

# Living the Vegetarian Life in Japan

**Many Japanese people do not have direct experience or understanding of what it means to be vegetarian, vegan, or have other dietary restrictions.**

While Japanese people understand avoiding foods such as pork, beef, &c. for health reasons, restricting certain foods for religious, ethical, or sociopolitical considerations is still largely unfamiliar in Japan, and it can be difficult for your Japanese friend or coworker to understand.

**Fish and meat make their way into a number of friendly-looking Japanese dishes. *Dashi* is a fish stock;** fish stock features in many unlikely snacks, as well as many soups and dipping sauces. Japanese curries are traditionally made with beef or pork, even if you do not see pieces of meat in the meal. Crackers and even cookies have shrimp, eel, and other small fish in them.. This poses a real challenge for a vegetarian or one with other dietary restrictions.

## Improving your Japanese is the first step!

Learn how to politely ask the content of what you order or explain that you do not want bonito/fish flakes on your okonomiyaki (“*katsuobushi nashi de onegai shimasu*”). **Learn kanji** to read ingredients, signs, and menus. The more advanced your Japanese reading and speaking skills are, the more confident you’ll feel in explaining your restrictions, and making informed choices.

Watashi wa bejitarian desu.	I am a vegetarian.
Watashi wa o-niku to sakana ga taberaremasen.	I don't eat meat or fish
.XX nashi de ii desu ka?	Could I have it without XX?

## To overcome the barrier...

**Tell your contracting organization, schools, and any coworkers ASAP.**

Be sure to immediately let your contracting organization and school(s) know of your dietary restrictions. Most schools have teachers designated in charge of social events, like those infamous enkais. Let them know! They are usually happy to accommodate.

**Cook for your Japanese friends and coworkers.** Learn to cook and appreciate traditional Japanese vegetarian dishes. Your commitment to, and interest in, authentic Japanese cuisine will impress your Japanese friends, and garner interest and support for your dietary preferences and restrictions! Showing your positive regard for Japanese cuisine and culture through diving into it will warm others up to your restriction and normalize it for them.

**Teachable moments all around for your students.** You are here as not only an ALT or CIR, but as a cultural ambassador for your nation and the world outside Japan as a whole. Here's an opportunity to expand their perspectives. You will probably be expected to share *kyuushoku* (school lunch) with your students, especially if you teach Elementary school. If this happens, your students will undoubtedly have some questions about your unique lunch; explain what you are eating and show them that your lifestyle makes you happy, healthy, and is usual for many in the world.

## **Out and about? Restaurant options:**

**Indian:** A sure bet for some great vegetarian options, you may also find that the staff speak some English and have experience with vegetarianism.

**Italian:** When in doubt, pizza. A margarita pizza or a simple pasta with tomato sauce won't be tough to find at your standard Italian restaurant.

**Shojin Ryouri ("devotional cuisine"):** Find this nearly-vegan traditional cuisine most often in Japanese towns and cities steeped in Buddhism. Restaurants in cities like Kyoto and Koya-san are great veggie destinations, or if you stay at a temple (highly recommended for a great veggie getaway).

**Izakaya:** a wide variety of smaller dishes are served; usually plenty of vegetarian options, such as tofu dishes, salads, fried vegetables, and so forth.

## **Research and plan in advance.**

**Happy Cow:** Find vegetarian and vegan restaurants around Japan, as well as natural food stores. (<http://www.happycow.net/asia/japan/>)

**Is it Vegan?:** This blog has one mission: to help you stay vegan in Japan. A comprehensive breakdown of many grocery items' ingredients, how to read food labels, and even a list of veggie festivals. (<http://isitveganjapan.com/>)

**Japan Vegetarian Society:** (<http://www.jpvs.org/Eng/ep1/index-eng.html>)

With a little foresight, Japanese knowledge, and planning, living with dietary restrictions in Japan is possible! **Best of luck, and enjoy Japan!**