

hokkaido *Life*

A PICKY EATER'S GUIDE TO JAPAN

The links in these documents contain information to make your life in Hokkaido easier and more enjoyable. Access each link and add it to your favourites list.

The following is addressed to vegetarians but otherwise 'picky eaters' should also find it helpful.

Japanese vegetarians are few and far between. *Gaijin* vegetarians are much less rare, and there seems to be a good deal of understanding, or acceptance, of this bizarre eating habit so rampant among us. Or rather, most Japanese have heard of vegetarianism but really hope you aren't one. You will be questioned daily about your eating habits, repeatedly served things you *just* said you don't eat, and have people try to convince you that Japanese meat is better than non-Japanese meat. However, it is possible to maintain a vegetarian lifestyle.

Two Rules for Anyone Who Doesn't Eat Something, for Any Reason

1. Set Your Limits

Decide exactly what you do and don't eat, and how far you will bend your rules. For example, for social purposes, I eat things that I would never eat at home. At home I do not eat anything made with, or even near, meat, including fish. But, in Japan, I eat fish. The whole thing staring up at me from its plate; sliced up with lots of *wasabi* and anything else that's around for garnish; or in soup, whatever.

I would never do this at home. But, I have found that it makes things much easier socially. If someone invites me to dinner, it's easy to say, I don't eat meat, but fish is okay, but not octopus, squid, or shellfish (which doesn't sound that easy does it?).

School lunch; the most painful. The soups invariably have little bits of flesh in them. I eat around them. I don't even take helpings of whatever bit of flesh is being served. The teachers know I don't eat meat, and the kids are coming to;

they all think I am weird. But remember, school lunch (*kyushoku*) is not in your contract. You don't have to eat it!

I only eat school lunch at that one school, where I get to eat with the kids. Otherwise, it's yummy salads and sandwiches from home for this vegetarian. I call this being flexible. If, however, you are strong enough to stick to your principles, then by all means, do so! You will at least find support among other JETs! At any rate, decide what exactly it is you do and do not eat, and stick to you standards.

2. State Your Eating Habits Early and In Full

If you already told them you don't eat it, it won't be too rude when it turns out that no, you don't, in fact, eat it. You may miss out on some invitations; why invite the ALT who doesn't eat fish to a sushi party? But if they know that you do like *kappamaki* and *tamagoyaki* then you might still get invited.

Stating Your Reasons

After telling someone that you don't eat meat, the first question will of course be 'Why?'. We are vegetarians for various reasons, of course, from environmental concerns, to health reasons, and allergies or religion. For some reason, Japanese people are more accepting of vegetarianism if it is for reasons along the lines of allergies or religion. I don't know why. But you don't have to tell the truth. It could make your life a lot easier. How you decide to explain your reasons is up to you, but be prepared to do so!

Possible Reasons

Environmental problems (*kankyō mondai*); health (*kenkō*), healthy (*kenkouteki*); religion (*shūkyō*); allergy (*arerugi*)

EATING OUT

Eating out can be difficult, but also fun. There are lots of meat-free foods in Japanese restaurants, but lots of things to watch out for, too. Remember, meats like ham, sausage, bacon, and of course fish, are often not considered meat in this country, so be specific when asking if something contains *niku*! Also, restaurants are not in the habit of catering to their customers' requests. Your requests for no meat will be seen as strange, and possibly impossible, but it doesn't hurt to ask.

Safe Foods at the Combini

Ume onigiri (rice balls with sour plums, wrapped in seaweed); *nattomaki* (fermented

soybean sushi rolls); *inarizushi* (rice in fried tofu pockets); *zarusoba* (cold buckwheat noodles, but the sipping sauce is fish based).

At the Izakaya

Onigiri, *agedashidofu* (fried tofu), *hiyayako* (chilled tofu, often served with fish flakes, though), *yuudofu* (tofu boiled with *kombu*), *edamame* (boiled and salted soybeans, in the pod, don't eat the pod), *koroke* (fried potato patties, often with corn, or meaty things), *gohan seto* (rice, pickles and *miso*), some veggie dishes, like corn or spinach, and of course, the beer.

At Kaitenzushi

True Japanese fast food: sushi on a conveyor belt, but you can also order things.

- *Maki-zushi* (rolled sushi): *kappamaki* (cucumber and wasabi); *nattomaki* (fermented soybeans) and various other pickled vegetable *maki*, in day-glow colors
- *Tamago* (egg, rice and a band of seaweed)
- *Inarizushi*

Safe Noodle Dishes

Soba (thin, buckwheat noodles) and *udon* (thick, wheat noodles) come in the following styles: *kake* (plain, hot), *kitsune* (fried tofu with green onions), *sansai* (mountain vegetables).

Also try *morisoba* (plain), *zarusoba* (plain except for *nori*), and *somen* (thin wheat noodles) all served cold with dipping sauce.

Dishes You Hope Are Vegetarian but Which Often Contain Meat

Salads, pasta, anything 'western', noodle soups, *yasaiitame* (stir fried veggies, often has meat, because it is not a meat-free meal).

Dishes You Might Think Are Vegetarian but Aren't

- Soups with no visible meat: *miso* and other noodle soups are made from fish broth; *ramen* (Chinese style noodle soup) is pork based
- *Okonomiyaki* (a cabbage pancake usually with meat or shrimp): You might be able to find some without meat – the *natto* version is lovely! – but request no sauce (oyster) or *katsuobushi* (fish flakes that shimmer in the heat of your cabbage pancake)

- *Takikomigohan* (rice made in the rice cooker with veggie bits): It is usually made from a meat or fish stock
- Also things that look like tofu: *kamaboko* (the fish equivalent of hot dogs) and fish meatballs

EATING IN

When you eat at home you can eat whatever you want and know exactly what is in everything you make. Unfortunately it's hard to get some vegetarian staples here, and they aren't as convenient either. Don't fear though, you're not doomed to eating tofu and white rice every day. There are ways of getting whole-wheat flour and dried beans. And there are some good, at least interesting, Japanese foods that you might like, and a few that the vegetarian should be wary of.

Things to Try

- *Natto*: it looks and smells disgusting, but it's addictive (besides, it will redeem you for not eating meat, every Japanese person who knows that you eat *natto* will think you are amazing; half of Japanese people can't stand the stuff)
- Different kinds of tofu – *kinugoshidofu* (soft), *momendofu* (firm), (dried), *aburaage* (fried), *gomadofu* (sesame-flavoured), *tamagodofu* (made with egg), *tonyu* (soy milk)
- Brown rice (*genmai*, they sell it but don't eat it, but it actually tastes good, and has fibre and nutrition, unlike its refined offspring *shirogohan*)
- *Tsukemono* (pickled things, like cucumber, *daikon* and cabbage)
- Sea vegetables like *wakame*, *kombu*, and *hijiki*
- Other vegetables like *renkon*, *daikon*, *gobo*, *mituba*, and *satusmaimo*
- Noodles

Things to Beware of at the Grocery Store

- *Miso* with *dashi* in it, called *dashi ire*. When cooking Japanese food like *miso* soup at home, feel free to use water in place of *dashi*, or make *dashi* from *kombu*
- Anything prepared or instant; soups; broths; salads and salad dressings
- Mysterious things that look like tofu that might in fact be fish

As always, the official [hajet/forum](#) is where you will find all the answers to any questions you may have regarding life in Hokkaido.

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