

# Lessons from a mountain town: Kokoro my life



Japanese customs put care and attention into everything they do

**Caroline Ishii**  
Columnist

I always put love and care into the food I create for others. Like with the weeks spent preparing to make a five-course dinner for 100 participants as part of the Virtual Communal Table event celebrating World Food Day on Oct.16. A chef friend told me he could not put all the care and detail into his food that I do with mine. I replied I don't know any other way than to give it my best and make people happy. Living in Japan, I realized this approach is not just me, but part of Japanese philosophy. In Japan, food is important to people's lives and closely aligned with their love of nature, seasons, regions, and celebrations. The Japanese collective spirit is about doing your best in whatever you do, whether saying good morning to someone or serving them food.

**A food for every season**

I love how the seasons change everything around you in the stores, and this change is evident with food. Every season comes with its own colours and tastes, and many cultural celebrations and events. There is my favourite, *sakura mochi*, only made during the *sakura* season in the springtime. In the summer, *kakigori* (ice shavings) makes its appearance. The front of a house on the main street in my town transformed almost overnight into a *kakigori* stand. My favourite flavour was matcha and *adzuki*. In the fall, the autumn leaves set the tone. Vibrant orange persimmons hang from house exteriors like Christmas ornaments, and sweetened chestnuts sometimes replace the beloved *adzuki* bean. In the winter, the focus becomes hot pot meals called *nabe-mono*. While Christmas is not an official holiday in Japan, store vendors love the themes. They are quick to fill their stores with festive foods, from frosty, white cream cakes to sweets in gift packages for children. Christmas Eve is a romantic date night for couples like Valentine's Day is for us. However, the main holiday event of the year in Japan is New Year's. A time for reflection, spending time with family and friends, and going to the temple to pray for the new year. There



PHOTO COURTESY: CAROLINE ISHII

Caroline Ishii puts love and care into all the food she makes.

are special lucky foods eaten on New Year's Day, with households spending weeks preparing for it or ordering their special new years box from their local vendor.

**Regional specialties**

Each region is known for its food specialty, called *kyodo ryori*, using local ingredients and traditional recipes. For example, Osaka is known for *okonomiyaki* and Kyoto for matcha. On Shikoku Island, Kagawa is known for its udon and Kochi prefecture for its *butan*

and *yuzu* citrus fruits and ginger. I heard that it is important for Japanese salarymen to know what specialties come from each region so that they can be part of the common "conversation." Coming home with *omiyage* or souvenir gifts, usually food, for sharing with your colleagues, family and friends is expected when you travel out of the home

base.

**Eating with your eyes**

Food is always beautifully presented in Japan. Whether you are buying a 100-yen *mochi* (about \$1.25), a 500-yen lunch box at the local take out store (\$6.30), or an elaborate 10,000-yen (\$125) *kaiseki*, multi-course meal, thought and care that goes into the preparation and presentation.

**See KOKORO P. 19**

*"I love how the seasons change everything around you in the stores, and this change is evident with food."*

## Recipe: Sembe-breaded chicken fingers

A crunchy Japanese twist on a classic dish, chicken fingers

**Kelley Tsumura-Luk**  
Contributor

Kelly and I have been talking about putting our favourite recipes in the newspaper. We were talking about a dinner she attended at the Consul General of Japan residence in Toronto last year. Both of us enjoying food, talked about the fancy menu. A dish that caught my attention was lobster tempura made with *sembe*, or Japanese rice crackers, instead of *panko* bread crumbs. I thought the *sembe* bread- ing would be great for making chicken fingers. When my kids were little, I would make breaded chicken fingers over using frozen ones, due to their sensitivities to soy and milk. Well, thank goodness they have outgrown them. I, however, have developed an intolerance to gluten and dairy. Fortunately, I can tolerate *shoyu*, which has gluten, in small quantities. So I am always looking for foods low in gluten to make for dinner, which is why the lobster tempura caught my attention. I tried it changing up the bread crumbs for the delicious *saku-*



PHOTO COURTESY: KELLEY TSUMURA-LUK

Left: Business Manager Kelley Tsumura-Luk's Sembe-Breaded Chicken Fingers. Right: Breading station.

*ra*-shaped rice crackers and used potato starch in replacement for the flour. Since my first experiment, I have tried regular rice crackers and later added *furikake* to the potato starch for more flavour. Both were delicious changes, and my family loved it. The rice crackers stay crunchy longer than bread crumbs when fried. This dish is one of my responsibilities, along with *umani* for New Year's dinner this year. Since this was an experiment, there are no quantities. I have a family of five, so the amounts I am giving you are an estimate.

**The ingredients:**

4 chicken breasts (flattened to a schnitzel thickness or left as is)  
¼ cup potato starch  
1 egg (beaten, you can season the egg if you like)  
1 package of rice crackers (I crushed them with a rolling pin, a food processor should also work.)

**Steps:**

1. Set up a breading station with a plate of potato starch (flavoured with *furikake* if you'd like), a bowl with the beaten egg, and a plate with the crushed rice crackers.  
2. Lightly dust the raw chicken in the potato starch.  
3. Dip chicken into the scrambled

egg.  
4. Roll chicken in the crushed rice crackers.  
5. Fry in vegetable oil. If the chicken is flat like a schnitzel, 1 inch of oil in a frying pan. If it is thick pieces, use enough oil to cover the pieces. The time depends on the thickness of the meat. When the crust turns a golden colour, it should be done. The internal temperature of the chicken should be 165°F/75°C.  
6. Let drain on a plate lined with paper towels.  
7. Slice into smaller pieces and enjoy. *Itadakimasu!*

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From MURAKAMI P. 4

in collaboration with Vans (2015), Supreme (2007), where his art was printed onto skateboards, fetching more than \$1,000 each for re-sale. He also restyled the Supreme iconic box logo in 2020, raising over \$1 million for COVID relief in the U.S. The majority of his t-shirts have an affixed price tag of over \$200, but his artwork was available to the masses when he collaborated with Japanese clothing company UNIQLO and the classic 1970s Japanese manga character, Doraemon (2018) to create a line of clothing and accessories and musician Billie Eilish (2020). His most successful sculpture, *My Lonesome Cowboy* (1998), sold for over \$15 million in an auction twenty years later. Even with all his success in contemporary art, there was a downward spiral draining funds from his business. In July, Murakami revealed on Instagram in a heartfelt video that his company was nearing bankruptcy amid the COVID pandemic. With great determination and passion to create two feature films, *Jellyfish Eyes Part 1 and Part 2*, he was forced to abandon the production that has taken over nine years since 2011. But fear not, several more popular ubiquitous Murakami x Collaborations continue to garner attention, and Murakami is not going anywhere anytime soon. Be on the lookout for a Hello Kitty x Murakami collection soon.

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PHOTO COURTESY: CAROLINE ISHII

Special foods are brought in with each new season in Japan. Left: Bunny-shaped mochi for springtime. Centre: Sakura mochi. Right: Kakigori with adzuki and mochi for the summer heat.

From KOKORO P. 8

Growing up in Toronto, I would help my mom serve dinner. Food could not simply be placed in a bowl or on a plate. It would have to be presented, made more beautiful, and carefully plated, often with garnish like green onion slivers or ground sesame seeds.

As a young girl, I thought this was annoying when I was hungry and just wanted to eat. Later in life, I enjoyed plating dishes mindfully. Becoming a chef, it's one of the things that I enjoy most.

I often spend much thought on how to present a dish to wow the diner, so they appreciate its

beauty and aesthetics before digging in, like an *ikebana* flower arrangement.

**Food is me**

I realize over time that the food I make is an extension of me. What do I mean by this?

I mean that I put my heart and spirit into it. When I make food, I think about the people I am making the food for and add good wishes like an extra ingredient. It's often for people's health and happiness and protection from harm's way, especially during the pandemic.

Does it work? I will never know.

People often say that my food is delicious, and they cannot wait to eat it again.

I believe what they are craving is more than the food itself. It is the feeling they get when they eat my food. It's fresh, pure, and din-

When they are gone, you crave their food. More than the food, it was the energy in the food.

The love and care they put into it to make you happy. Can you put words to this expression?

Kokoro my life

I found that the Japanese have a term for this love, kokoro. It means putting your body, mind, and spirit into what you do.

It explains how I approach food and cooking. It's about wanting to please the customers, but also more than this. It's about sharing my love for customers, my best

offering, all my creativity, passion, and talents, and to show I care.

I am continuing what my mother loved to do at home and when she volunteered at the Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre in Toronto, feeding others and presenting food with love and care. It's what mothers and fathers and grandmothers and grandfathers around the world continue to do always.

More than ever now, we need food that nourishes and comforts us. Adding love to what we make and serve is like a secret love letter tucked into a lunch bag for a loved one. They will notice. It is kokoro and love in action.

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*"We need food that nourishes and comforts us. Adding love to what we make and serve is like a secret love letter tucked into a lunch bag."*

From JCSJ P. 13

include the right to live, the right to basic shelter, and the right to housing.

JCSJ joins in solidarity with all those currently suffering during this city's housing crisis and with the nearly 10,000 Torontonians who face homelessness every night. We ask for safe space, safe shelter, and safe housing for all.

On Thursday, Nov. 5, JCSJ and allies gathered at Toronto's City Hall to deliver an open letter to Mayor John Tory, calling on him to act decisively on homelessness. Speakers included Tristan Tsuji, a Yonsei with lived experience in social housing, as well as Simone Schmidt, a volunteer with the Encampment Support Network, a group providing on-the-ground support and defence for those living in encampments.

The event concluded with JCSJ members delivering an open letter to the mayor via City Hall security, since the mayoral office declined to receive it in person. The letter requested the following actions, quoted verbatim here:

Until there is enough permanent, safe, rent-geared-to-income (RGI) housing, immediately ensure enough emergency shelter. Open an additional 2,000 hotel rooms to meet the current need.

Until there is safe housing or appropriate shelter with dignity and respect for health and well-being—hands-off encampments—enact no further evictions or forced displacement of people and provide the necessities of life, such as water and access to basic needs, such as wash-

rooms.

The City of Toronto must invest in rent-geared-to-income housing and change its Housing Now plan to build 100% RGI housing instead of 80% market-rent units. The City should move forward with the acquisition of vacant property. This includes 214-230 Sherbourne, as demanded by the community for a decade instead of leaving it vacant while hundreds suffer right outside its doorstep.

Mayor Tory, you must publicly advocate for a massive investment by the federal government to build social housing in the City of Toronto. Just as you made transit a priority, we call on you to prioritize the lives of homeless people in this city.

JCSJ hopes to see a public response to this urgent issue as winter approaches. The shelters here are full and inadequate. Over 1,000 people are sleeping outdoors. Countless others are couch-surfing or staying in unsafe situations. In 2019, an average of 2.5 deaths of the homeless took place every week.

We urge everyone to advocate at all levels of government for an end to homelessness. You can write to the Mayor at [mayor\\_tory@toronto.ca](mailto:mayor_tory@toronto.ca), the Premier at [doug.fordco@pc.ola.org](mailto:doug.fordco@pc.ola.org), and the Prime Minister at [justin.trudeau@parl.gc.ca](mailto:justin.trudeau@parl.gc.ca). To donate to the Encampment Support Network, email [report.on.toronto@gmail.com](mailto:report.on.toronto@gmail.com). For more information or to join Japanese Canadians for Social Justice, email [jcforsocialjustice@gmail.com](mailto:jcforsocialjustice@gmail.com).

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NAJC 2020 Holiday photo.

From NAJC P. 16

virtual shopping opportunities through local NAJC member organizations such as purchasing a membership and making donations, virtual craft fairs, and supporting Japanese Canadian artists and authors, and community groups.

A subscription to *Nikkei Voice* and *The Bulletin* magazine also make good gifts. Your support would be very appreciated and helps strengthen the community.

However you celebrate the holidays, I hope you will enjoy some wonderful Japanese food on New

Years Day. Our family tradition starts on New Year's Eve when we eat noodles before midnight.

The long noodles represent a long life. Soba noodles are made from buckwheat, which is a hardy plant and represents strength and resilience. Also, it is said that the

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noodles are easily cut, it's a way of letting go of the hardship of the year.

On New Year's Day, osechi-ryori are the lucky foods that are prepared in advance so that you would not cook on the first three

days of the New Year. You can buy a lot of food at Japanese grocery stores or restaurants. I buy and make the foods.

It's a delicious way to start the New Year and by carrying on the family traditions it reminds me of my mom and grandmother and connects me to my ancestors.

Here are some of the foods I eat on New Year's Day:

**Kuromame** – sweetened black beans that symbolize good health

**Nishime** – *gobo*, carrots, lotus root, and taro

**Ebi** – cooked prawns representing long life

**Tazukuri** – dried baby anchovies coated in soy sauce symbolize a bountiful harvest.

**Konbu** – seaweed, means happiness and joy

**Kinpira** – *gobo* (burdock root) and carrot. *Gobo* means good health and harvest

**Renkon** – the holes in the lotus root means you can see the future

**Kamaboko** – fishcakes, usually pink and white

**Mochi** – pounded sweet rice filled with *anko* (sweet red bean paste)

What are your family traditions and holiday food? Email [national@najc.ca](mailto:national@najc.ca) or share on our NAJC Facebook. Keep in touch with NAJC e-news at [najc.ca/subscribe](http://najc.ca/subscribe)

Enjoy the holidays! Stay safe! With best wishes from the National Executive Board.

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