

Vegan, Vegetarian, Food Allergies, Religious Diets

Cultural Ideas of Food

While Japanese people may be familiar with the terms vegetarian or vegan, many people don't understand exactly what it entails. They hear 'no meat' and think 'no red meat'. Similarly, food allergies certainly occur, but Japan hasn't been experiencing the same increase in allergies that other countries have been, so knowledge of how to accommodate someone with allergies is low. Jews and Muslims make up a minority of the population, so terms like kosher and halal may be unfamiliar. Japan does have a traditional Buddhist diet called shojin ryouri, which is vegetarian, so there's some understanding of religious diets.

Kyuushoku

If you're in elementary or junior high, chances are you'll be eating in the classroom. Lunch is treated seriously and teachers are expected to model good eating habits, including eating a healthy meal and not wasting food. All my schools would weigh the leftovers after every meal and call out the most wasteful class the next day. If you're at a small school with an on-site kitchen, they might be able to make you a meat-free lunch. If that's not possible, talk to your supervisor and your school about bringing your own lunch.

This is a bigger deal than you might imagine. Try to make your lunch look healthy. (You won't hear the end of it if you bring something like instant ramen.) Students and teachers alike will ask you what you have, or sneak over to peek into your lunchbox. Try to use this as a teaching moment to introduce unfamiliar foods or styles of cooking, and to explain again why you eat the way you do.

Find an Ally

Living on a limited diet is much easier if you have a few people at your back. Find a JTE or other English speaker to go shopping with you once or twice and help you read labels. Ask nearby ALTs or your Pred for the names of grocery stores that have a good international food section. Talk to someone in your school or office about your requirements so that there's something you can eat at

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office parties — these are set courses and can range from \$35-\$55. You don't want to spend that much to eat white rice. Trust me.

When going out with friends, it's good to have at least one person who will take your side when debating where to eat or trying to keep one grill for veggies only at yakiniku. It's also good to have a taste tester who can tell you if the curry you ordered is pork based or if there's seafood hiding in your pasta.

Talk to Your Server

At first, a lot of the food will be unfamiliar to you and you'll have to ask about the ingredients frequently. The last page has some helpful phrases. Keep in mind that service is excellent in Japan. The staff at the restaurant will try their best to help you understand the ingredients, or to make you something you can eat. The problem is more the lack of understanding about hidden ingredients, cross-contamination, and the idea that bacon is pig meat.

Hidden Sources of Fish and Meat

Dashi is stock usually made from fish. It's in just about everything, including miso soup, ramen and soy sauce. For vegans and seafood allergies: I can personally attest that almost any soup or sauce contains some kind of seafood extract. Japanese curry is often pork or beef broth based, though Indian curry often has a vegan option. Crackers and chips often contain shrimp, crab or other seafood. If cross-contamination is a problem, always check the menu for fried seafood items before ordering your own fried food — they use the same oil.

Branch Out

You could spend hundreds of dollars on ordering the products you're familiar with, but I encourage you to discover new flavors and learn to cook new things. Japan is big into local, seasonal fruits and veggies. Ask teachers or secretaries for recipes or recommendations on how to cook unfamiliar foods. Kabocha is delicious, nutritious and usually available at BBQ places if you end up at one. If you want to add some nutrients to your white rice, you can try something called

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zakkokumai / kokumotsu gohan. It's rice with seeds, grains and sometimes legumes that you throw into your rice cooker on its plain white rice setting.

Learn to Read Food Labels

As you get more comfortable, it's good to learn how to read a food label. (One note for anyone with seafood allergies: the allergen label is only required to tell you if the product contains shrimp or crab, not seafood in general like in the US.) The Google Translate app has a decent camera-translator and an even better drawing input for kanji that doesn't require you to know stroke order.

survivingNjapan.com/2012/04/ultimate-guide-to-reading-food-labels.html

Personal Choice: Where Will You Draw the Line?

It's worth spending some time thinking about how closely you will adhere to your diet. If you avoid pork for religious reasons, will you eat a salad that you know they picked the bacon off of? If you're vegan, will you eat fish at restaurants so that you have more options? You can certainly get by without compromising, but how strict you choose to be (or have to be) is directly proportional to how much you'll have to prepare ahead of time.

Preparation!

Early on, seek out a chain store that reliably carries a filling meal so that you have a go-to option when traveling. For example, 7 Eleven is everywhere in Japan and it will carry basics like edamame, natto (fermented soy beans) or plain onigiri. Coco Curry House has a prepackaged allergen free curry that's vegetarian (and possibly vegan; I can't recall) and a menu in English.

Keep a quick protein snack in your purse or car. Options like Soyjoy or CalorieMate are vegetarian and readily available in supermarkets. If vegan, you might have to order online or make your own. You can find soy based protein powder at grocery stores or health food shops. Also, Japan has great health care and you'll be on government insurance, so see your doctor regularly!

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Cultural Exchange

Alcohol and food are the gears of the social machine, and you may end up feeling a little left out. Keep in mind that the E in JET Program stands for 'Exchange'. If you can't eat the same food as your coworkers, bring them some of yours! You can expand the image they have of what American food is like.

Your schools may not be okay with you giving food to students, but in my experience, teachers and staff really appreciate an afternoon snack. Cook or bake something you enjoy, just make sure it's easy to portion into individual pieces without touching them—touching other people's food with your bare hands is rather rude. You could also bring in small, prepackaged snacks from home, or even Japanese food you can eat.

Frustration

With dietary limits, you're going to face an additional level of cultural exhaustion. After the hundredth time you've explained that bacon is meat or that you're not being picky—raw octopus could literally kill you, you start to go a little crazy. Every kid in class coming over to look at your food stops being cute. You get tired of having to do the same dietary spiel at every restaurant. When you get to this level, you can either get angry or you can make peace with the fact that their food is the way it is.

While this handout focuses on the challenges you might face, I believe that overall you're going to have an amazing journey. Remember that your time in Japan will be short, and all too soon you'll be the nostalgic one writing advice to the next generation of ALTs.

Enjoy the experience and don't let food stop you from making the most of it!

Helpful Websites

iherb.com: Lots of familiar products, free international shipping over ~\$45

theflyingpig.com: They buy stuff from Costco Japan and ship it to you

<http://www.fbcusa.com/>: Import from the US. Good for seasonal stuff!

<https://isitveganjapan.com/>: Helpful resource for all aspects of vegan life

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Excuse me. すみません。 Sumimasen.	I am a vegan. ヴィーガンです。 Viigan desu.	I am a vegetarian. ベジタリアンです。 Bejitarian desu.
I am Jewish. ユダヤ人です。 Yudaya jin desu.	I am Muslim. イスラム教徒です。 Isuramu kyouto desu.	I have an allergy. アレルギーがあります。 Alelugi ga arimasu.

I don't eat ____ ... // ____ を食べません。// ____ o tabemasen.

I can't eat ____ ... // ____ が食べられません。// ____ ga taberaremasen.

Meat 肉 niku	Shellfish 貝類 kairui	Fish 魚 sakana	Tree nuts ナッツ nattsu	Pork / Bacon 豚肉・ベーコン butaniku / bekon	Peanuts ピーナッツ・落花生 piinatsu / rakkasei
Eggs 卵 tamago	Dairy 乳製品 nyuuseihin	Soy 大豆 daizu	Wheat 小麦 komugi	All seafood 魚介類 gyokairui	Any animal products 動物性食品 doubutsuseishokuhin

- Connect two or more of the above using the word と (to)

Can you check with the chef? シェフに聞いてもらえますか。 Chef ni kiite moraemasu ka?	Can the chef make this without _____? _____ を入れずに作れますか。 _____ o irezuni tsukuremasu ka?
Does this contain _____? これは _____ が入っていますか。 Kore wa _____ ga haitteimasu ka?	Is this cooked in the same pan as _____? これは _____ と同じなべを使っていますか。 Kore wa _____ to onaji nabe o tsukatte imasu ka?

I don't drink alcohol. Does this contain mirin or alcohol?

お酒が飲めません。これは味醂とかアルコールが入っていますか？

Osake ga nomemasen. Kore wa mirin toka arukouru ga haitteimasu ka?

I'm sorry. My Japanese isn't great.

Could you say, 'We can do it' / 'It's okay' / 'We can't do it' ?

すみません。日本語があまりわからないんですが..。

できる / だいじょうぶ / できない / ということでしょうか。

Sumimasen. Nihongo ga amari wakaranain desu ga...

Dekiru / daijoubu / dekinai to yuu koto deshou ka?