be crafted from ingredients found in any large grocery store; just a few will require a trip to a Japanese market. Some take weeks or months before you can taste your finished pickles; others are chopstick-ready in minutes. So if you're unable to hop the next jetliner or tramp steamer to Japan, you have many routes to transport yourself to the land of Japanese pickles.

Some of the flavors that are going to hit your tongue here are familiar—like the sweet, sharp, cleansing taste of gari, or [pickled ginger](#). But a lot also hail from what may be uncharted territory: the earthen, musky, meaty flavor of [rice bran pickles](#), or the sweet and pleasantly swampy vegetables that emerge from an [amazake](#) cure. I hope that you dig the experience of exploring new and possibly challenging techniques and flavors as much as I do.

When and How to Serve Tsukemono

I'm of the philosophy that pickles pair best with my mouth almost anytime, usually while I'm standing in front of the open refrigerator. But if you must be a stickler, know that Japanese pickles are traditionally served on any number of occasions, including as part of breakfast or any light meal, with rice and soup; at the end of a meal, as they are believed to aid in digestion; or as happy hour snacks with sake, beer, or whiskey. Some dishes, like curries or fried pork, always have a pickled component served on the side of the plate (see [Red Pickled Ginger](#)). And I have heard of many people who jumpstart the day with a tart and puckery [umeboshi](#) (pickled plum)—take that, coffee! In short, even traditionalists pretty much come around to the same conclusion as I do: there is never a bad moment to become one with a pickle.

On a well-laid Japanese table, pickles are presented quite artfully, with a lot of thought given to offering a variety of flavors, textures, and colors (which would explain why so many store-bought Japanese pickles come off the shelf in Kool-Aid shades of purple, pink, and yellow). Different styles of pickles are often combined; for example, pickles flavored variously with soy sauce, vinegar, and rice bran or miso will share a plate. It is common to see three or more varieties of pickles chopped into tiny bite-sized pieces and arranged side by side in a single small dish. This, my friend, is the pickle as art.

Basics of Japanese Pickling

While some picklers geek out on *what* gets pickled (insert your “We can pickle that!” *Portlandia* riff here), I find I'm more interested in *how*—in working with new pickling techniques and beds (see [Pickling Beds](#), below). If you share my brand of geekitude, then nothing can compare with Japanese pickles. Just a few pickling principles rule the tsukemono school:

1. **Pickling Beds.** Like the organic farmer who says her main crop is the soil and vegetables are an added bonus, I profess the importance of the *pickling bed*—a medium that is reused repeatedly (even indefinitely) and that is the foundation of a number of Japanese pickles. Vegetables or other ingredients cure in the medium for minutes, hours, days, months, or years (!), depending on the style of pickle and the flavor you're going for. When the pickles are removed, the bed is kept for reuse. Crafting the bed and keeping it pickle-ready is a job unto itself. Bedbound pickles in this book include [rice bran pickles](#), [koji rice pickles](#), and [miso pickles](#).

2. **Pressure.** Another hallmark of tsukemono craft is the use of pressure. Ingredients to be pickled are salted, put in a container, and covered with a weighted drop lid that does not touch the edges of the container. The vegetables are slowly and gently compressed as they release their liquid and the lid lowers along with them, giving them a crunchy texture. (The resulting liquid is usually discarded, but some like to use it as a flavored, salty component in marinades.)

You can buy wooden drop lids (as well as pickling vessels) made especially for tsukemono, but this is not necessary. Any large bowl or bucket, or the insert of your slow cooker, or a clean large glass jar (even a fish bowl with a wide mouth) will work. The drop lid just needs to fit inside the container—you could try a plate, the lid to a food storage container, a saucer for a flowerpot (clean and wrapped in plastic wrap), or a pot lid. (Note that one can purchase a spring-loaded pickling press, but they tend to exude a lot of pressure—I have a flat batch of umeboshi to prove this point.) Weights placed atop a drop lid allow you, the pickle maker, a lot of control over the rate of the pickle’s compression. Again, special weights can be purchased, but why bother? Cans or bottles from your pantry, or even rocks, can be used: weigh them on a kitchen scale to find the object or combination of objects that will give you the weight designated in the recipe.

WHY YOU SHOULD RUN OUT RIGHT NOW AND BUY A KITCHEN SCALE

Don’t have a kitchen scale? Go buy one. These days, a good one that’s small enough to fit in a kitchen drawer is about \$30. You’ll find you will use it for much more than just weighing out vegetables and pressure weights for tsukemono: measuring ingredients for baking, making jam, estimating postage, and weighing your pet hamster. (Come on. You know you want to.)

3. **Squeezing.** This is another means of transformation for vegetables in Japanese pickling. The ingredients are first tossed with salt or some kind of salty medium (like soy sauce) to help draw out their water, left to rest for a bit, and then squeezed vigorously by hand. Squeezing is often used in conjunction with the pressure from a drop lid. In the recipes in this book that call for squeezing (“[Sitting Fee](#)” Cabbage Pickles or [Pickled Mustard Greens](#), for example), it is important to really make your vegetables rain. Do not gently massage. Do not be a wimp. SQUEEZE without mercy. Added bonus: salty water makes your hands really soft.

(Antibonus: it also irritates tiny cuts and hangnails. Ouch!)

4. **Marinade/Vinegar.** While the above techniques tend to be paramount to tsukemono and other Asian pickles, some also take on their flavor the way your grandma's did: via vinegar brine or some kind of marinade infused with other flavors. Some pickles require time to develop flavors in the bath, whereas others are ready to eat after a quick toss in a vibrant sauce.

A WORD ON CANNING

Don't do it. For the most part, tsukemono aren't acidic enough to withstand shelf storage via hot water bath canning, and pressure canning would destroy their crisp texture. The only recipe in this chapter that could possibly be canned (though it's really not necessary) is [Pickled Asian Pear \(Nashi\) with Lemon](#).

Key Ingredients

Arame (*Eisenia bicyclis*) Arame is a kind of kelp or sea vegetable used in Japanese cuisine; it has a mild flavor and an unchallenging texture. It's usually sold dried (it looks like little dark brown bits of dry grass) and is soaked before using to reconstitute it. Hijiki, a similar sea vegetable, can usually be substituted for arame (though its texture is a bit more toothsome).

Asian Pears (*Pyrus pyrifolia*) Asian pears (called *nashi* in Japan) grow throughout Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and China; they usually ripen in the fall and winter. Most often, the skin is tough and needs to be peeled off, but I have eaten varieties grown in California with skin tender enough for eating. This fruit is super juicy, crunchy, and sweet out of hand. It also makes a [fine pickle](#). (Never seen one? It's pictured [here](#).)

Koji Miso, mirin, sake, rice vinegar, soy sauce, shochu (a vodka-like distilled liquor), [amazake](#), and Chinese fermented black beans all have a lot in common. These workhorses of Asian cuisine all start with the same mold spores, *Aspergillus oryzae*, better known as koji. Koji is the name of both the mold (seed koji) and the ingredient (koji rice) used for cooking and pickling, which is rice coated with the active mold spores. Look for it in Asian markets, online, or in health food stores.

Kombu This thick-cut sea vegetable is frequently used in Japanese cooking, particularly to flavor bonito stock and soups. Some add it to pots of beans to help the beans become tender faster. Rarely is it in the center spotlight as it is in the recipe for [preserved seaweed](#). It is sold in dried sheets, and can be found in Japanese markets and health food stores.

Mirin A very common sauce and flavoring agent, mirin is a sweet fermented rice wine. Some varieties are designed for drinking, but the cooking variety of mirin, sold amid condiments and not with the booze, has very little alcohol—less than 1 percent. Cooking mirin is most often used in conjunction with soy sauce to add sweetness to dishes; it's also commonly used to season fish. Aji-mirin is mirin with a little added salt; it's okay to use them interchangeably in a recipe, but be sure to adjust your salt accordingly. If you're out of mirin, you can substitute sake (or even dry sherry) with sugar added at a ratio of roughly 3:1 by volume.

Miso Many Japanese dishes, including soups, stews, and marinades, use miso. It's a thick, fermented paste made from soybeans (and/or barley), koji rice, and salt. Depending on the variety of miso (red, yellow, or white), the paste is fermented for weeks, months, or years. It lends a tangy, salty flavor to food, making it a perfect medium for pickles. When shopping for miso, buy it from the refrigerated section. Look for organic, and also for a short ingredient list containing only what's mentioned above.

Rice Bran White rice is a staple food of Japanese cooking; to make it white, the outer husk of the rice grains—the bran—is removed during processing. This byproduct has a few culinary uses, but its most common application (in Japan, anyway, where it's called *nuka*) is pickling (see [Rice Bran Pickles](#)). Nuka is usually sold dried in airtight bags on the shelf. However, sometimes fresh rice bran can be found in the refrigerated section of Japanese markets or health food stores. When working with the fresh stuff, you will need less water than you will with the dried. Also, while fresh nuka often yields better flavor, I've found it spoils more easily.

Shiso I am bonkers for fresh shiso, so much so that the measly quantities I found at the store were no longer cutting it, and I had to start growing my own. Imagine a cross between basil, anise, thyme, and stone fruit all at once. Yeah, it's that good. The green variety of this pretty little culinary herb often shows up on sushi plates, but the red variety is equally delicious and is a frequent additive to umeboshi, to which it lends its telltale red color. Put it in salads, pickle it, cure it in salt, douse it in vinegar (see [Pickled Shiso Leaves and Shiso Vinegar](#))—it's all good. Shiso leaf has a number of common names, including beefsteak plant, ooba, and perilla; its scientific moniker is *Perilla frutescens*. A note on salted

shiso leaves: they are usually found vacuum-sealed on the shelf in Japanese grocery stores.

Ume (*Prunus mume*) Ume is a fruit known as Japanese plum, but it's actually more closely related to apricots. The trees grow widely in Japan and produce a beautiful flower. Ume can be tough to find in the States, but they are available in Japanese markets in June. In addition to being used for umeboshi, they are popularly transformed into umeshu, a sweet, light liquor. The plum can't be eaten raw, but when cured into pickles or booze it has a pleasant, fruity bite.

Umezu The salty brine that forms when salt pulls out the liquid from ume during the making of umeboshi is called umezu, and it's a delicious and salty seasoning that's a great addition to some tsukemono and to other dishes. Umezu can be white or red; both have the plum flavor, while the red variety has the added color of [red shiso leaf](#). Umezu can be homemade, as a byproduct of making umeboshi, or purchased.

Umeboshi When ume are layered in salt and left to ferment for several weeks, they become umeboshi; given their unique puckery and salty flavor, many people call them "salt plums" or "pickled plums." Umeboshi are often eaten with white rice (the plum is supposed to look like the red sun on the white Japanese flag), and they are said to be very good for digestion and for relieving headaches.

TRADITIONAL TSUKEMONO

Miso Pickles (Misozuke)

Miso-zuke are a very old skool Japanese standard with a crisp texture and a salty, sweet, and pleasingly cozy flavor. This is a go-anywhere pickle, and it is at home with rice or grilled meats. It's also a great foray into the world of [pickling beds](#), since the pickling bed (the miso-doko) comes together in under a minute, and the immersion time can be quick. For most vegetables I prefer about 30 minutes, but I've also used firm tofu and left it in for a month, with delicious results that were more like spreadable aged cheese than tofu. I call for red miso because it's my favorite, but feel free to try a mellower white or yellow miso instead. **Makes about 1 cup of pickling bed, enough for 10 to 20 batches of pickles**

TIME: 40 MINUTES TO 1 DAY

2/3 cup red miso

1 clove garlic, minced

2 tablespoons mirin

2 tablespoons sake or dry sherry

1 teaspoon kosher salt (optional)

1/4- to 1/3-inch thick sliced (and peeled if necessary) firm vegetables such as carrots, broccoli, or turnips, or 1/4- to 1/3-inch thick sliced watery vegetables such as cucumber or daikon

Combine the miso, garlic, mirin, and sake in a small mixing bowl to form a thick paste. Watery vegetables, like cucumbers and daikon, should first be lightly tossed with the salt and left to drain their excess moisture for an hour. Rinse and pat completely dry before continuing.

Submerge the vegetables in the paste; don't use more vegetables than can be covered in a thick layer of the paste. Let sit at room temperature for 30 minutes to 1 day. Wipe off or rinse off miso before eating.

The miso-doko (that is, the pickling bed) will last several days on the countertop (this is handy if you're pickling frequently). To add to its longevity, refrigerate the miso-doko between uses. Depending on the water content of the vegetables you're curing, one miso bed can be reused upward of ten times. If you're still enjoying the flavor, continue to reuse it. If it gets too watery to adhere well to the vegetables, drain off the excess liquid. Old

pickling beds will eventually lose their salty and sweet flavor, but they can still be used as marinades or soup bases.

Note

For easier cleanup that will help preserve your miso pickling bed, spread half of the miso mixture in a small square container and cover with a layer of thin cotton cloth (like muslin or a square cut out of an old kitchen towel; cheesecloth is too porous unless triple-layered). Spread the cut vegetables in a single layer, and then place another layer of cloth with the remaining miso mixture spread on top. Once the vegetables are cured to your liking, simply lift off the top layer of fabric and remove the vegetables—no rinsing required. Store the fabric with the pickling bed in the refrigerator between uses.



Koji Rice Pickles

Koji Rice Pickles (Kojizuke)

Koji rice is a wonderful thing, and Japanese food would not be the same without it. Sake, miso, soy sauce—they all owe their existence to the hardest working fungus in the food business, *Aspergillus oryzae*. Know what else koji can make? Did you say “pickles”? “Ping-pong!” as folks would say in Japan. You’ve guessed correctly! This pickle is another one that uses a **pickling bed**, which lurks in your fridge, fermenting engines revved and ready to make quick pickles when you are. In this case, the bed—which is called amazake—is spooned over the vegetable you’d like to cure. It is also a beverage and an excellent marinade for fish. **Makes about 6 cups of fermented rice bed; enough for many batches of pickles**

TIME: ABOUT 2 WEEKS

5 cups water

2 cups short-grained Japanese rice

1¼ cups koji rice

¾ cup kosher salt

Bring the water to a boil in a well-insulated pot with a tight lid (bust out the cast iron if you have it). While you’re waiting, rinse the short-grained rice well in a fine-mesh sieve under running water. Add the cleaned rice to the boiling water and stir. Cover, turn the heat to low, and let cook, stirring often, until the rice is quite soft and mushy and all of the liquid is absorbed, about 25 to 30 minutes. Note that this rice will be much more porridgy than regular cooked rice.

Take the lid off of the pot and remove the pot from the heat. Stirring frequently, and using a kitchen thermometer for accuracy, let the rice cool to 140°F (a small fan or blow dryer on its cool setting can help speed the process), then add the koji rice. Stir well to combine. Cover and keep it toasty warm for 24 hours; I wrap mine in a blanket and keep it over a heating pad on low.

After 24 hours, inspect your amazake. It might not smell so nice, and it will look like thick gruel. Stir in the salt, and transfer the mixture to a very clean pickling crock, glass jar(s), or food-safe plastic container(s) that can hold about 6 cups (3 pints). Cover it loosely with a lid not screwed into place to let air in but keep out insects and debris. Allow the amazake to ferment at room

temperature for about 2 to 3 weeks. When ready, it will have a consistency similar to cottage cheese and its smell will have become sweet and quite pleasant. Once it has reached the flavor and sweetness you like, store it in the refrigerator; and it will last for several months.

To make amazake pickles, clean, peel, and slice vegetables $\frac{1}{8}$ to $\frac{1}{4}$ inch thick. For watery vegetables, like celery and radishes, rub them with salt and let them sit for 30 to 60 minutes to draw out some of their moisture; less watery vegetables like carrots don't necessitate this step. Rinse and pat dry, and lay them in a shallow dish. Then, coat them completely on every surface with a thick layer of amazake. Let them sit at room temperature for 30 minutes to 1 day. Serve immediately in the amazake (don't rinse them!); refrigerate any unused pickles for up to 3 days.

Rice Bran Pickles (Nukazuke)

If quick pickles like thin cucumber slices or shredded carrots in vinegar are a one-night stand, then **rice bran** pickles are a long-term commitment. Don't get me wrong; I love my nuka-doko (the bed used to make nukazuke) for the magically meaty and earthy pickles it can provide. But this slowly fermented bed can seem like a pet as much as a foodstuff. It needs attention every day—both a thorough stirring from bottom to top and an assessment of its moisture content, its flavor, and its temperature. When I plan to go out of town, I not only need a dog sitter, but I also need to make provisions for my nuka-doko. It is my hope to pass this bed along to my children (as they do in Japan). But in the meantime, I have to remind myself that it's just a pickle. In Japan, nuka-doko may live in a wooden barrel under the floorboards, but any nonreactive kitchen container of sufficient size (at least 1 gallon) in a cool, dark place will work just as well. If you are lucky enough to find fresh nuka, use it in combination with dried for great flavor and ease of care. **Makes about 8 cups of pickling bed, suitable for numerous batches of pickles**

TIME: ABOUT 6 WEEKS

2 pounds dry rice bran

1 cup kosher salt

1 tablespoon yellow mustard powder

½ ounce kombu, broken up or cut into small pieces

6 cloves garlic, sliced thinly

½ ounce unpeeled minced fresh ginger

10 dried small, red chile peppers

About 6½ cups water

In a 1- to 2-gallon vessel made of ceramic, glass, or food-grade plastic, combine the rice bran, salt, mustard, kombu, garlic, ginger, and chiles. Add the water in 3 batches, mixing it into the other ingredients with your clean hands as you go. Stop adding water when the mixture has the texture of wet beach sand suitable for sandcastles—damp and clumping, but not pooling water. Cover the nuka-doko loosely with a lid not screwed into place to let in air but keep out insects and debris. Allow it to sit at cool room temperature in a dark place for 2 to 6 weeks as you prime it.