

Vegan, Vegetarian, and Restricted Diets in Japan

Despite what you may have heard about Japan, it is 100% possible to live comfortably as a vegan or vegetarian there. It just takes a bit more thought and effort than you might be used to.

Japanese grocery stores stock fruits and vegetables, the tofu and soy milk are cheap and delicious, they have online specialty stores there, and you can still cook meals at home. Whatever your diet, you'll be fine—provided you are willing to learn enough Japanese to ask what's in your food and read ingredients labels, and to cook more meals at home rather than eating out if necessary. It can seem a bit overwhelming at first, but the information in this handout will help you cope with most of the challenges you will face in trying to maintain a restricted diet while living in Japan. Here's a few things to keep in mind.

Restricted diets are still quite rare in Japan, and many Japanese people have no direct experience dealing with people with special diets like vegans and vegetarians.

Most Japanese have probably heard the word 'vegetarian' before, and they are of course familiar with people having allergies to certain foods, but most Japanese have never even heard of veganism, and few have any real understanding of what 'vegetarianism' or 'veganism' really mean in practice. The whole idea of abstaining from consuming certain foods for ethical, political, or environmental reasons is an extremely foreign concept in Japan. So get ready for a lot of confusion!

Fish and other animal products make their way into a number of vegan-friendly-looking dishes in Japan, and *dashi* (fish stock) is in A TON of Japanese foods. However, you may be surprised and delighted by the surprisingly delicious and simple vegetable dishes you can find here and there.

Miso soup, curry, pasta, rice balls, and even salads often contain meat or other animal products. Since vegetarianism is such an unfamiliar concept in Japan, no one thinks to segregate animal products from otherwise vegetarian dishes. If you're at a restaurant that is not explicitly vegetarian, you simply have to ask whether a dish contains animal products—you can't assume anything. *Dashi* (fish stock) is a staple of Japanese cooking, and it shows up in otherwise innocuous dishes like miso soup (although NOT in miso paste) all the time. With that said, Japanese cuisine places an emphasis on simple preparations that bring out the subtle flavors of standalone food items (think *sushi* or *sashimi*) in a way that can be surprisingly delicious. Practically every Japanese grocery store sells something called *yaki imo*—which is just plain sweet potato, heated, in a brown paper bag—and it's surprisingly tasty. You can find many cunningly simple preparations of ordinary vegetables to delight you in Japan that you may have never encountered before.

The key to surviving on a restricted diet in Japan is learning the vocabulary!

I am a vegetarian/vegan.	Watashi wa bejitarian/biigan desu.
I don't eat meat or fish.	Watashi wa o-niku to sakana o taberaremasen.
Can I have it without XX?	XX nashi de ii desu ka?
Is there fish in this?	Kono naka ni wa sakana ga haitte imasu ka?
Cheese is no good (for me).	Chiizu wa dame desu.
Is there something without fish?	Sakana ga haitte nai mono ga arimasu ka?
I have an allergy to milk.	Miruku ni arerugii nan desu.

Your life will be made much easier if you tell your supervisor, along with anyone else who needs to know at your schools, about your dietary restrictions immediately.

Don't feel shy about being upfront about what you can and cannot eat. Your supervisor is there to help you transition and adjust to life in Japan, and he or she will want to know about anything like dietary restrictions that could cause problems right away. It's already a given that you are different from everyone else and have strange customs and ways, so it's not particularly bothersome at all to accommodate any special dietary needs you have. Your supervisor will need to know what foods you can and cannot eat when planning things like your welcome party and *enkais*, and your schools will need to know if you plan on bringing your own bento every day instead of eating the *kyuushoku* (school lunch) like everyone else.

Far from being something to hide, being a vegetarian or vegan in Japan actually makes you MORE interesting to everyone around you.

Remember: you're not just going to Japan to teach English. The 'E' in JET stands for 'exchange', and your special diet is a wonderful way for that cultural exchange to happen, since average Japanese will be exposed to a very different lifestyle choice from anything they're likely to be used to. The fact is, being a vegetarian or vegan is part of your culture and identity that you are bringing with you to your host city, and that helps enrich the cultural diversity of the place you will be calling home, which is one of the main goals of the JET Programme. So no need to feel ashamed because you don't fit in. Instead, be open and upfront about it. Explain your diet, and the reasons you opted for it. Most people will likely be quite intrigued. It's a chance for them to learn about a foreign culture.

Eating out? Here's some vegan-friendly restaurant options.

Indian: A staple for vegans and vegetarians in Japan. The staff often speaks English and is familiar with the idea of restricted diets. You can usually find a few vegan options on the menu of most Indian restaurants in Japan.

Italian: Not a bad choice—particularly for vegetarians. You can usually at least get a plate full of spaghetti with tomato sauce. But watch out for cheese and hidden meat in the pasta sauce!

Shoujin Ryouri (Buddhist monk food): A specialty of the Kyoto area, and in other towns steeped in Buddhist history, *shoujin ryouri* is the traditional vegan diet of Buddhist monks in Japan. In addition to restaurants specializing in this kind of cuisine, it is also typically the food you will be served if you stay overnight at a temple.

Izakaya: There's usually at least a few small vegan dishes offered at the tiny bars you can find in any Japanese town, such as edamame, tofu dishes, salads, fried vegetables, and so forth. Once again, though, watch out for *dashi* or other animal products in sauces or broths.

French-style boulangeries: Quite popular in Japan, but hit-or-miss as to whether they have vegan options. You can usually at least find plain baguettes (which, if they're made in the traditional French manner, would be vegan), and sometimes quite a few more kinds of delicious breads that are vegan. But watch out for butter or animal-derived shortening in breads in general in Japan!

Conbinis: The ubiquitous convenience stores that dot the land actually have quite a few vegan snacks most of the time, though you're mostly out of luck if you want a whole meal. Edamame, fruits, inari zushi, plain rice balls, mochi, and fried potato snacks can often be found there.

Sushi restaurants: These are actually often a solid choice if you're stuck with nothing else. Since the food is so simple, you can be confident there are no hidden animal ingredients. You can usually find vegetable sushi like *kappa-maki*, *kampyo-maki*, and *inari-zushi* at these places, as well as fried potato products sometimes.

Further things to research: There is actually a blossoming vegan and vegetarian movement in Japan, though it's still relatively small by international standards. And you can find vegan online food stores, as well as health food grocery stores in the big cities that sell lots of vegan products. Here's a list of things to check out.

- **The Japanese vegan and vegetarian societies:** <http://vegan-japan.info/>
<http://www.jpvs.org/Eng/ep1/index.html>
- **<http://tokyo-vegefest.com/english/>:** This group puts on a great, big vegan food festival every October in Yoyogi Park in Tokyo, as well as other events. It's well worth sneaking off to Tokyo for a weekend to attend!

- **Natural House (<http://www.naturalhouse.co.jp/>):** a Whole Foods-like grocery store with branches in several big cities, and which carries lots of vegan stuff.
- **<http://warabemura.net/html/page3.html>:** An entirely vegan mail order shop, with an English-speaking staff and English catalogue. The English version can be a bit cumbersome to order from, though, and it's easier using the Japanese page once you get used to it.
- **<http://www.yousei-no-mori.jp/>:** Japanese-only vegan online grocery, and the sole importer of commercial vegan dog and cat food in Japan, as far as I can tell!
- **iherb.com:** A very large range of American vegan foods and toiletries. Plus they offer free shipping to Japan!
- **<https://www.happycow.net/asia/japan/>:** Your one-stop-shop for finding vegetarian and vegan restaurants in Japan.
- **<https://isitveganjapan.com/>:** A blog about staying vegan in Japan. Provides info on reading Japanese food labels, and on veggie festivals, groups, and vegan shopping in Japan.
- **<http://veggy.jp/>:** Japanese-language magazine all about vegetarianism and veganism in Japan. Full of delicious vegan recipes, vegan news, vegan events, and profiles of vegan businesses in Japan. Great reading material to help you study Japanese!

Best of luck!

And remember:

一期一会 (ichi go, ichi e)