

FARE

News and Novelties from the World of Food, plus Agenda and More



The Art of Miso

IN AN OLD WAREHOUSE located in Fuchu, a small town in Hiroshima prefecture, 400 miles southwest of Tokyo, Kuni-hiko Kanemitsu, a 63-year-old Fuchu native, shows me around the cool, dimly lit concrete room where he works. Dressed in a powder blue jacket over a pressed white shirt, he pauses briefly to inhale the yeasty aroma that hangs in the air. Eleven huge cedar barrels, eight feet tall and constructed more than a hundred years ago, flank the room. Within these barrels a felicitous transformation is taking place: soybeans, salt, and rice or barley are fermenting into miso, the savory paste that flavors everything in Japanese cuisine from soups and

Miso maker Kunihiko Kanemitsu's son, Kohichi, stands before vats of fermenting miso in his family's factory in Fuchu, Japan.

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pickles to dressings for salads.

Kanemitsu is a fourth-generation producer here in Fuchu, where the making of miso is a centuries-old art. Miso is appreciated around the world, mainly for its healthful qualities: slow fermentation breaks down soybeans into a concentrated source of protein, and naturally occurring bacteria create a live culture similar to yogurt's. But in Japan a love for miso runs especially deep, and the food has long been a staple of the country's cook-

FOOD FOR THOUGHT



"Manhattan is a narrow island off the coast of New Jersey devoted to the pursuit of lunch."

—RAYMOND SOKOLOV

ing. Of the hundreds of regional variations found within Japan, the mellow-tasting, artisanally made misos created in Fuchu are widely considered some of the best.

"Our miso is unique because Fuchu sits on the border between Japan's rice-growing regions and its barley-growing ones," Kanemitsu explains. To make miso, he adds koji mold (the same catalyst used in the fermentation of sake and soy sauce) to steamed rice



METHOD

Tama Miso (Egg Miso Sauce)

This sweet and silky miso sauce is thickened and enriched with an egg yolk for an even more velvety texture. (For a source for hard-to-find Japanese ingredients, see THE PANTRY, page 107.) Fill a 2-quart saucepan with water to a depth of 1"; bring to a boil over high heat. Reduce heat to medium-low. In a medium bowl, whisk together 1 cup shiro (white) miso, 1 tbsp. sake, 1 tbsp. mirin, 2 tsp. sugar, and 1 egg yolk. Place bowl over saucepan; cook, whisking, until mixture thickens, about 3 minutes. Remove bowl from heat and whisk in 3 tbsp. rice vinegar and 3 tbsp. water. (If a thinner sauce is desired, add a little more water.) Chill. Toss boiled chilled spinach, seaweed, diced raw tuna, or julienned daikon (pictured above, clockwise from top left) with enough sauce to coat. Makes about 1 cup.

or barley before combining them with cooked soybeans and salt and allowing the mixture to ferment slowly. Fuchu's geography and climate are particularly ideal for this process: set in a valley surrounded by mountains, the town has hot,

humid summers and cold winters, a combination that promotes the growth of the bacteria necessary for the development of high-quality miso's complex flavors. This time-honored method stands in contrast to those of most commercial miso

producers, who have found ways to mechanize the process and reduce fermentation time, at the expense of quality and taste.

Kanemitsu produces a dozen styles of miso by varying the proportions of his ingredients and the length of fermentation. (See "Three Popular Styles of Fuchu Miso", below.) His barley miso, called mugi miso, cures for up to three years, emerging as a coarse, mahogany-hued paste with an almost meaty taste. But the style for which he's the best known, and the one that put Fuchu on the miso-making map in Japan, is shiro, or white miso, a mild, sweet-tasting rice variety that local producers ferment for as little as one week. This miso was once favored primarily by the upper classes, but its popularity, along with that of Fuchu's other misos, spread with the help of merchants, regional lords, and travelers, who introduced it to other parts of the country beginning in the 17th century. By 1900, Fuchu was supporting ten miso companies.

Today, only three are still in operation. "The Japanese are switching to Western-style foods," Kanemitsu tells me. Indeed, since the 1970s, miso consumption in Japan has declined by more than 40 percent. This drop, coupled with the low cost of industrially made miso, has prompted Fuchu's remaining artisanal producers to promote their miso outside Japan. And that's a good thing: if all goes according to plan, some varieties of Fuchu miso will become available in America later this year. —Harris Salat

Three Popular Styles of Fuchu Miso

Fuchu misos are generally mellow in taste and less salty than those produced elsewhere in Japan. Fuchu white miso **A**, which is also called shiro miso, is made of quickly fermented rice and soybeans; its sweet flavor and creamy texture work perfectly in such preparations as tama miso, an egg-enriched and vinegar-spiked miso sauce (see recipe, above), and ozoni, a traditional soup consumed during the first week of the new year. In Fuchu, caramel-colored chu miso **B**, also made with rice, strikes a nice balance between salty and sweet; typically aged for up to eight months, it's ideal in miso soup and oyster hot pot. Barley varieties such as aka mugi miso **C**, a red miso, are often found in the barley-growing regions of southern Japan. Mugi miso is usually aged for one to three years, which gives it a distinctive chestnut color and a salty, concentrated flavor that pairs well with meat. —H.S.

