

# A VISUAL FEAST

Take your cues from the environ, as much as the food on your plate, for a full sensory dining experience in Japan, writes Jane Lawson.





When the Japanese say ‘we eat first with our eyes’, it’s not to be taken lightly – in fact, it’s an integral part of the dining experience.

Japan’s restaurants, at their finest, are supremely artful, offering the diner a journey beyond the food, deep diving into the country’s culture.

From the dining space setting and the way the waitstaff move within it, the exquisite arrangement of food and graceful service, to the final farewell protocol – every moment is orchestrated to provide the guest with optimum hospitality.

Traditional culture is deeply ingrained within the Japanese psyche, and it’s strongly believed that the only opportunity to make a good impression is your first.

This philosophy applies across the board, but is most evident in the service arena. Even purchasing a slice of cake comes with movement-preventative structural wrapping to avoid damaging the delicate façade, and enough dry ice to ensure ultimate freshness at your destination – and yes, for precise measure, you’ll be asked for your estimated arrival time.

Service in upmarket restaurants is phenomenal, particularly in high-end *ryōtei* (formal, usually traditional *kaiseki* cuisine, served in approximately 12 small consecutive dishes), *kappo* (contemporary *omakase*, or chef’s selection, eaten counter-side) and sushi, tempura or other specialist counters, where carefully crafted morsels are tendered individually, by the master.

When arriving at such establishments, pay attention to subtle signs of welcome. Attractive pocket-gardens suggest slowing your pace and taking your time. Wetted stepping-stones or pathways, or tiny salt pillars garnishing doorways, are symbols of purification.

Passing through a *noren*, or split textile curtain, is a secondary checkpoint and reminder to leave your cares at the door. The same applies when taking off your shoes, essentially leaving the outside world and any impurities behind. These non-verbal, visible triggers help calm your mind before entering the dining space, setting an intention for the occasion.



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01, 02 & 04 Some of the incredible dishes you can expect at Sanpou Nishimuraya Honten  
03 KAI Tsugaru, Aomori © Jane Lawson



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Once inside you’ll be seated and drink orders promptly taken, allowing you to settle in and relax. Take a moment to reflect on your surroundings; note the essence of tranquillity and relaxing tones, the way the serving staff softly shuffle through the room, the warm polished wood or tactile stone surfaces, simple yet exquisite *ikebana* (flower arrangement) and artwork – or lack thereof; walls and surfaces are often pared back so as not to distract from the meal. Music, if played, maintains a low volume, lighting is never harsh and strong perfume is vehemently discouraged. Every detail is painstakingly considered, aimed at ensuring utmost culinary pleasure.

### A taster

Experience Japan’s innate *omotenashi* (hospitality) at *ryōtei*, *ryokan* (inns) or *kappo* style restaurants including:

- Nippon Cuisine, Hoshinoya Tokyo
- Sanpou Nishimuraya, Kinokuniya Onsen
- Jiki Miyazawa, Kyoto
- Takagi, Ashiya
- Ode, Tokyo
- Lurra, Kyoto
- Shirotsuka, Tokyo

Japanese kitchens are often open, yet there’s a remarkable lack of kitchen clamour, no clattering of pans or harried exasperation – barely a sound is heard, apart from occasional directions by the softly spoken chef or murmurings of appreciation from fellow diners. The quietness is an opportunity to meditate on all forms of visual communication and learn about the fascinating culture you’re suddenly immersed in. If you are fortunate to be seated at the counter, you’ll be awed by how incredibly organised and gleaming the kitchen is.

Observe the waitstaff’s graceful body language and hand movements as they guide dishes onto your tabletop as if they’re landing a seaplane filled with precious cargo. Without a hint of awkwardness or pretention, everything is placed just so. Every moment is pre-ordained to avoid disturbance and ensure comfort.

Seasonally rotated tableware and serving vessels, with fitting colours, patterns and textures, are selected to help narrate each dish’s story. As you walk your chopsticks throughout the meal, be aware that you’re likely dining from a procession of 300-year-old ceramics, contemporary designer lacquerware, etched Edo-period glass, sleek modern metallics, carved ice bowls and freshly cut bamboo cups or hand-woven baskets.

Whether it’s a masterpiece on a plate symbolising a particular season, a jewel-like piece of glistening, hand-crafted sushi or a fragile wisp of shiso leaf tempura cooked as you watch, one cannot help but feel overwhelmingly impressed and humbled by such high temples of cuisine.

Tea will be served when the meal is complete, a gentle signal that it’s soon time to leave. On departure, the chef or host will appear at the door, bowing in thanks and waving you off until you are no longer within sight. However, one final gesture of visual generosity is now yours for the giving; take the first turn you come to, resisting the urge to check how long your host will linger, as your disappearance determines their return behind the scenes where they’ll contemplate the prospect of tomorrow’s first impressions. [zenbutravel.com](http://zenbutravel.com) ♦