

Art Inspired by the Seasons: Wagashi



Minazuki, a type of *wagashi* that embodies wishes for good health and happiness

Photo: PIXTA

Kaaisan is a Kyoto-based creator who promotes Japanese culture in English day by day. In this month's issue, Kaaisan talks about *wagashi* (traditional Japanese confectionery).

Wagashi is a general term for the kind of sweets that have been made in Japan since ancient times. They are characterized by the use of various plant-based ingredients such as beans and rice. *Wagashi* design changes with the seasons, with some popping up only at certain times of the year, like Halloween costumes, and others conveying the spirit of the season through their appearance, like Christmas *coffrets*.¹ Just as favorite seasons come and go in a regular pattern, the availability of specific types of Japanese sweets only at certain times of the year is both a tease and a delight. Let's follow *wagashi* on a journey through the year in Japan.

Kaaisan

Spring wagashi

In spring, there are many light-colored sweets that evoke the image of budding plants. *Sakura mochi*, a typical example of spring *wagashi*, comes in two styles: Kansai style and Kanto style.² Kansai-style *sakura mochi* are light pink *mochi*³ glutinous rice cakes filled with *azuki* bean paste (with some beans left whole) and wrapped in pickled *sakura* cherry leaves. In the Kanto region, the *azuki* bean paste is rolled in a crepe-like dough, which is then wrapped in a pickled *sakura* cherry

leaf. *Sakura mochi* is so popular, it can even be found in convenience stores and supermarkets outside of the spring season.

Summer wagashi

During the hot and humid Japanese summer, cool-looking smooth sweets made with agar or *kuzu* are especially popular. *Minazuki* is a *wagashi* made with a jelly-like base made to resemble a small piece of ice and topped with *azuki* beans. In Japan, the color red is traditionally

believed to keep evil spirits away, so this *wagashi*, with the hope that the red beans on top will do just that, symbolizes wishes for good health and happiness.

Autumn wagashi

As the season of chestnuts and sweet potatoes, autumn is known for *wagashi* such as *kuri-kinton* (candied chestnuts and sweet potatoes) and *imo-yokan* (sweet potato jelly). Besides, there is also a genre of Japanese confectionery called



Kaaisan

Creator of English-language short film introductions to Japan. She manages an online community for like-minded people interested in Japanese culture and worldview to meet and learn together. She also plans and organizes various events on an irregular basis.



Sakura mochi (Kanto style), a *wagashi* representing spring

Photo: PIXTA



A *nerikiri* sweet, visually representing the season (*Nerikiri* with pumpkin, apple and ginkgo leaf shaped toppings)

Photo: Kaaisan

“*nerikiri*,”⁴ is made with white bean paste and sugar as the basic ingredients. *Nerikiri* sweets are made all year round, while they express a seasonal feeling with their distinctive designs and motifs. In autumn, *nerikiri* are shaped to resemble motifs such as colorful leaves and pumpkins.

Winter wagashi

Zenzai is a popular Japanese winter *wagashi* among ordinary households in the Kansai region. It is made by simmering *azuki* beans with sugar and adding *mochi* cakes to the mixture to create a warming and delightful winter treat. *Hanabira mochi*, served mainly in Kyoto on New Year’s Day, is a thin layer of *mochi* wrapped

around a filling of white *miso-an* bean paste, and a slice of burdock root. The origin of this treat can be traced back to around the 10th century, when there was a custom of praying for longevity by eating something hard (*hagatame*⁵).

Some popular *wagashi* are available year-round at supermarkets and convenience stores, but if you want to experience the real world of traditional Japanese confectionery, specialty stores are the place to go. There is even a Japanese proverb, “For *mochi* (rice cakes), go to the *mochi* shop” (“*Mochi wa mochiya*”), which uses the popular *wagashi* ingredient (*mochi*) to express the idea that it is

best to leave things to professionals in each field. Learning about the background and motifs of Japanese sweets will help you appreciate their flavors better and enjoy them even more.



Hanabira mochi (right) and *matcha* powdered green tea (left), a traditional refreshment served since ancient times, most notably in Kyoto

Photo: Kaaisan

1. Limited-edition cosmetic kits released by various brands in time for the Christmas season.
2. Kanto: a large area roughly consisting of Tokyo and the surrounding prefectures. Kansai: an area roughly consisting of Kyoto, Osaka, Kobe and the surrounding prefectures.
3. Kansai-style *sakura mochi* is made from *domyoji* flour, which is prepared by steaming glutinous rice called *mochi gome*, drying it, and then grinding it with a coarse millstone. Kanto-style *sakura mochi* uses a crepe-like dough made from wheat flour and refined rice flour.
4. In addition to describing a type of Japanese confectionery, *nerikiri* can also refer to the dough used to make *wagashi* itself, which is a white bean paste kneaded with an added thickener.
5. On the 100th day after a child’s birth, the family holds a traditional Japanese ceremony called *okuizome* (literally “first meal”). After pretending to feed the baby a variety of foods, the parents perform a ritual called *hagatame no gishiki* (literally, “tooth-hardening ritual”). They touch the tip of the chopsticks to a pebble prepared along with the food, and then gently place the tip on the baby’s gums as an expression of their hope for the baby to have strong teeth and live a long life. (See *Highlighting Japan*, May 2023.)