

## **How to cook Japanese barbecue**

I come to Japanese food as naked as a new-born. Not literally, as that would be quite dangerous, but without prior experience or preconception. My only stipulation was a palette of easily sourced ingredients and no clichés or well-worn ideas. The barbecue theme evolved from my decision to make teriyaki. This sweet and sour barbecue chicken may be one of the biggest Japanese food clichés out there but I wanted to eat it; possibly the best reason for cooking anything that I know. When so much of life in the kitchen is spent in the pursuit of pleasing others, sometimes the greatest act of love is cooking for yourself.

### **Begin with shopping**

To truly immerse yourself in the art of Japanese cooking, you need to start with the procurement of ingredients. Whether you pluck produce from the allotment or head for the supermarket depends on your situation, but what you want is a food hunt. No list, no agenda; just the freshest produce you can find. The ingredients I chose for these recipes were the ones that called to me at the time; the concepts work with whatever you choose. In Japanese food, fresh is everything. Life force.

### **Clear your space**

When I came home with my treasure trove of ingredients, I realised that the first thing I had to do was clean up. Something that should have been done before leaving the house. My workbench of board, knife, salt pot, pepper grinder, pestle and mortar, plus a bowl of lemons, gradually accrues half opened packets of raisins and pots of pulses that loiter there until I can no longer feasibly function. Create yourself a calming and uncluttered space; including in your head. Especially in your head.

### **Investigate your ingredients**

When shopping for ingredients with a familiar arsenal of cooking practices in your head, you have most likely decided what to do with it all as you shop. Certainly it is natural for me to cook intuitively, but with a new learning curve ahead I needed guidance by my side in the form of Nancy Singleton Hachisu's wonderful 'Japanese Farm Food'. Life force of ingredients forms the central tenet of Japanese food and Nancy is right on this; my vegetables may not be field fresh, or still attached to the plant, but laid out on the bench devoid of rubber bands or plastic bags, you can feel the resonance in the room. Lay out your ingredients on your newly sparse workbench and get touchy-feely with them; familiarise yourself with what you have before you and think about how you might bring out its vital essence. Aside from vegetables and a chicken, I had soy sauce, sesame seeds, miso paste, chillies, ginger and garlic. And salt. Not all Japanese food is seasoned with soy.

### **A Japanese barbecue; recipes**

Aside from the marinating of the chicken, pickling of turnip, and salting of cucumber (none of which should be left for very long) make this food when you are ready to eat. Japanese food doesn't hang around; it still tastes great but loses the vitality that defines it.

#### **Teriyaki chicken**

I used a whole chicken and jointed it, as that is how I buy chicken. Feel free to use thighs, drums or wings instead. I had no mirin, so used maple syrup instead. Marinade the chicken for as long as possible in equal measures of soy sauce and maple syrup plus a finger of grated ginger. Outdoor barbecue is the way to go, but it can be cooked on a grill or even roasted.

#### **Green tomatoes**

This one is straight out of the book. I found some green heritage tomatoes; actually ripe but still green. Dressed in a splash of soy, they transform into a magical sweet and sour thing.

#### **Carrot and radishes in miso dressing**

Slice the vegetables in the round, as thinly as possible, and dress with 1 part miso, 1 part vinegar, and 2 parts oil. Use a good rapeseed oil. White wine vinegar will do; the lady in the oriental supermarket assured me that rice wine vinegar is not all that different.

#### **Smashed cucumber**

Also straight out of the book; it is seriously good. Lay a cucumber on a board and bash it with a rolling pin. Strangely, all the seeds may shoot out of one end whilst the flesh remains stubbornly

whole. Keep bashing until it can be broken into pieces. Mash two cloves of garlic with one teaspoon of salt, either in a pestle and mortar or by squishing it repeatedly with the flat of the knife. Add this, with another teaspoon of salt, to the cucumber. Place it all in a plastic bag and massage the salty garlic into the cucumber flesh. Leave in the fridge for 10 minutes, drain all the liquid off, and serve ice cold.

#### **Turnip pickles**

Soak thinly sliced raw turnip and ginger in ½ part vinegar to 1 ½ parts soy. It needs to sit for about the same time as the cucumber; any longer and it loses that vibrant edge and inherent crunch.

#### **Broccoli and green beans with lemon, salt and sesame**

The vegetables were blanched in boiling salted water until just on the wrong side of tender crisp. Tossed in lemon juice, salt, and sesame seeds, they are served warm.

#### **Wild garlic, wet garlic, spring onions and young leeks**

In a large frying pan, with a touch of oil, toss whole spring onions with sliced leek and finely sliced wet garlic. Season with a touch of salt. Once soft and slightly caramelised, add the wild garlic leaves and stir to wilt. Served hot, this needs nothing more than a scatter of freshly picked chives.

#### **Serve with the hot teriyaki chicken**

Cook the teriyaki chicken any way that suits; I did not reduce down the marinade for sauce but instead brushed the remainder over the chicken every ten minutes or so.

Serve everything together, beautifully presented. Hopefully, you can already see how these familiar ingredients are going to form an unusual and memorable meal. Savour the different flavours and sensations and experience the way that they all play together.