

No. 50 Jan/Feb | Fresh 2017

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Celebrating Central Texas food culture, season by season

the
Fresh
issue

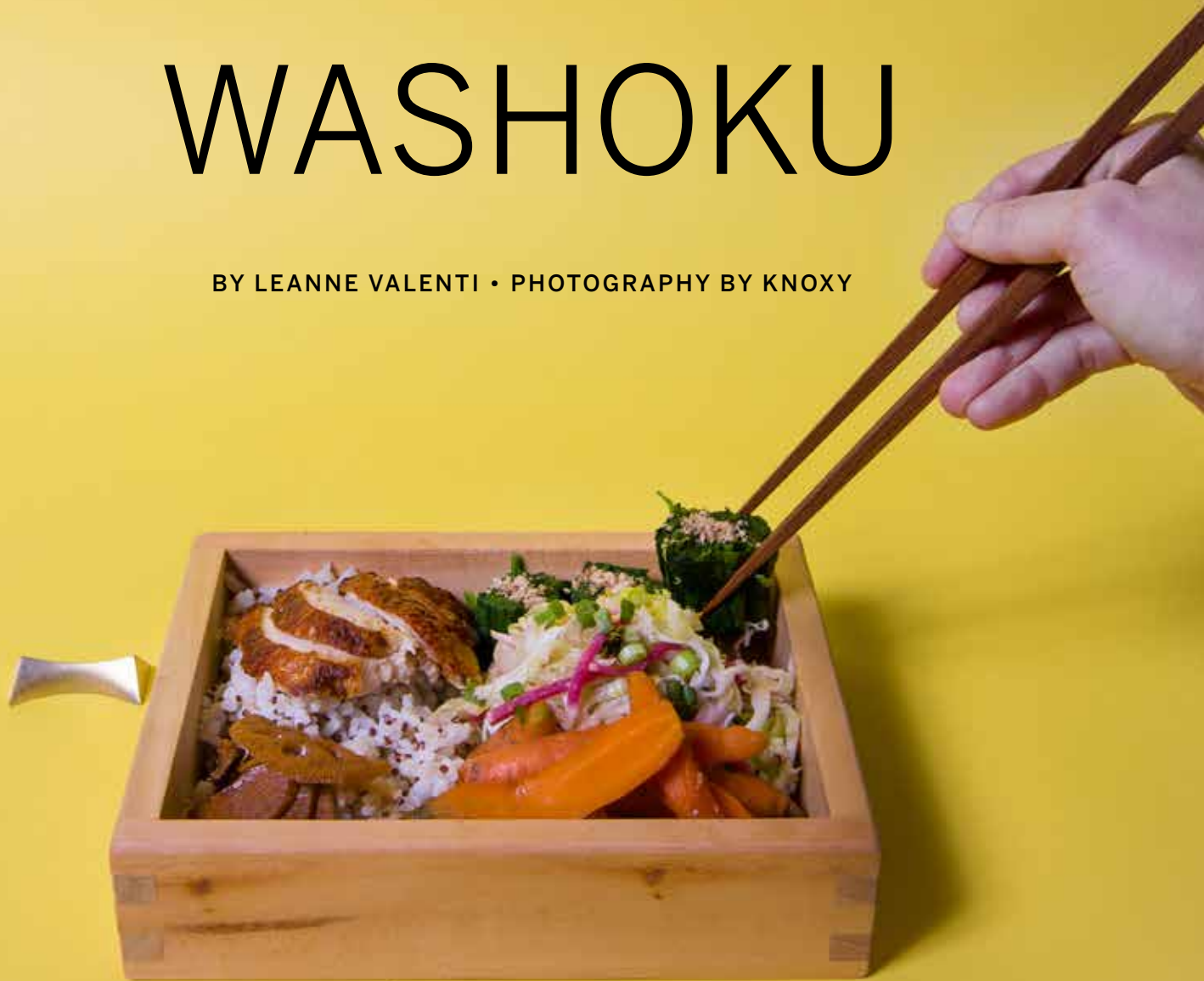


bento boxes
food trends
& more

cooking **FRESH**

THE ART OF WASHOKU

BY LEANNE VALENTI • PHOTOGRAPHY BY KNOXY



Did you know that the bento boxes served at sushi restaurants are just one of many types of bento traditionally offered in Japan? Their common characteristic isn't the raw fish or the cute compartments they are served in, but the way they are packed. Every bento is created according to a deep cultural principle known as *washoku*—literally “harmony food”—the ancient practice of balancing five colors, five tastes and five elements in every meal.

I first learned of this Japanese art in culinary school when I discovered the cookbook, “Washoku,” by Elizabeth Andoh. Intrigued,

I played with this theory of balanced cooking and was astonished that even the simplest ingredients became ridiculously delicious and strikingly satisfying when prepared as part of a complete symphony of flavor, texture and color.

I've been using washoku principles in my cooking for six years and it's at the heart of our menu design at my business Bento Picnic. The comment I hear most frequently is, “I've never liked this vegetable or that vegetable, but I LOVE all of yours! How do you do it?” I'd like to say it's magic, but it's simply about balance. Here's how it works:



STEP-BY-STEP

Start with organic, wholesome ingredients.

Think vegetables, grains, legumes and pasture-raised proteins. They are rich in nutrients and are easier for our bodies to recognize and absorb than processed foods.

Choose a wide range of colorful ingredients.

Aim to get the five major color groups in each meal: Black, White, Green, Yellow and Red. Each color corresponds with a unique nutritional profile to maximize your intake of nutrients and antioxidants.

Pair ingredients to incorporate all the five major tastes in each meal.

When sweet, salty, sour, pungent and bitter elements are present, it maximizes the flavor dimensions of a meal without the need to add excessive amounts of fat and salt.

Prepare ingredients using a variety of cooking methods.

Cooking methods can be grouped into five elemental categories as well and combined to create a rich depth of textures and flavors:

- Water (blanch, boil, steam, poach)
- Tree (raw)
- Fire (open-air dry methods, e.g., sauté, grill)
- Earth (preserve, pickle, ferment)
- Metal (enclosed dry methods, e.g., bake, roast, fry)

You have no doubt seen washoku principles in practice in sushi restaurant bentos, where raw fish might be nestled next to Japanese-style toasted nori, steamed white rice, tempura-fried vegetables and fermented soy sauce. But it's just as easy to achieve washoku with homestyle bento combinations, such as chicken meatball skewers with soba noodle salad, kimpira-sautéed carrots and burdock, quick-pickled sesame cucumbers and ripe cherry tomatoes. The possibilities are truly limitless—I've even had success using washoku to make the one-dimensional recipes from my childhood more well-rounded and appetizing; my grandma's beef stroganoff came to life once I accentuated the slow-braised beef and egg noodles in gravy with horseradish-beet relish, crème fraîche and fresh scallions.

Practicing balanced cooking through washoku has made me more present and tuned-in to the process of nurturing my body with food. With each meal, cooking has become a more fun, intuitive and creative process.

A CENTRAL TEXAS WINTER-MARKET BENTO

Serves 6

Use these recipes to make a wholesome, delicious supper and then pack the rest in bento boxes to bring to work or school the next day.

SPINACH GOMAAE

- 2 bunches spinach, washed well, tough stems removed
- 6 T. toasted sesame seeds
- 2 T. tamari
- 2 T. sugar
- 1 t. sake
- 1 t. mirin

Blanch the spinach in boiling water for 30 seconds, then shock in ice water, strain and squeeze out the excess water with your hands. Chop the spinach into 2-inch pieces and set aside. Pulse the toasted seeds in a food processor until partially ground. Combine the sesame seeds with the tamari, sugar, sake and mirin and toss with the spinach. Serve at room temperature or chilled.



ROASTED CHICKEN WITH FUKUJINZUKE PICKLES AND QUINOA RICE

Fukujinzuke is a traditional Japanese pickle with a soy sauce-based brine typically served as a relish alongside rice and curry. Fresh lotus root can be found in most Asian markets.

For the chicken:

- 3½ lb. whole organic chicken
- Kosher salt and cracked black pepper, to taste

Heat the oven to 400°. Dry the bird thoroughly inside and out, then season the cavity and the skin with salt and pepper. Place the chicken, breast-side up, in a baking dish, then place in the oven for 50 minutes. Using tongs, flip the bird over, reduce the heat to 350° and bake for another 45 minutes (until the internal temperature reaches 165° to 180°). Let the chicken cool before carving.

For the pickles:

- 1 3-inch piece fresh lotus root, peeled, halved, sliced thinly
- ¼ lb. shiitake mushrooms, stemmed, quartered
- 1 T. kosher salt
- ½ c. sugar
- ½ c. soy sauce or tamari
- ½ c. sake
- ½ c. mirin
- ¼ c. rice vinegar
- 1 6-inch strip kombu
- 1½-inch knob fresh ginger, peeled, julienned

Combine the lotus root and mushrooms in a medium bowl. Sprinkle with the salt and use your hands to gently toss until evenly distributed. Set aside for 10 minutes while you prepare the brine. In a medium saucepan, stir together the sugar, soy sauce, sake, mirin and rice vinegar. Cook over medium heat for about 3 to 5 minutes—stirring until the sugar dissolves. Squeeze the excess moisture from the vegetables and add them to the soy sauce mixture, along with the kombu and ginger. Let it come all the way to a boil, then use a fine-mesh spider skimmer or slotted spoon to remove the vegetables to a sealable container. Let the soy sauce mixture continue boiling until it is reduced by about half, then let cool. Pour the brine over the vegetables, cover and refrigerate. The pickles can be used right away, but they'll be better if you let them marinate in the brine for 2 to 3 days. They'll keep in the fridge for up to a month.

For the quinoa rice:

- 2 c. medium rice
- 2 T. quinoa
- 4 c. water
- 1 t. salt

Add the rice, quinoa, water and salt to a medium saucepan. Cover and bring to a boil over high heat. Reduce the heat to low and simmer, covered, until the liquid evaporates—about 20 to 25 minutes. Remove from the heat and let steam with the lid on for 10 minutes. Use a wooden spoon or rice paddle to fluff before serving.

MEYER LEMON-MISO SLAW



- 1 T. Meyer lemon juice
- 1 T. white miso
- Salt, to taste
- ½ lb. green or Napa cabbage, sliced thinly
- 1 watermelon radish, julienned
- 1 t. chopped scallion
- ½ t. Meyer lemon zest

Whisk together the lemon juice and miso to make a creamy dressing. Add salt, to taste, then toss the dressing with the cabbage and radish. Garnish with the scallions and lemon zest. Serve chilled or at room temperature.

HONEY-GINGER CARROTS

- 1 bunch carrots
- ¼ t. kosher salt
- ¼ c. sherry vinegar, divided
- 2 T. honey
- 1-inch knob fresh ginger, peeled and grated



Trim away the carrot tops and scrub the skins. Place the carrots in a single layer across the bottom of a large shallow pot. Add the salt and a splash of the sherry vinegar, then add water to the pot to reach halfway up the side of the carrots. Cut a piece of parchment paper so that it will fit inside the pot and cut several slits in the middle of the paper. (This is known as a *cartouche* and it serves as a cover for the surface of a stew, soup, stock or sauce to slow evaporation,

prevent a skin from forming and/or keep ingredients submerged.) Place the cartouche in the pot, completely covering the carrots. Put the pot on the stove over medium-high heat. Let the carrots simmer until the liquid evaporates, then check the carrots with a fork or cake tester. If they are still hard, add a bit more water, cover back up and let continue to simmer until they are tender enough to pierce. Once tender, remove the cartouche and deglaze the pan with the rest of the sherry vinegar. Drizzle on the honey and sprinkle the ginger evenly across the carrots. Adjust the salt, if needed, then move the carrots to a sheet pan to cool. Once cool, cut the carrots as desired. Serve at room temperature or chilled.

TO ASSEMBLE:

Spread the quinoa rice across the bottom of half of a bento box and place the carved chicken along with a thick pinch of fukujinzuke pickles atop the rice. In the other half of the bento, snuggle the slaw, carrots and spinach side by side. If your bento has multiple compartments, use your creativity to pack the components however they fit best with your bento design.

