

Five books about Japan that are perfect for foodies

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We've already established that there's a fantastic canon of Japanese cookbooks out there when you're craving a washoku meal or hearty bowl of noodles. But you can't exactly curl up and read them cover to cover. Fortunately, many authors writing about Japan use the country's cuisine as a central plot point. Here are five food-centric books perfect for a lazy afternoon:

The Teahouse Fire

Fiction, Ellis Avery, Riverhead Books, 480 pages

Winner of the annual Lambda Literary Award for Debut Fiction, which recognizes the best LGBTQ novels, "The Teahouse Fire" is set during the tumultuous Meiji Era (1868-1912), as Japan wrestles with tradition and Westernization. Aurelia, newly orphaned in Kyoto, is adopted by the prestigious Shin family as an attendant for their daughter, Yukako. As the title would suggest, much of the story centers around *sadō* (tea ceremony; author Ellis Avery studied it for five years), as both Aurelia and Yukako practice it in defiance of the art's historic male-only precept. The turmoil of the era is mirrored in Aurelia's own personal growth and modernization.

Sweet Bean Paste

Fiction, Durian Sukegawa (trans. Alison Watts), Oneworld, 224 pages

Sentaro is in a slump: unmotivated, chain-smoking, and making (frankly) bad *dorayaki* (pancakes stuffed with red bean paste) in a small corner shop. But one day, Tokue, an elderly woman, says she can teach him how to make better red bean paste, and an unlikely partnership is formed. But as the shop's popularity booms, thanks to Tokue's recipe, a dark secret comes to light. It's a charming book with a slice-of-life edge. And if you can't get enough, there's even a movie adaptation called "Sweet Bean" starring the late, great Kirin Kiki as Tokue.

Kitchen

Fiction, Banana Yoshimoto (trans. Megan Backus), Grove Paperback, 160 pages

No list about food-centric Japanese books would be complete without an entry by Banana Yoshimoto. "Kitchen" is so short you could finish it in an afternoon over a cup of tea. After her grandmother passes away, Mikage moves in with her friend Yuichi and his transgender mother, Eriko. Together, they help her come to terms with grief and loneliness. But struggling with her growing feelings for Yuichi, it's an unexpectedly delicious *katsudon* (pork cutlet bowl) that acts as the catalyst for Mikage to make a crucial choice. If, after "Kitchen," you want even more Yoshimoto, "Moshi, Moshi" is the perfect follow up.

Rice, Noodle, Fish

Nonfiction, Matt Goulding, Harper Wave/Anthony Bourdain, 352 pages

Part travelogue, part photojournalism, part storytelling, “Rice, Noodle, Fish” is Matt Goulding’s deep dive into Japanese food culture. Broken down by region — it includes expected locales such as Tokyo, Osaka and Kyoto as well as more out-of-the-way destinations like Ishikawa Prefecture’s Noto Peninsula — it’s less a defined itinerary and more an homage to one nation’s culinary possibility. The short prologue, an exchange of emails between Goulding and the late Anthony Bourdain about developing the book, is especially touching. A Japanese edition, “Kome, Men, Sakana no Kuni Kara,” was published in 2017.

Memorial

Fiction, Bryan Washington, Riverhead Books, 320 pages

Out this past October, “Memorial” is about Benson, a Black daycare teacher, and his partner Mike, a Japanese American chef. When Mike’s mother, Mitsuko, suddenly shows up in Houston, Mike up and flies back to Osaka to meet his dying, estranged father, leaving Benson and Mitsuko as unlikely roommates. Washington is no stranger to writing about either Japan or its food — a memorable essay for *The New Yorker* entirely about the pleasures of omurice is a perfect example — and it shows. The act of cooking is a recurring motif throughout the novel’s three sections: the kitchen is a central space where tough, personal conversations between characters happen. It’s a modern, raw debut novel that perfectly captures the current moment of struggling to connect with others.