

Ingredients of Japanese Sweets and Confectionery

Legumes

"When discussing the key ingredients in Japanese sweets and confectionery, legumes—especially those used to make anko (sweet bean paste)—play a central role. Among them, azuki (red beans) are indispensable, and no exploration of wagashi (traditional Japanese sweets) would be complete without them.

In Japan, azuki have been revered for centuries as a food believed to carry positive energy, with their distinctive red color thought to have the power to ward off evil. This tradition is reflected in the custom of serving sekihan (rice cooked with red beans) during celebratory occasions."

Grains

"The primary grains used in Japanese sweets and confectionery are rice and wheat. While wheat flour is a commonly recognized staple, the range of rice-based products utilized in wagashi (traditional Japanese sweets) is truly remarkable, showcasing the ingenuity of the Japanese people.

Rice is typically classified into two main varieties:

Uruchi-mai (regular rice, commonly used for everyday meals)

Mochi-gome (glutinous rice, primarily used for making mochi, a chewy rice cake)

Each rice has its own distinct properties. When processed into flour—either raw or after heating—its characteristics change, with variations in texture and behavior. Additionally, differences in heating methods and the size of the flour particles further influence the final product, enabling a wide range of applications."

Sugar

Sugar is an essential ingredient for anko (sweet bean paste, which is one of the main ingredients of traditional Japanese sweets). Before the early Edo (1603 to 1868) period, anko was typically flavored with miso (a fermented paste made from soybeans, salt, and a type of mold used in fermentation, often used in savory dishes) or salt. However, with the increase in sugar imports during the Edo period, domestic production was encouraged by the 8th Shogun, Tokugawa Yoshimune, leading to its widespread use across Japan. By the late Edo period, wagashi (traditional Japanese sweets) such as sakura mochi (a rice cake wrapped in a pickled cherry blossom leaf), kintsuba (a sweet made from red bean paste and flour, often pan-fried), and daifuku (a chewy rice cake filled with sweet fillings such as red bean paste) had become popular treats enjoyed by the general public. This shift reflects how the cessation of warfare and the ensuing peace allowed confectionery culture to flourish and reach a broader audience.

Agar

Agar, known as kanten (a jelly-like substance made from seaweed) in Japanese, is a vital ingredient in many wagashi (traditional Japanese sweets), such as yokan (a firm, sweet jelly dessert). It is produced by freezing and drying the boiled extract of seaweed, typically tengusa (a type of red algae). Interestingly, kanten shares its raw material with tokoroten (a gelatinous, noodle-like dish made from seaweed). Its origin dates back to the Edo period and is surrounded by a captivating legend. According to the story, leftover tokoroten was left outside on a frigid winter night and froze solid. The next day, exposure to the sun caused the seaweed's bitterness and moisture to drain away, leaving it naturally dried. Later, when water was added and the mixture re-boiled, it melted and solidified again, leading to the accidental invention of kanten.

Ingredients and Fruits that Enhance Flavor

We must not overlook the variety of seeds and nuts that enrich the flavors of wagashi (traditional Japanese sweets). Ingredients such as goma (sesame), kashi (poppy seeds), and tree nuts like kurumi (walnuts) and tochi (horse chestnuts) play a vital role in adding depth and texture. Spices like cinnamon are also commonly used to enhance the aroma and taste of these traditional confections. Wagashi are crafted from a wide range of natural ingredients, each reflecting the abundant gifts of nature.