

**JAPAN**

---



料理  
の  
旅  
日  
記

**CLÉMENCE LELEU & ANNA SHOJI**

**ILLUSTRATIONS BY ADRIEN MARTIN**

# **JAPAN**

---

**A CULINARY TRAVEL DIARY**

**PRESTEL**

**MUNICH • LONDON • NEW YORK**



*To my parents, Annie and Claude Leleu*

# OUR ITINERARY

## **Tokyo** \_\_\_\_\_ 19

Immerse yourself in the world's largest megalopolis where culinary influences from all over Japan come together, and where foreign cuisines are reinvented in the capital's own fashion.

## **Kansai** \_\_\_\_\_ 77

Kansai is full of contrasts, ranging from tradition-conscious Kyoto to popular Osaka. A delicate vegetarian cuisine and gourmet street food intertwine here.

## **Kyushu** \_\_\_\_\_ 141

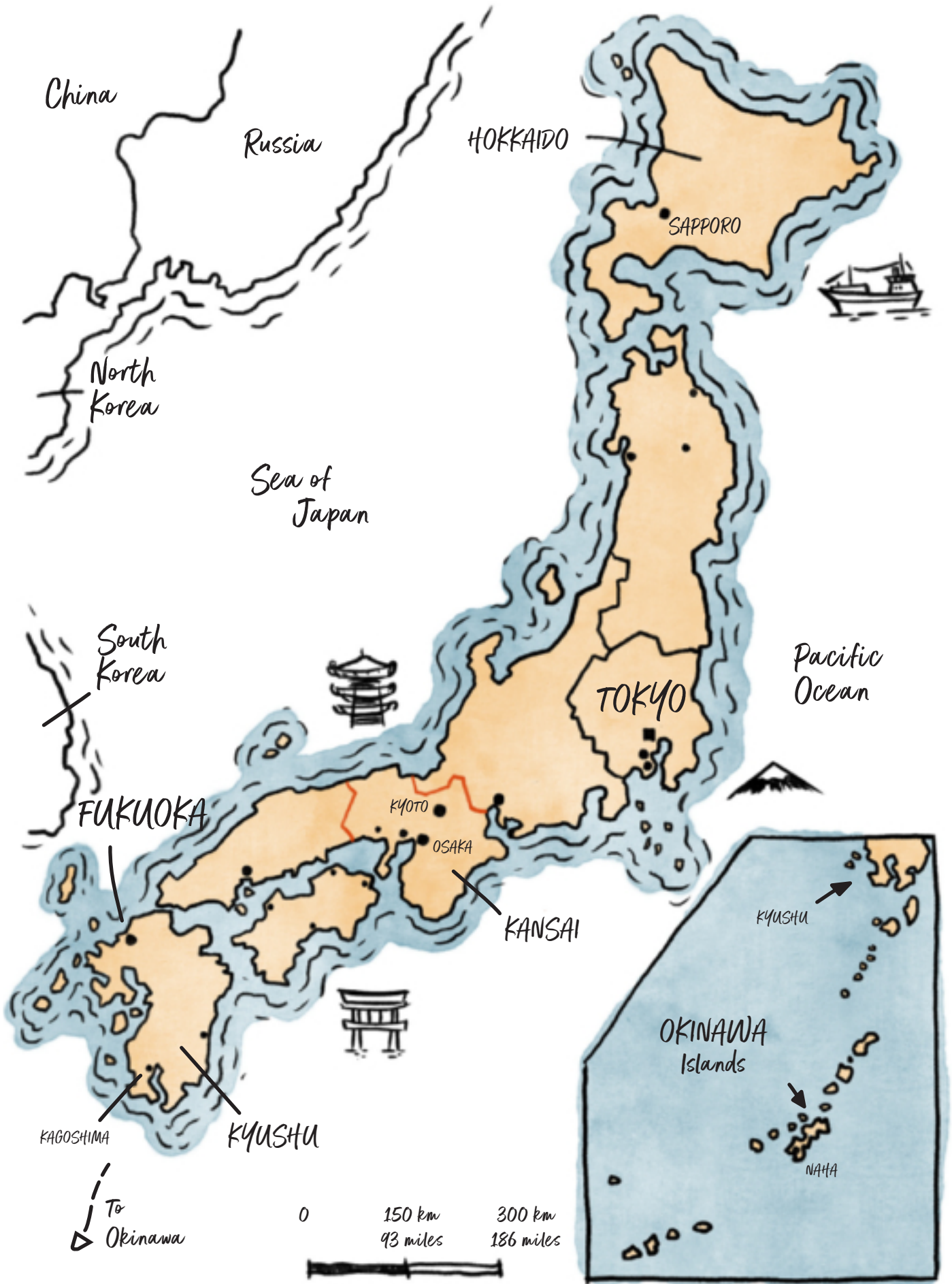
Kyushu has the largest number of active volcanoes in Japan. This volcanic activity influences the lives of its inhabitants and also leaves its mark on the land and therefore on the products that are grown there.

## **Hokkaido** \_\_\_\_\_ 191

Hokkaido is the island of seafood and comforting family dishes ideal for the winter months. It is also the land of the Ainu, an indigenous Japanese people.

## **Okinawa** \_\_\_\_\_ 239

The archipelago of Okinawa is made up of more than 150 islands. It is one of the few places in the world where we find more centenarians than anywhere else. Occupation by the American army has left its mark on the islands.



China

Russia

HOKKAIDO

SAPPORO

North Korea

Sea of Japan

South Korea

Pacific Ocean

FUKUOKA

KYOTO

TOKYO

OSAKA

KANSAI

KYUSHU

OKINAWA Islands

Naha

KAGOSHIMA

KYUSHU

To Okinawa

0 150 km 300 km  
93 miles 186 miles

## INTRODUCTION

# Join us on a culinary journey to the land of the rising sun

---

**'To understand, you first have to eat, so please sit down.'** Usa Teruyo's words still ring in my ears. Usa is of Ainu origin, an indigenous people from the island of Hokkaido. Before telling me about her ancestors and the ways in which she tries to preserve their customs and traditions, particularly the culinary ones, she insisted that we take the time to share a meal, together and in silence. So we enjoyed mashed sweet potatoes served in a wooden bowl, then sausages stuffed with *pukusa*, the wild onions found mainly in the mountains of the north island. 'If you go out of your way to experience new flavours, if you are interested in where they originate from, then you will understand those who cultivate and cook them. Cooking is the best way to understand a people, a country or a culture.'

My intention was for this book to be a kind of culinary travel diary which allows you to explore Japanese cuisine and everything it stands for - to understand what its best-liked ingredients, the way they are combined as well as the regional preferences and idiosyncracies say about its local and national cuisines, as well as about the whole country itself.

As Usa says, a country's cuisine is perhaps the best gateway to its culture. The best and also the

least expensive. Most people can cook and choose their ingredients - interpreting, circumventing, even twisting recipes a little here or there to suit their own desires and means. Tasting the cuisine of another country allows you to visit the place for the duration of a meal, without the need to pay for a train or plane ticket.

## A JOURNEY WITH FIVE STOPS

We selected five geographical areas, either because they are emblematic of the archipelago or because they possess their very own culinary identity. Each area is presented in one chapter, peppered with articles and features that cover subjects connected with Japanese cuisine in the broadest sense. My text is enriched with recipes written by Anna Shoji, my quintessential teammate. Anna has been a market gardener in the province of Touraine, France, since 2015. She grows vegetables, fruit and Japanese plants, while respecting the land and its produce.

This travel diary begins in Tokyo, the largest megalopolis in the world, where culinary influences from all over Japan and foreign cuisines mingle and merge. The Japanese capital digests them all



and sometimes reinvents them in its own way. First, we discover a fish market the size of a continent, then we stroll down the famous Kappabashi-dori, also known as Kappabashi or Kitchen Town, the main street for food lovers. Next, we go behind the scenes of the *konbinis*, the famous small convenience stores which are a perfect mirror of Japanese society. Finally, who better than the poet and translator Ryōko Sekiguchi to tell us all about her city? She offers us a new perspective on this place that we may think is devoid of its own culinary identity.

The next destination on our trip is Kansai, a vast region full of contrasts, home to the historic city of Kyoto and the popular port city of Osaka. Here, fine vegetarian cuisine and gourmet street food intertwine. We push open the doors of the tearooms that remained locked in the 1960s. We stop every few metres to try a *takoyaki* or a *kushikatsu* street food snack before continuing to a traditional pastry shop where we will sample a traditional Japanese confection: the famous *wagashi*.

Our journey continues on the island of Kyushu, the most southerly of the archipelago's four largest islands, not counting Okinawa. This volcanic land is the country of market gardeners, who feast on the richness of its soil. Kyushu has long been the only Japanese gateway for trade with South Korea, as well as later on with Portugal and the Netherlands. The island's cuisine has been hugely enriched by these multicultural influences - *tonkotsu*, *tempura* and *kare raisu* grace plates on Kyushu. Before leaving the island, we must make a detour to Fukuoka to discover the local *yatai*. People come to chat and eat on the go at these mobile food stalls which set up everywhere from about 5 p.m., before disappearing again in the middle of the night.

We then head to Hokkaido, the northernmost island in the Japanese archipelago. Here, fishing rules supreme. Seafood, fish and seaweed are fished here and sold throughout the country. Locally, the menus feature stuffed squid, salmon roe, crab and shellfish. But Hokkaido is also the land of the Ainu, an





indigenous people with multiple culinary traditions that have almost - but not entirely - disappeared.

Finally, the last leg of our culinary journey takes us to the tropics. Okinawa comprises a string of more than 150 islands, mainly known for their turquoise waters and sandy beaches. It is also a so-called 'blue zone' - people here live much longer than in most countries on Earth and the islands boast more centenarian women than any other place in the world ...

What would a meal be without a drink? In the final chapter of this book, we fill our glasses with sake, whiskey and *sochu*, three alcoholic drinks produced in the archipelago. We sneak into the sparsely decorated traditional teahouses with their tatami mats to discover how the tea ceremony is performed and how it has permeated Japanese culture (ceramics, horticulture, architecture and more). Finally, we need to find out about an essential part of Japanese life - the vending machine.

## **DISCOVERING JAPAN, A-SIDE AND B-SIDE**

*Japan. A Culinary Travel Diary* explores the terroirs of the archipelago, their specificities and their multiple facets, all of which reveal that 'eating Japanese' actually means much more than it seems. It is obviously a story of country, tastes and seasons, of regionality and the relationship with nature and living creatures. But a country's cuisine also bears the traces, and sometimes the stigmata, of history.

Japanese cuisine is a melting pot of multiple culinary cultures. It is the result of assimilation and of power struggles, featuring periods of conquest and periods of occupation. When we taste the dishes, we savour food infused with Chinese, Korean, but also Dutch and Portuguese influences. The meals are an infusion, sometimes constrained, but always reinterpreted with a flavour made in Japan. This will help us understand that what we eat is always much more political than we imagined - for example, how these dishes first saw the light of day, the care that is taken in growing the vegetables and in selecting the animals to ensure their sustainability, the fight to perpetuate the best ancestral know-how and the culinary customs of the indigenous peoples ...

This is why I simply could not write a book on Japanese cuisine without mentioning the history of the Ainu people and being interested in the influence exercised once - and still today - by the American occupation on the Okinawa Islands. Finally, it was difficult to ignore the depletion of fishery resources in Japanese waters, or not to mention the already very concrete impact of global warming on market gardening and marine life.

Finally, it was important to me that this book should offer recipes for home cooking that were accessible to everyone, using ingredients that can also be found in Europe and the United States, either because they are grown or produced there, or because they can easily be found on the shelves of a supermarket or an Asian grocery shop.

So, all that remains for me to do is wish you a good trip and *itadakimasu!* ■

# **Anna Shoji:**

## **‘The taste of Japan is the taste of our country. It seeps into our dishes so they will always remind us of Japan.’**

---

A Japanese market gardener in the Touraine province of France, Anna Shoji is passionate about cooking and created all the recipes in this book. She is also the cofounder of an ecovillage dedicated to Japanese food, in the Île-de-France region. Here, she tells us about her conversion to agriculture, her love of the land and her passion for all cuisines – Japanese, French and more.

**Where do your strong links to culture, land and terroir stem from? Did you inherit them?**

Not at all. No one in my family owns any land or has any knowledge of agriculture. My family has lived in Tokyo for several generations, so I didn't even have a grandmother in the countryside who might have tended a vegetable garden. It was something entirely unknown to me. I discovered farming when I went to work in Algeria, as part of a small group of Japanese visitors tending a market garden. I really enjoyed my work and I loved this connection with, and closeness to,

the land so much that I wanted to change my career and start over. And so I began to look for land to cultivate.

**Why did you choose to start your market gardening in France?**

I grew up in Tokyo where I went to a French-Japanese school. My family was quite Europeanized – my father managed several Italian restaurants, my mother ran a porcelain decorating school, which drew its inspiration from Danish, German and French models. We often went to Europe and we even lived in Denmark for two

years. My path in life was laid out somewhere between Japan and Europe, but particularly in France.

I chose to settle here because I already knew a little bit about the country, and because I knew that the quality of the land is considered as important in France as in Japan.

**Since 2015, you have been based in the Touraine province where you grow Japanese vegetables on 2 hectares (5 acres) of land.**

Absolutely. In the beginning, I had intended to settle in the south because I had done part of my



studies there. I knew many people in that part of France, it was nice and warm, and I thought it would be good for my vegetables. But when I studied the landscape in a little more detail, I realized that the earth in the south was very dry and mostly limestone. Of course, lots

of vegetables grow very well there, but I found the conditions too different from the land and water I knew in Japan. This is when people told me about the Touraine area, known as 'the garden of France', and that's how I ended up at this farm. I was looking for a small piece

of land but in France farms tend to be very large - they easily comprise 10, 20 or even 100 hectares (24, 48 or 96 acres), whereas I just wanted one hectare. If I could find this plot of land, there would be nothing. I would have to start from scratch, set up greenhouses and dig a well.

Yet I ended up finding exactly what I was looking for, with all the greenhouses, irrigation, electricity and pumps already in place - the previous owner was leaving all his tools and equipment behind. This was great for someone starting out, so I bought the plot of land in Ligueil, one hour south of Tours.

**Did you encounter any difficulties in growing your Japanese vegetables in the soil of Touraine, or did it work out straightaway?**

It all worked fine straightaway. I started with those families of plants of which a 'French version' exists, such as cabbage, cucumbers and turnips ... Although they are not exactly the same varieties as their Japanese cousins, these vegetables already grow here, so I could see no reason why the Japanese versions wouldn't also do well.

What had to be adapted, however, was our gardening practice. The ways of growing and harvesting vegetables, and the timing of the harvests, differ between the countries. Japanese vegetables are very often eaten raw or only very lightly cooked so they need to be tender and crunchy. They should be juicy and taste good as they are, without being prepared in any way.

**In Ligueil, you cultivate your produce, which is mainly intended for chefs, without using pesticides.**

Absolutely. I don't use any chemicals, not even those that are permitted and widely used by organic farmers. Yet, I do not have the 'organic' label because not all my seeds are organic; most of them are, but I cannot divide my field between organic and non-organic. So only a part of my production is labelled organic, all the plants for which I do not need seeds, such as

lotus roots and ginger rhizomes. But what matters most to me personally is not the label, it is not using any chemicals on my crops.

**Do you notice a difference between France and Japan in the way people cook vegetables?**

In Japan, vegetables are mostly eaten raw. In France, they are usually eaten raw in salads, roasted or in stews like *rata-touille*, and they are generally considered an accompaniment to meat or fish. Vegetables are still considered a side dish here.

In Japan, vegetables are valuable ingredients in their own right. You can have an entire meal consisting only of vegetables, without having to be vegetarian. The term vegetarian may in fact scare some people because it creates the impression of having to restrict or constrain your diet when, in fact, this is not at all the case! The main-course vegetables are sufficient in themselves, without making the dish seem bland. So in Japan, we are more demanding in terms of flavour and texture. When you make a stew, you cook the vegetables for a very long time; they have to be flavoursome, of course, but it's still different. And then, in Japan, we try to eat vegetables in their entirety, with their tops, leaves, roots and skins ... This is why they must be harvested at the right time - neither too ripe nor too under ripe.

**What, in your opinion, are the characteristics of the Japanese terroir?**

In Japan, the word *terroir* mostly describes the ingredients which are very specific to a city or a region, and there are great differences between the north and the south

of the country. The climate, which also varies greatly, creates these *terroirs*, which are vary greatly and are very locally specific.

And then the *terroir* is also the way in which the people who live there ensure the preservation of local specialities and know-how, how they safeguard culinary specificities, which can often be ascribed to constraints linked to the climate. For example, in the north of Japan, in Akita, we find *takuwan*, a dried yellow radish, a bit like a crunchy pickle. Normally, radishes are dried before brining them, but in the north it is so cold that they cannot be left to dry because they are susceptible to frost. The locals therefore found a way of smoking them dry. This produces radishes with a deliciously smoky flavour, which are then fermented. It is the combination of geography, topography and climate which makes the *terroir* so specific, and which results in a local know-how which needs to be passed on.

**Do you see any differences or similarities between French and Japanese terroirs?**

There are many similarities because France is rich in different *terroirs*, with lots of nuances. For example, in the cheese category, we can use the same cow's milk base to obtain entirely different results in terms of taste or texture depending on the region where the cheese is produced. Regional bacteria are different; they create subtle differences. Perhaps that's what we don't have in Japan, this sort of nuance. Each region is very different in its tastes. Many dishes are associated with one particular city, which also means that gastronomy is an inherent part of each journey. The Japanese

love to eat (at least I do!) and, when we travel, we immediately associate a city with a particular food, an ingredient or a dish, and so we plan the culinary stops of our journey accordingly before we even leave. They are obvious.

There is perhaps also a difference in the way these *terroirs* are protected. In France, we have AOPs, AOCs (Appellation d'origine protégée/contrôlée) ... In Japan, foods are less well protected; there are very few appellations. Instead, it's all about tradition and culture. They are the main vectors of transmission and preservation.

**Your cultivation is local, but you grow Japanese vegetables. This poses the question as to what is local. Obviously, 'local' does not necessarily imply 'national'.**

Absolutely. It is true that I grow Japanese vegetables in the Touraine province, but my production is local. If someone asks me what I grow in my little corner of the Touraine, the answer may seem somewhat surprising: Japanese vegetables. However, that is what I grow.

What I cultivate is a mix of local and Japanese vegetables. In my opinion, it is always better if we can produce locally, rather than importing it. Shiso and Japanese vegetables grow very well here in France and this avoids having to import them by ship or plane. Being local, even when it includes the cultivation of foreign vegetables, is connected with the preservation of the environment, which is an imperative. Who knows, maybe in 30 or 50 years, my vegetable production will be considered 'local' by everyone!

**Would you say there is something like a 'Japanese taste'?**

Yes, there is a Japanese taste. That of dashi, umami, the salty sweetness of mirin and soy sauce. In French restaurants, they sometimes add a little *kombu* or dashi. This gives the dish a slightly Japanese note, which reminds us of what the dishes we used to eat, and that feels good. The taste of Japan is the taste of our country. It immerses itself into our dishes so they will always remind us of Japan.

**What do you think are the challenges that Japanese agriculture will have to face in the future?**

In Japan, we are so happy with local production, that something is 'made in Japan', that people don't worry too much if it's organic or doesn't contain too many pesticides. Yet Japan is one of the largest consumers of pesticides in the world, even if things are starting to change.

The main thing we look for in fruit and vegetables are taste and appearance. Fruit and vegetables are sold singly, each one packaged separately ... In order to eat something tasty and beautiful, the Japanese ignore the environmental aspect. Yet my grandparents' generation did not think like that at all. For things to evolve quickly I sincerely believe that it would help if the Japanese were better informed on environmental aspects. We just don't make them think enough. We have not properly explained to them what the risks are of the methods currently employed in agriculture.

We should also move away from a culture where everything is calibrated to the nth degree. For

example, cucumbers must be straight and all of the same size for logistical reasons; otherwise they will not fit into the boxes. On the producers' side, this entails enormous losses, which then have a repercussion on prices.

**In Laval-en-Brie, you also co-created Mura, a Japanese ecovillage where Japanese cuisine plays a vital part. Can you tell us a little more about it?**

Mura was created by women and for women, but men are, of course, also welcome! Four Japanese women - Maki Maruyama, Terumi Yoshimura, Hiromi Kobayashi and me - set up the project with the intention of creating a place where working women and mothers could come together to relax, a place where you can feel the richness of nature and what it supplies, and where you can sense the passage of the seasons. All this is firmly connected with food.

All the activities we propose are linked to Japanese culinary culture. The idea is to pick vegetables in the vegetable garden or herbs in the woods and then cook them together; to learn pottery to create our own tableware; to find out how to dye fabric to make aprons ... At Mura, we learn that we can do a lot with our hands and to appreciate what nature offers us if we respect seasonality and if we take care of what surrounds us. We want to raise awareness among our visitors through discovery, learning and sharing, but also and above all through eating well. To be honest, we were really four foodies who set up this project! ■

# Basic ingredients

Here are some ingredients you should have in your cupboard before starting to prepare a Japanese recipe. This list is a suggestion and certainly not exhaustive. It's up to you to add to it according to your tastes and preferences.

- ① **Anko** - If you don't want to prepare it yourself, you can buy this slightly sweetened red bean paste ready-made. It is most often sold tinned (canned), either with a smooth texture or puréed with small pieces of bean. Anko is used to make many different desserts, including *dorayaki* (a pancake-like patty).
- ② **Dashi** - This stock is considered the basis of Japanese cooking, an essential ingredient in most soups and stews. It is mainly sold in powdered form, but you can also find it in bottles. You can easily prepare your own dashi at home, using *katsuobushi* (simmered, smoked and fermented skipjack tuna) and *kombu* seaweed.
- ③ **Katsuobushi** - These flakes of dried, smoked and fermented bonito tuna are used to prepare dashi as well as other dishes such as *okonomiyaki* (savoury pancakes), on which the flakes seem to dance under the effect of the heat.
- ④ **Miso** - Miso is a paste made from soya beans (soybeans) and fermented rice or barley. There are several kinds, with their colour depending on the degree of fermentation. The most commonly used types are white and red miso paste.
- ⑤ **Shoyu** - This Japanese soy sauce is the equivalent of our salt and an essential ingredient in Japanese cuisine. It consists of soya beans (soybeans), wheat, salt and water. Soy sauce is used as a seasoning for meat and fish as well as in marinades. It only takes a few drops to spice up a vinaigrette and to give it a special little umami twist.
- ⑥ **Sake** - This rice wine is mainly used to dilute sauces. Like some wines in France, there are sakes that are used for cooking. Particularly renowned for its strong umami flavour, it gives dishes a slight malty and earthy, yet rounded, taste.
- ⑦ **Sansho** - Sansho is also known as 'Japanese pepper' and while it is used like pepper, it actually isn't a pepper at all. Instead, sansho belongs to the Rutaceae family of citrus fruits. This is why, in addition to its spicy, peppery flavours, we find lemony notes when we taste it.
- ⑧ **Wasabi** - Belonging to the same family as mustard and horseradish, wasabi rhizomes are grated before being transformed into a pungent paste. It is used to spice up and accompany sushi and sashimi as well as cold soba noodles.
- ⑨ **Yuzu kosho** - Yuzu kosho is a paste condiment prepared from yuzu, a Japanese lemon and chillies (chili peppers). This paste can be stirred into miso soup or into a *nabe*, a winter hotpot that resembles a fondue. Yuzu kosho can also accompany sashimi.
- ⑩ **Rice vinegar** - Essential in vegetable marinades, to season salads and, above all, for making sushi rice, adding just a few drops of rice vinegar gives a malty flavour to any recipe.
- ⑪ **Tamari** - Tamari sauce is the equivalent of soy sauce, except that it is made exclusively from soya, without any trace of wheat. It is therefore ideally suited for people with a gluten intolerance.
- ⑫ **Mirin** - Mirin is a sweetened rice wine that is only used for cooking. It is used in particular to prepare sauces, to which it gives a little sweet and salty taste. It must be stored in a cool place and protected from the light.
- ⑬ **Tempurako** - Tempurako is a mixture of potato starch and wheat flour, used for cooking tempura. It is a highly rated companion for crunchy fries and air-fried foods.





1



2



3



4



5



6



7



8



9



10



11



12





# TOKYO

- The *konbini* - a mirror  
of Japanese society ————— 20
- The fish market,  
a Tokyo institution ————— 33
- A walk through the Kappabashi-dori,  
the street of food lovers ————— 46
- Ryōko Sekiguchi: 'As there is  
no farmland here, Tokyo makes  
use of all that is available.' ————— 60
- The bento, the Japanese  
art of the lunch box ————— 72

# The *konbini* – a mirror of Japanese society

---

*Konbini* mini supermarkets are emblematic of the Japanese archipelago. Here you will find absolutely everything you might need on a daily basis – and much more. When you look at it closely, you'll realize that these shops offer a perfect snapshot of Japanese society in real time.

'*Irasshaimase!*' As soon as you walk through the door of a *konbini*, the staff there will address you with their famous 'welcome to my shop!', a greeting that has become emblematic of these local convenience stores. The shops are open every day, and some even 24/7. Whether you are in Tokyo, Kyoto, Osaka or in the middle of the countryside it's impossible to miss them. And for good reason: in 2020 there were 50,000 *konbinis* operating throughout Japan - that's one for every 2,500 inhabitants!

The concept was originally imported from the United States and then perfected in local fashion when the first shops arrived in Japan in 1974. The first *konbini* - a Japanese translation of 'convenience store' - first opened its doors in the Toyosu district, in Tokyo Bay. The concept is simple: here you can find everything you need on a daily basis, from food to hygiene and cleaning products. During the period of strong economic growth in the 1970s, the *konbini* became the essential go-to address for another emblematic figure, who also emerged during these prosperous years: the so-called 'salary-man', a salaried, white-collar employee. It was this model employee of Japan Inc., always dressed in

a black suit and white shirt and carrying a briefcase, who made the convenience store an extension of his home. It's where he grabbed a cup of coffee in the morning, went to buy a *bento* or *onigiris* for his lunch break and, if he missed the last evening train home, he could even find a shirt, a pair of socks and underwear here, to start a new day in the office in clean clothes.

## **THE ART OF MAKING ONESELF INDISPENSABLE**

---

Building on their success, the *konbinis* pounced on the smallest vacant plot to install their perfectly stocked and neatly arranged shelves. They invested in residential areas and business districts, making inroads into metro and train stations, taking over university campuses and supplying travellers at motorway (interstate) service stations. There are three chains of these stores which together make up 80 per cent of the sector's turnover: Seven Eleven is in the lead, followed by Family Mart and then Lawson. It's difficult, especially in Tokyo which has

2,100 Seven Eleven stores alone, to walk more than 200 metres (220 yards) without coming across one of these three brands. In some places, you can even happen across two *konbinis* from the same group facing each other, on either side of a road, for example. This is not a mistake but a carefully considered strategy, as Minoru Matsumoto, one of the communication managers at Seven & I Holdings Co., explained to the press: 'We apply the strategy of dominance - even if we already have a Seven Eleven at a particular junction, the presence of a second one is justified since it means that the potential customer does not have to cross the road.'

*Konbinis* are masters in the art of making themselves indispensable. During the 1970s, these convenience stores mainly offered food, drinks, hygiene and clean-

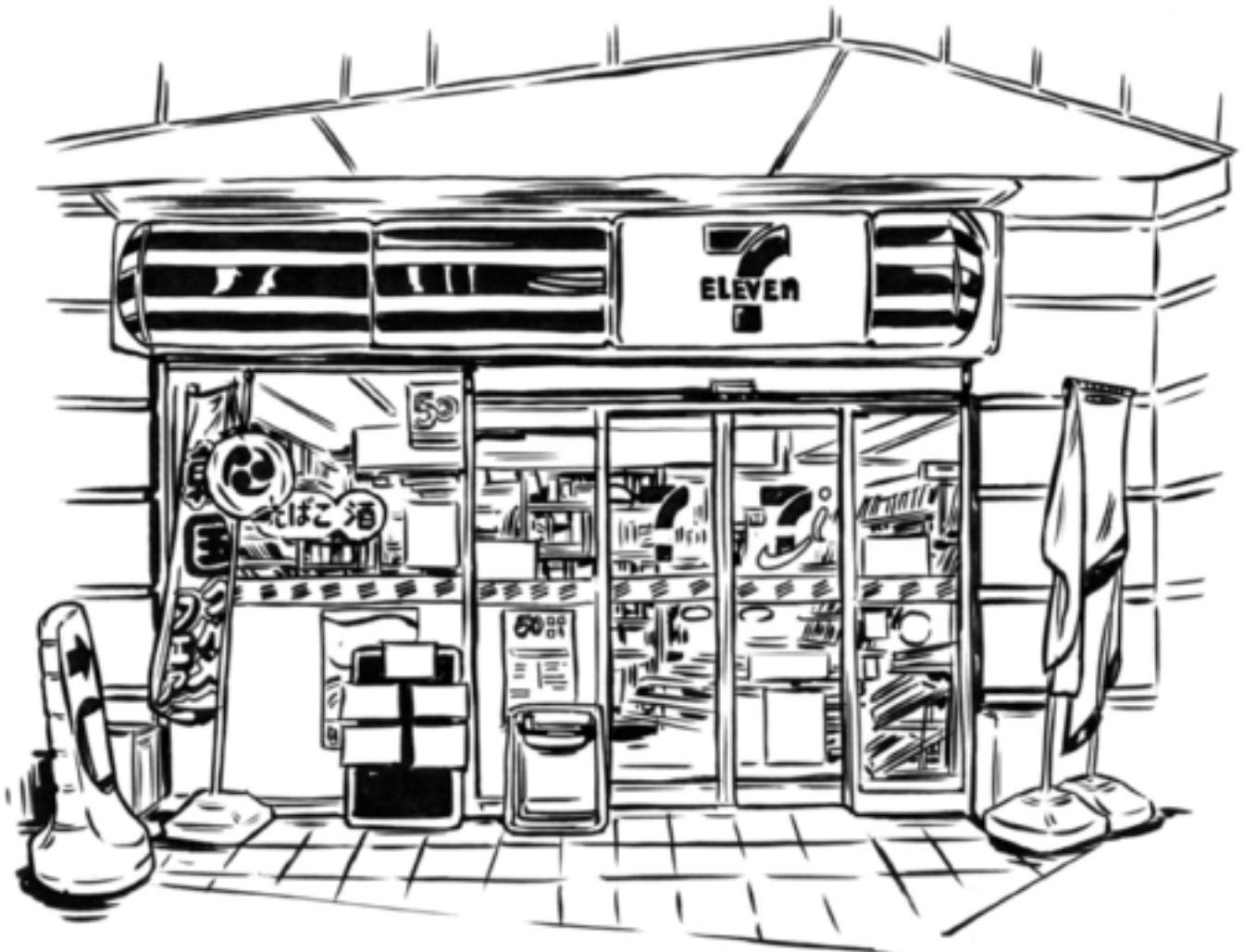
ing products, plus a few magazines. Over the years, the range they offer has grown and been extended to include multiple services. At a *konbini* you can now buy concert tickets, drop off your laundry to be washed and ironed, pay your local and road taxes, withdraw money, send a fax (still common in Japan), print a document and post your letters and parcels. No large-scale supermarket or local grocery store can boast of offering such a great range of personalized services, all in a store that doesn't take up more than 100 square metres (1,000 square feet).

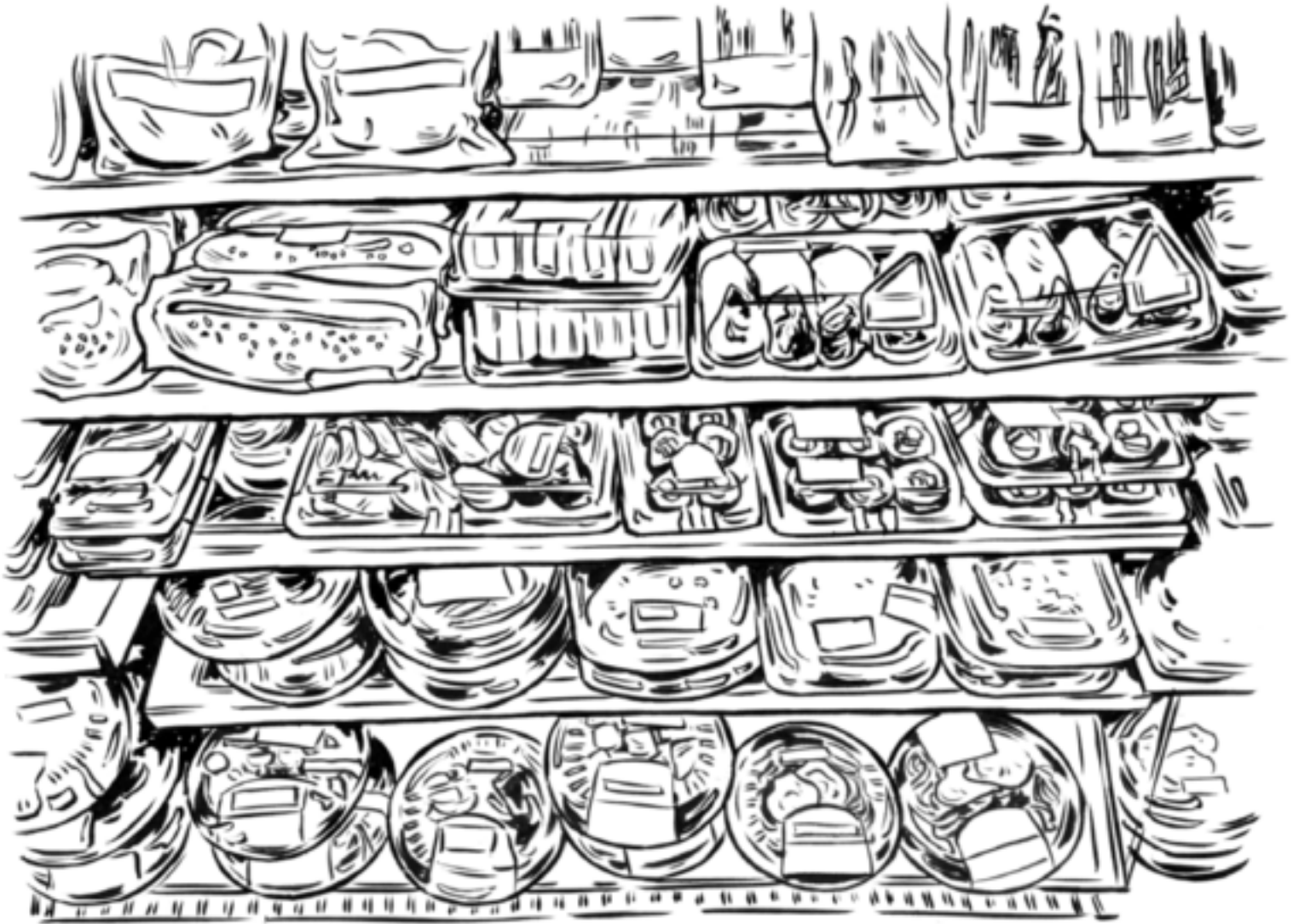
### **THE RACE FOR REAL-TIME DATA**

It's with foodstuffs that *konbinis* achieve most of their turnover,



three-quarters to be precise, half of which involves immediate consumption. To further satisfy their customers, these convenience stores rely on a 'just-in-time' supply chain to their shelves, thanks to a continuous real-time data analysis. Before the





**Faced with the ageing of Japanese society, the latest trend is the adaptation of konbinis to an increasingly elderly customer base. Inside, everything is designed to make life easier for seniors.**

cashiers even scan your first item, they will pass on two pieces of information to the registration machine: your gender and your approximate age. This allows them to know the store's typical customer base in order to refine what they have on sale. In addition to knowing with what to stock on the shelves, this real-time data analysis helps to prevent empty shelves. In fact, the basic principle for a *konbini* is to have no stock in the back room. Thanks to barcodes, the brands' centralized

distribution platforms are instantly informed of a sale, and therefore of the stock status of the product on the shelves. Restocking orders are immediately initiated, the information is transmitted to the storage centre which straightaway sends a delivery truck. This way, customers will always be able to find their freshly prepared *onigiris* or a *tamago sando*, the ultra-popular egg sandwich, on the shelves, at any time of the day or night, even in the middle of the midday rush hour.

Observing the trends and changes in these pocket-sized supermarkets also allows us to understand the mechanisms at work in Japanese society. Thus, we could observe that hygiene products took up more and more space on the shelves from the moment that women had an easier access to employment in the archipelago. Certain other items have perhaps disappeared, such as the erotic magazines which might give the stores a bad image at the time of major international competitions such as the Rugby World Cup or the Olympic

Games. The most recent trend, however, is the *konbinis'* effort to adapt to an increasingly elderly clientele. In 2021, over-65-year-olds made up 30 per cent of the Japanese population. Will single men and adolescents, who today remain the largest section of *konbini* clients, soon be replaced by seniors? This could well be the case if we are to believe the latest innovations proposed by the local retail giants. Seven Eleven recently launched a food delivery service for the elderly. The Lawson chain of shops went one step further - in 2006, it opened its first boutique entirely dedicated to seniors in Awaji, a few miles from Kobe. Inside, everything has been designed to make the lives of older customers easier - wider aisles, lower shelves, larger price labels,

doors that open automatically and dining areas with tables and chairs where customers can sit and meet friends over a meal. And this is only the beginning, as the brand plans to dedicate 20 per cent of its stores to its elderly consumers by 2025.

### **HAS THE MODEL REACHED ITS LIMITS?**

Despite their unstoppably efficient management, the *konbini* did not foresee the grain of sand that has been slowing down the machine for some time: the difficulty in recruiting staff. Each store is a franchise, and the retailers are responsible for recruiting their teams,

which are mainly made up of students, housewives who want to work part-time or workers of foreign origin, mainly from South-East Asia. These *arubaito* - meaning 'small jobs', precarious and poorly paid - no longer find takers, particularly for the night shifts. Faced with the lack of candidates to make up the night shifts, some stores have started to reduce their opening hours, which does not necessarily please their parent companies. A franchisee in the Osaka region paid the price. After closing his *konbini* between 1 a.m. and 6 a.m., he incurred the wrath of Seven Eleven, who threatened him with a penalty of 17 million yen, or 94,000 GBP (119,000 USD) for violating contractual clauses. He eventually lost the franchise for his store. This highly publicized affair led to an investigation followed by a report from the Japanese Fair Trade Commission in October 2020, which called into question the commercial practices of the main chains in the sector and requested a plan of collective measures. Some brands have since given in to pressure and agreed to review the amount of income retained by franchisees. They have started to allow certain stores to reduce their opening hours, a movement accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic. The *konbini* model, which is the manifestation of an era of strong economic growth, is undoubtedly undergoing its greatest change yet. ■



# onigiri

**1 salmon steak,  
about 100-120 g  
(3½-4½ oz)**

**1 tsp salt, plus extra for  
salting the fish**

**300 g (1½ cup) sushi rice**

**360 ml (1½ cups) filtered  
water**

**2 sheets nori seaweed**

**½ tsp sesame seeds**

## Preparation

The day before cooking, cover the salmon steak with salt, but do not salt the skin side. Leave it on a plate in the fridge for at least one night – two or three, if possible.

Cook the rice. Gently rinse the rice in clean water without breaking the grains. Repeat two or three times, then drain the rice in a colander. Place the cleaned rice in a saucepan with the filtered water. Cover and leave to rest for at least 30 minutes before cooking. Cook over a high heat for 5 minutes, then reduce to low and cook for 10 minutes. Turn off the heat and leave to rest for another 10 minutes without removing the lid.

Cook the salmon. Using kitchen paper (paper towels), remove any excess salt and water from the surface of the salmon. Place the salmon skin-side down into a hot frying pan, cover, leaving a gap if possible, and cook for 25–30 minutes over very low heat. Once cooked, cut the salmon into four pieces. If you like the skin, you can keep it on to make your *onigiri*; otherwise, remove it now.

In a bowl, combine 100 ml (scant ½ cup) of water and 1 tablespoon of salt. Use to moisten your hands to prevent the rice from sticking to them. Next, put one-quarter (one-fourth) of the rice into your hand; flatten it slightly and make a small hollow in the centre. Place a piece of the prepared salmon into the hollow and form a pyramid without pressing too hard, but enough to hold the shape. Wrap in a seaweed sheet cut into thirds or quarters. Enjoy hot.

If you are preparing the onigiri in advance, wrap them in the nori just before serving to keep it crisp.





# tonkatsu

100 g ( $\frac{3}{4}$  cup) plain  
(all-purpose) flour  
1 egg, beaten with  
2 tbsp water  
100 g (1 cup) panko  
breadcrumbs  
2 slices pork loin,  
1-1.5 cm ( $\frac{3}{8}$ - $\frac{1}{2}$  in) thick  
1 pinch each of salt and  
black pepper  
500 ml (2 $\frac{1}{8}$  cups) oil  
for frying  
 $\frac{1}{4}$  cabbage, shredded  
4 tbsp tonkatsu sauce

## Preparation

Prepare three plates or flat dishes – one for the flour, one for the egg and one for the panko breadcrumbs.

Season the pork loin with the salt and pepper, then cover it completely with flour.

Now dip the floured pork into the beaten egg, then turn it in the breadcrumbs to coat.

Heat the oil in a deep saucepan to 170–180°C (340–230°F), then fry the pork until the breadcrumbs are golden brown. Remove the pork from the oil and drain the excess oil.

Serve with the shredded cabbage and the tonkatsu sauce.



# gyoza

## Gyoza dough

125 g (generous 1 cup)  
plain (all-purpose) flour  
2 pinches of salt  
85 ml (⅓ cup) boiling  
water  
2 handfuls of potato starch

## For the filling

150 g (5¼ oz) cabbage  
50 g (1¾ oz) young leeks  
50 g (1¾ oz) spring onions  
(scallions)  
¾ tsp salt  
150 g (5¼ oz) minced  
(ground) pork or chicken  
1 tsp grated garlic  
1 tsp grated ginger  
1 tsp sesame oil  
1 tsp mirin  
1 tsp sake  
1 tsp soy sauce  
1 pinch finely ground  
black pepper

## Preparation

### Making the dough

In a bowl, combine the flour and the salt. Add the hot water and mix with chopsticks or a fork. The dough will not come together at this stage. Knead for a good 5 minutes to form a smooth ball, without any creases or cracks.

Cover the dough with cling film (plastic wrap) or an inverted bowl, and leave to rest for 15–30 minutes at room temperature.

Now cut the dough ball in half and form two logs by rolling it with your hands. Cut each of the logs into nine equal pieces (eighteen in total), then shape them into small balls.

Sprinkle the work surface and one of the balls with potato starch. Flatten the ball with the palm of your hand, then roll it out using a rolling pin. Form a circle about 10 cm (4 in) in diameter, making the edge slightly thinner than the centre. Repeat to make a total of eighteen discs.

Watch out! The dough dries very quickly, so cover it and the balls with a clean cloth while you are not working them to prevent them from hardening.

### Making the filling

Finely chop all the vegetables for the stuffing (cabbage, leek and spring onions [scallions]). Add the salt, mix lightly and leave to rest for 10 minutes to allow them to drain.

Put all the other filling ingredients into a bowl and stir to combine well.

Drain the vegetables well, then add the other ingredients. Mix again.

The filling is now ready. Leave it to rest in the refrigerator for 15 minutes.

