

Learn About The Five Pillars of Japanese Cuisine

Sa-Sato, Shi-Shio, Su-Su, Se-Shoyu, So-Miso

The popularity of Japanese food has skyrocketed in the US in recent years. From sushi and ramen to tonkatsu, there are so many options to choose from. But have you ever thought about the ingredients that go into Japanese Cuisine?

Some of the first ingredients that come to mind are likely fish and rice, which is not incorrect. However in Japan, there is an acronym used called “Sa Shi Su Se So”. This acronym stands for the five pillars you will find in every Japanese household and kitchen, increasing in intensity and flavor as the list goes. Let’s break down these five ingredients and a local place where you can find them!

Sa - Sato

In Japanese, “sato” means sugar. An ingredient across the world, sugar is used as a starting point in many sauces or dishes. When the next pillar **spoiler alert**, salt, is added to a dish, it causes moisture to leave ingredients, so you want to make sure that sugar is added first. “Sa” sometimes also stands for sake, which can be used in tandem or in place of sugar to bring a sweetness to your dish.

Shi - Shio

“Shio” means salt in Japanese. Similar to western cooking, salt is one of those first ingredients you add to a dish to begin building flavor in Japanese cooking. It has many properties that are beneficial such as reducing the fishy smell from fish and is the counter to sugar, allowing a balance to be achieved early in the cooking process.

Su - Su

“Su” is vinegar in Japanese. Going from sweet and salty, vinegar brings acidity to the dish. If added too early to a vegetable dish for example, the flavor would not be absorbed properly due to an excess of moisture still in. This is why vinegar comes next. It also helps to begin building those layers of umami which will pick up quickly with our last two ingredients.

Se - Shoyu

“Shoyu” means soy sauce in Japanese. In old Japanese, they used the word “seiyu” for soy sauce, hence the difference. These last two ingredients are a sizable jump in flavor complexity and intensity, which is part of the reason why they are added at the end. Soy sauce, as you likely know, is a salt rich ingredient. This is added towards the end to make sure your dish is not too salty and provides a depth and richness.

So - Miso

If you have tried miso soup before, you know that it has quite a unique flavor. Both soy sauce and miso share a similarity in that they are both fermented foods. If added early in the cooking process, the heat will inevitably change and reduce the complex and umami flavor in your dish. This could possibly change the entire flavor profile in an undesired way.

So there you have it! The five pillars of Japanese cuisine. The order of these ingredients will vary sometimes, and not every Japanese meal has these ingredients. But if you have these in your pantry, you can make a wide variety of Japanese sauces and flavors. If you would like to pick up these items in one convenient place in the Houston area, check out **Seiwa Market** <https://www.seiwamarket.com/> or **Daido Market** <https://www.daidotx.com/> on the west side of the city. These are the only two Japanese grocery stores in the city, and carry a large selection of ingredients from Japan.

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Itadakimasu: Let's Eat!

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