

# **KAISEKI**

## The wisdom of Japanese cuisine

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**\*\*\*\*\* Google translation, very roughly edited \*\*\*\*\***

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### CHAPTER I - Why Japan, why Kaiseki?

A few years ago I decided to look for myself. Especially in culinary terms. Until then I had cooked in a Berlin restaurant, which was decorated with Michelin stars, the chef came from the Upper Palatinate and cooked, as it was expected by the testers from the Michelin: French cuisine, with a regional touch. "Regional" was then also called "rustic", and one could get also such things as black pudding and sauerkraut, to which champagne had been added in order to make it more delicate. I myself originate from the Ruhr area, which is in culinary terms rather undetected. My grandmother regularly cooked her traditional Sunday Roast. She had been born in Hessa and cooked a lot with horseradish sauce and salted potatoes.

At my parent's home the traditional Sunday feast was a roasted lamb shank with a lot of garlic. My mother made her own bread and met like-minded mothers in a garage where they bought organic vegetables directly from the farmer. This was in the Eighties. It had something of dealing and somehow took place in secret. Grain eater and eco - these were common concepts at the time. Today, people say hipster and organic. How times change.

When I ate in a two-star restaurant a few years after my apprenticeship, which is now just over ten years ago, I started to get bored. Always the same sauces, main ingredients and flavors. It was somehow very retracted, what you mean by fine cuisine.

In the meantime, I had advanced in my philosophy studies and had the diffuse feeling that there should be more. There must be a kitchen that is also delicate, but with a different approach, which I could study and which might make me understand why and how I could. Only the French cuisine was called delicate. But what would happen if I would compare the French cuisine with the Japanese cuisine.

I would then perhaps better understand what the food of my grandmother has to do with the famous chips in the Ruhr area and a star kitchen which combines French cuisine with regional influences from Bavaria and Berlin.

In short, it was about exploring what constitutes my own culinary identity.

This is how I came across the Japanese kitchen. To begin with, she showed me that a delicate cuisine is possible without jus and filet, without truffles, crème fraîche and chocolate.

However, she did not give me an answer to the question of my own roots, but showed me some things that I had not asked for. I really appreciate that, because the Japanese kitchen is a wise kitchen. It offers good tips for life in general. The Japanese cuisine, one might say, is cooked philosophy and tasted wisdom.

You can see that on Kaiseki very well.

When I asked a Japanese philosopher, "Is there a delicate Japanese cuisine, a kind of equivalent to French haute cuisine?" He answered. "Look at Kaiseki. But if you really want to understand Kaiseki, you have to also look at the Japanese tea too." And then he added, "Go to Kyoto."

Kaiseki? Tea? Kyoto? At first, everything seemed very puzzling to me. I was just preparing a big project: my doctorate in philosophy about Japanese food, which is the basis for this book.

After intensive years of study, I worked on the connection between philosophy and cooking. Now I was ready and planned the field research on site. I wanted to go to Kyoto to get to know this mysterious kaiseki that was little known outside Japan.

I felt well prepared. My PhD supervisor told me, "You're a culinary and philosophical education-just do what you think is right." And so it happened. My journey started.

Kaiseki, even that in advance, is actually Japan's culinary art. Many kaiseki restaurants have received stars, even though Japan's reaction to Michelin was a bit slow when they began to rate the first restaurants in 2010. "How come a French tire manufacturer thinks he could judge a kitchen that has evolved over many centuries?" A kaiseki cook told me skeptically.

Formally, the Kaiseki serves a menu of ten to eleven courses that vary seasonally. In addition to the season, the place, the surrounding nature and what it offers in terms of culinary matters play an important role. Seasonality and regionalism are concepts that have been cultivated there for centuries.

The menus change with the seasons and with it the dishes on which the food is being served. In the summer, a lot of glass is used, which gives a cooling impression. In winter, the plates and cups are earthier and made out of ceramics, sometimes colorful, sometimes simple – they keep the warmth very well.

When I started my research in Kyoto in 2010, most European chefs still served a la carte dishes on white porcelain. Today, in the high-class kitchen, there is often only a menu that changes with the seasons and is carried on a wide range of materials, from the tree bark to the ceramic bowl. Is that just the zeitgeist or has it spread from Japan? Looking at it from the outside one could say that the western cuisine approaches the Japanese, but if you look beyond it, if you look more closely at the actual cooking, the daily practice, the attitude and the thinking of the cook, then the Japanese cuisine continues to be very different. What distinguishes her, why she fascinates us so much at the moment and what wisdom she may hold for us - that's what this book is all about.

I will pick up the structure of the kaiseki menu, where each dish stands for itself, and at the same time, all together form a cultural context. This is conceivably loose and at the same time tight. In Kaiseki, the connection is created through the place, the season and the things that are currently in optimal condition; in this book, exactly this connecting is the idea of Kaiseki.

It all starts with the matcha, the tea of the tea ceremony. If it is preceded by food in Japan, it means kaiseki. Apparently there are two forms of kaiseki kitchens in Japan – I will explain the differences in the first chapter. It continues with something invisible: the knowledgeable hand

of the host, who arranges the food and creates the atmosphere. Looking at the tea bowl as a representative of the Kaiseki crockery, it will then become culinary: as an example, I will write about a certain eel called Hamo and the bamboo shoot. Every kaiseki menu ends with rice, which has a lot to do with the Japanese identity. After dinner, something sweet follows for tea. The traditional Japanese sweets named Wagashi initiate the matcha in the tea ceremony. With this closes the book. Because the original idea of Kaiseki is: The essential is not the food, but a bowl of tea.

## CHAPTER II - Tea and kaiseki

The origins of kaiseki lie in a cup of tea.

When the Japanese philosopher told me that I had to study tea to understand Kaiseki, he meant the traditional Japanese tea ceremony. In this, one sits on rice straw mats in small huts or rooms with pale loam walls and watches a tea master. The tea master, dressed, for example, in a night-blue kimono, sits on his knees and puts with seemingly strange movements green tea powder into an earthen cup and who then pours water out of a cauldron and thus making a frothy drink with a small bamboo broom, which he serves together with a small candy for his guests.

This tea is called matcha. We have most probably already come across it in smoothies, labeled as superfood due to its healthy effects. In Japan, it is also found in sweets such as white chocolate, tarts or ice cream. But actually it is there until today the tea of the tea ceremony. Drinking a matcha - that's something special and ceremonial.

In fact, almost always a matcha is served at the end of a kaiseki menu, just like in the tea ceremony, with a little candy in advance. The tea ceremony and the kaiseki menu thus seem to have a common origin. Following this trail, one will find oneself on a journey deep into the history of Japan - and will understand why kaiseki restaurants serve matcha tea today.

If one looks into these questions, one will come across Zen Buddhism, which came to Japan from China about a thousand years ago. Even then, matcha was a kind of superfood. The monks Eisai and Kukai brought the tea, *Camellia sinensis*, from their study trips from the Buddhist monasteries of China. The Matcha was then supposedly a brown, brick-pressed tea, which, finely ground and mixed with spices, was brewed. At that time, matcha probably had none of the bright green and the pure, fine-bitter sweetness and fullness that characterizes today's top quality.

For a long time this tea was reserved for the nobility and the monasteries. The monks drank it in a kind of communion in memory of an important patriarch of Zen Buddhism, the Bodhidharma, ate a few trifles, it was said that they were sweet fruits, but also salty snacks, and used its invigorating effect to keep the concentration in meditation.

Matcha was considered a medicine in the monasteries. This view has held, especially in the Matcha, in which you take the whole leaf finely grounded in itself, until today.

Around the 16th century began the time of the great tea masters, who created a tea ceremony in infinite variations for every conceivable occasion, for every day and season, sometimes very simple and focused, sometimes very elaborate with food, sake and walks through stylish gardens with dewy moss areas under red-colored maple trees around the tea house. The basic idea of the tea ceremonies, however, remained the same as in the monastery: in a kind of spiritual community, a tea is drunk and, in advance, a snack is eaten.

It was a time of war and upheaval. The tea masters were inspired by Zen Buddhism and made the simplicity and the reduction to the essentials to their program. A hut made of bamboo, assembled without further ado, in the forest, far from the city, from what is available to meet in and drink tea together, that was their ideal. It was about the community over tea, a moment of gathering that is unique and never returns. The Japanese term for this is Ichi-go ichi-e.

Thinking of the advice of the Japanese philosopher, I tried the tea ceremony myself: For a year I attended the course for non-Japanese students of the famous tea school Urasenke in Kyoto. There are, despite the many forms of preparing such a ceremonial tea, very clear and narrow limits within which one should perform the movements. As a European, it has not always been easy for me to adopt these rules, because leisure activities have something to do with fun, freedom, relaxation and creativity. In Japan, tea ceremony, archery and similar so-called way-arts have something serious. And they clearly state how things have to be. You train yourself by practicing by repeating the same movements over and over again, perfecting them step by step. When it comes to tea, it's about accurately folding and unfolding the cloth used to clean the tea cup, laying it over its edge, and doing it in three and a half fluid, naturally light, aesthetic, and somehow very pragmatic movements. For example, one has to raise the bamboo brush twice over the bowl and let it sink again, turning it once around its axis, to check very carefully whether all the fine chopsticks are present. Of course, that was already part of the preparation, but now the test in front of the guest actually and symbolically repeated again. This is a mindfulness exercise. The movements are clearly predetermined and

initially seem rather unusual to us, so that they look anything but fluid and beautiful in a beginner. But that comes with time, which means: over the years.

First of all, it was about getting involved with it.

Precisely because the specifications are so strict, the styles of the hosts and tea masters are in the smallest nuances in the execution. The form is therefore the basis for an inevitably emerging own expression. And something else happened: over time, I noticed how my perception of the small things, the gaps and differences, sharpened, like a gentle breeze through the shady mats in front of the open doors of the tea room, announcing autumn or how Late winter breaks from a branch a first bud. You experience that in a rather quiet community. The water in the teapot bubbles, fine smoke rises from it and then you drink a tea that makes in several ways awake. But more on that later.

In some 16th century teahouses, the doors were so small that it was difficult to get in. This forced one to put down the long sword. The teahouses and houses were not only the meeting place for a spiritual-ascetic contemplation, but also a place of peace in times of war. When, after a Saturday afternoon in the tearoom, I reappeared from the sometimes musty dullness, I felt clear and pure, like after a successful meditation or a walk in the woods.

The defining figure among the Japanese tea masters was Sen no Rikyu (1522-1591). He was in the service of the then rulers Oda Nobunaga and later Toyotomi Hideyoshi and held them for magnificent, the status of the client appropriate ceremonies in which precious, colorfully glazed Chinese porcelain was used. "Is it there: good, there is none: then not; If we act the way it is, then it's the real tea art," Rikyu said.

For, as the doctrine taught, it was really all about the natural beauty in the things that you only see when all that is essential is taken away and you seem to see a tea bowl, a bamboo brush or a person in all simplicity as it is, Sounds simple, but it's a lifelong task. Rikyu and the other tea masters of that time developed tea ceremonies that took this look into account. Practicing and performing these ceremonies gave rise to a path - the way of tea.

A student should have asked Rikyu what the secret of this path is. Getting water, making a fire, heating water, frothing tea, drinking tea - that's all, Rikyu is supposed to have answered. Chanoyu is called that in Japanese, translated as tea and hot water. He could do all that, said the student. Then he wants to be his student, Rikyu is said to have answered in the best Zen manner.

Zen likes to work with contradictions, while we strive to be unambiguous in the Western thinking tradition. With us there is no cultivation of contradictory statements or findings. For

a long time we have tried to categorize and organize the world in Europe. It eventually stifles thinking or disconnects it from the world. The thinking of contradictions, on the other hand, creates a movement that does not end, but goes back and forth. That makes thought itself alive.

Obviously, nothing is easier for Rikyu than to prepare and drink tea. And at the same time, because this action should not just be somehow performed, it should be an exercise and training that never stops-and should not stop. Because it's about an actually very simple realization: It's how it is, and things are the way they are. Which does not mean that they could not be designed. To really understand this most central and simple wisdom of life, which amounts to a kind of enlightenment, it takes a little detour - such as the very complicated and complex form of tea drinking as in the Japanese tea ceremony. And so it is not surprising that such an event is sometimes being prepared over weeks to bring all its aspects together naturally in this one moment.

That's the core. It is the central realization of this philosophy for me. Actually, everything is said. If you want, dear reader, then you can put the book down at this point. The rest is, so to speak, the application of this knowledge to the culinary. But maybe that is also the essential: the how. How the Japanese kitchen deals with this realization. How do you reduce things to the essential and what is the nature of a bamboo shoot or a fish? What's the quality, and it's high in Japanese cuisine. Here the philosophy of kaiseki has its origin.

(...)

During my time in the Urasenke tea school I was once allowed to attend a tea kaiseki as a guest. In preparation, we were given a small booklet in which was listed as in a script, when to do something. This seemed partially conclusive, sometimes a bit awkward and cranky.

Anyway, preparation is everything: The meeting starts one day before the actual gathering. The guest appears at the house of his host. However, he does not enter, but stops at the door, where he briefly greets the host and makes thus sure that he will find the place the next day. On the day itself, he does not just ring the bell at the door. The entrance to the house is sprayed with water. The damp floor is the sign for the guest that everything is ready and that he may enter. He should be there 15 minutes before the appointment. Together with the other guests, he meets in a small waiting room, where he equips himself with his utensils for the tea ceremony. This is a fan and a small bag. Inside is a cloth, a piker, with which you cut the sweets and bring them to your mouth, and a few fine papers that act as plates.

Through a small gap in the door, which has intentionally been kept open like this, guests can take a look into the tearoom and feel the mood, see the care with which everything has been arranged, and perceive the fragrance of the incense.

Then the guests go into the garden, mostly planted with moss and ornamental maple, covered with stones that the host has carefully moistened with water. The guests have already left behind some of their everyday world. The way of the tea is also an actual way through the garden to the tearoom, where you cleanse yourself. The guests sit down on a bench from which they will see their host for the first time. However, they do not just walk up to him and greet him with a "hello," but watch from a distance as he cleans his hands and mouth above a pool of water before he approaches his guests, silently bowing and heading for the tearoom. Again, no "nice to see you", but respectful silence. That stays that way for now.

Guests cleanse their hands and mouth too, cross the garden and enter the tearoom, inspecting the scroll and flower arrangement in the niche. You can imagine the atmosphere as well as in the above-described guest room of Kikunoi. You look through an open door or a window into the garden. The incense spreads a fine scent. A fern moves gently in the wind. The sunlight is reflected in a drop of water.

Anyone who would like to see an example of such a situation, such a property with garden, stepping stones, ferns and tea house, I may recommend the the very beautiful Oubai-In, in Kyoto. It is a side temple of the Daitoku-ji and one of the gardens which has been designed by the most famous tea master Rikyu and commissioned by Nobunaga. These places, like a kaiseki menu, have an impressive self-temporality that makes it easy to forget the rest of the world around them.

Only when all guests have taken their place, the host appears again and welcomes them formally. He does not simply sit down, but will be outside for a moment while eating, preparing the necessary things, and having his guests eat alone. Only for tea he will sit opposite his guests, who can then watch him preparing the tea.

He serves five courses in this way: he will enter, distribute trays and bowls, go out again and apply the next course. Only at the sixth time (!) he will interact directly with his guests. Then he serves one of the most memorable dishes of tea kaiseki. It is a rectangular tray called Hassun. The name refers to its measure ("eight Sun" - an old Japanese unit of measurement, in which a Sun corresponds to 3.03 cm). In two diagonals are small, stacked things. On the one hand food from the sea and on the opposite side from the mountains. The number

corresponds to the number of guests plus one, so that nobody has to take the last piece. These things can be small yams, also called mountain potatoes, or pieces of bamboo shoot or big green beans. On the other side, from the sea, you will find for example Fishmilk from the sea bream or algae.

Otherwise, the tray is empty and shows in stylish simplicity, how to put things into focus and play with the emptiness of the room. Although only two bites are provided for each guest, the tray is by no means empty. In Japan anyway, one understands the fine play with gaps, with the emptiness and the nothingness. And nothingness is not being seen as negative. Rather, nothingness itself is abundance. The fullness of nothingness is therefore an important Zen concept.

Each guest gets in turn first something from the sea. In addition, the host pours out Sake, the Japanese rice wine, and drinks it together with the respective guest, one after the other. Then the procedure starts again. This time the thing is eaten from the mountains, accompanied by another sip of sake. Again, the host drinks with each guest. If a third sake round is to take place, another course named Shiizakana will be served. You can tell at this point that it's less about food than about drinking. Incidentally, this is also the case in the Izakaya, the Japanese pubs, where beer drinking is in the foreground and you can order a whole range of small snacks and dishes.

The meal ends with pickled vegetables and hot water, with which one, as in the Zen monastery, cleans the rice bowl, so as not to waste the smallest grain of rice. If the last guest drops his chopsticks onto the tray with a distinct click, he indicates that the cha-kaiseki is over. The guests are now in the garden again. When they return to the tearoom, the actual tea ceremony begins with a thin and viscous matcha.

So that's a tea kaiseki, the food the kaiseki of the restaurants refers to. Such an event starts in the morning and extends into the afternoon. Cooking the food, watering and tending the garden, choosing the dishes and preparing the whole cha-kaiseki, all this is elaborate. It used to be the tea master who was employed in the noble houses. In today's modern society we find it almost exclusively in tea schools or specialized restaurants. In Kyoto, there is also a catering company that provides the food for such cha-kaiseki events.

The Kaiseki restaurants carry on this heritage in their own way by tailoring it to their needs.

When we ate a cha-kaiseki with the tea school, we basically failed mercilessly. Because it is regulated here in detail, in how many portions a bowl of rice emptied, how to bring a soup bowl to the mouth and so on.

These standards, when mastered, make sure that little is said. When the last guest enters the tearoom before eating, he pulls the door shut behind him. The host then knows that he can serve the first course. Everyone, guest and host, know about their role, so nothing distracts from the essential: the tone of the season, the mood in the room and the beauty of things like the mosses in front of the window, the flowers in the room or the dishes on which the food is served. Everything goes by itself - if you master the process.