

What is Kaiseki?

Kaiseki cuisine is a traditional Japanese meal, usually consisting of around nine courses served in a prescribed order.

The modern day kaiseki is a rather sumptuous affair, but paradoxically, its origin is a minimalist, strictly vegetarian meal, almost humble in spirit. It was traditionally served in Zen temples to accompany the tea ceremony.

In the Japanese language, this original Zen "kaiseki" is a combination of two words-"kai" which refers to the bosom of the kimono, and "seki" meaning stone. Much like the warmed stones Zen priests used to tuck into the bosoms of their kimonos to heat their empty stomachs to ward off hunger, the original kaiseki was a small meal, taken not to satisfy, but merely warm the stomach before strong green tea was ingested. It consisted of one soup, three small seasonal dishes and just three mouthfuls of rice. It was a meal of restraint-just seasonal ingredients, simply prepared.

While the original Zen "kaiseki" exists in its pure form to this day and is still served as part of the tea ceremony, today's kaiseki is quite a different affair. It is a much heartier and sophisticated meal centered on the drinking of sake (rice wine) rather than tea, and is very elaborate in presentation.

Though the two kaiseki are homonyms, today's kaiseki - is a totally different word in Japanese made up of two words-"kai" meaning to meet, and "seki" - meaning seat. So quite literally, seat of meeting, or in Aussie parlance, a party or a piss up.

The contemporary kaiseki is a seven to nine course meal (or more) and any number of the following categories of dishes can be served, usually, though not always in this order:

- 1. sakizuke HØQ appetiser
- 2. wanmono i seasonal offering in broth
- 3. mukozuke SFØQ cold dish (usually sashimi)
- 4. either yakimono <Mi or agemono ÚRi grilled or fried dish
- 5. takiawase M •[or mushimono, Wi simmered, braised or steamed dish
- 6. sunomono bni or aemono ŒHi salad or "dressed" dish
- 7. gohan jĩ rice or noodles
- 8. otsuyu JA broth
- 9. tsukemono ,i pickles

Note that 7,8,9 are served after the sake drinking is over.

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