

Kaiseki -To understand traditional Japanese Pottery-

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The relationship between tableware and the food presented on it has long been a topic for discussion, with an emphasis either on the food dish or the accompanying tableware.

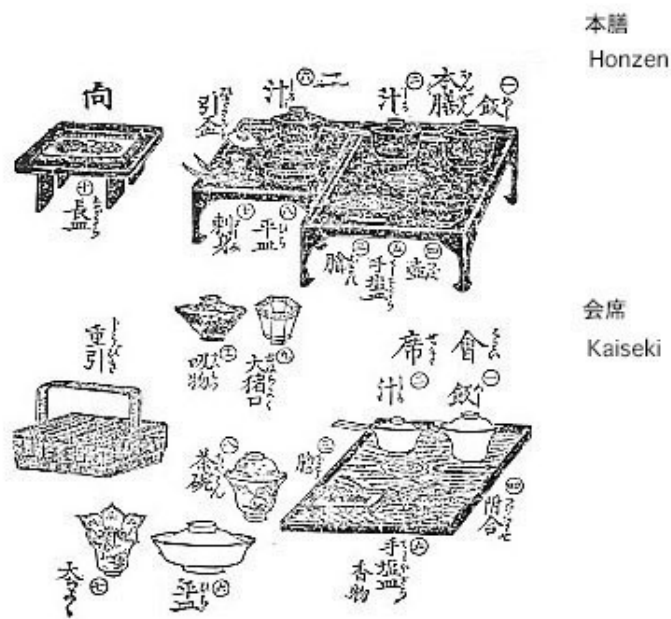
In Japan, it is taken as implicit that in talking about the one you inevitably talk about the other. So in this article, I am referring indirectly to tableware even though my apparent focus is on Japanese dishes and the mentality behind them!

Until about a hundred years ago, in the Meiji era (1868-1912), when society was organized in highly explicit social classes, the upper class ate their dishes, using *zen* which is a tiny low table for individual use. A wide variety of tableware was required to make the *zen* table more attractive and to make it reflect the appropriate seasonal atmosphere. The Japanese-style *zen* table design and the typical pattern of ordering dishes as commonly understood in the West can only be found today in special traditional Japanese restaurants or hotels.

懷石 *Kaiseki* dishes best represent the core of traditional Japanese food culture. These are simple dishes served before tea is served in the tea ceremony. It is essential to appreciate the spirit of 懷石 *kaiseki* to fully understand the form of the 膳 *zen* table. The core of 懷石 *kaiseki* dishes resides in their proper respect for food materials and nature's role in producing them, which in turn is shown in the simple form of the 懷石 *kaiseki* dish. The name 懷石 *kaiseki* comes from the tradition of Buddhist priests who stow warm stones (stone=石 *seki*) in their inside breast pocket (breast/ thoughts of heart=懷 *ka*).

There is also the concept of *wabi* or austere refinement. The feeling of *wabi* and *sabi* (quiet simplicity) come from simple and poor food served to fill an empty stomach. To be precise, this type of 懷石 *kaiseki* is called 茶懷石 *cha-kaiseki* (tea *kaiseki*). Food variety was naturally limited as Buddhist priests did not eat meat.

On the other hand, there is another type of 懷石 *kaiseki*, which is different--good and high-quality dishes served at special parties. These are also called 会席 *kaiseki* dishes. In addition, there are the more formal full-course dishes called 本膳 *honzen* (proper 膳 *zen*) dishes. In the spectrum of dishes. These are at the end opposite to 茶懷石 *cha-kaiseki*.



懷石料理 Kaiseki cuisine

It is said that the traditional Japanese dishes should be consumed not only by taste but also their visual appearance as presented to the eyes. Party 懷石 *kaiseki* dishes or 本膳 *honzen* dishes please people by utilizing a wide variety of food materials, finely cooked and presented on decorated dishes, and shining tableware. *Kaiseki* or 本膳 *honzen* dishes are served luxuriously decorated with ceremonial celebrations. We should note that there are two meanings to zen which are separate, the *zen* for the table and the *zen* which Western readers are more familiar with, or the Buddhist way. Decorated celebratory dishes are far from the spirit of the tea ceremony which relates to the Buddhist way.

Our "eyes" in party 会席 *kaiseki* or 本膳 *honzen* can only capture surface or material luxury. But the metaphor of "eyes" should be understood in a more spiritual sense. The food that merely satisfies the desire for life and appetite contradicts the spirituality of 茶道 *sado* (the way of the tea ceremony) whose essence is going beyond one's own self. For 禪 *Zen* priests, eating is not just for satisfying the appetite. For them, the whole life, and the whole ascetic practice are represented in eating. This is why they keep quiet while eating. In addition, cooking is also an ascetic practice. Indeed, everything related to one's appetite is ascetic practice. When eating, they just eat, and they just keep seated and when they are seated that is commonly and widely known as 坐禪 *zazen* (Zen sitting). And the excretion that comes afterward is also an ascetic practice. Hunger is thus a way to spiritual enlightenment.

茶懷石
Tea kaiseki



The simplicity of 茶懷石 *cha-kaiseki* comes from the core of the 禪 Zen spirit. Being simple does not mean being shabby. The mental simplicity of 禪 Zen and the tea ceremony is related to the artistic sense of 侘 *wabi* and 寂 *sabi*. The simple food materials used in 茶懷石 *cha-kaiseki* are cooked with care, and without losing their essential own natural taste. This is different from just enjoying raw food materials as being natural. What is at stake is the respect for nature, which is emphasized by the style of 茶懷石 *cha-kaiseki*, small amounts of food seen in pots and plates. The tableware here is not new, not shabby, but not luxurious merely to show off to guests. The pots and plates used in 茶懷石 *cha-kaiseki* are sometimes used for the tea ceremony. For instance, a *sake* (rice wine) bottle is used as a flower vase, with some seasonal flowers and put on the floor. The act of putting the tableware into a different context, different from its original use, is called 見立て *mitate*. A pot in 茶懷石 *cha-kaiseki*, used for serving food, may be used as a snack plate in which seasonal cakes are put. These cakes also represent the four seasons. Thus everything related to 茶懷石 *cha-kaiseki* and the tea ceremony represents respect for nature and identification with nature. If the guest is surprised and pleased, it is not because of the material luxury but because of the spirituality and the artistic sense of their host. Thus everything leads us to the sense of beauty in the poverty or simplicity pursued in 禪 Zen.

This spirit of 茶懷石 *cha-kaiseki* was the backbone of original Japanese food culture and the background to the spirit of people who lived in an era of poverty. Up until about 120 to 130 years ago, rice farmers could not eat the rice they had produced, and they had to eat other grains. Most Japanese including low-class warriors (samurai) ate a cup of soup plus one dish, with some grain (rarely rice) as their sole diet. On the other hand, the dishes commonly consumed in Japan nowadays are more like popularized party food. It is essential to recall the spirituality that existed in 茶懷石 *cha-kaiseki* when seeking to examine and appreciate our food culture here in Japan.