



## J-Pop Leads to Interest in Washoku Culture

### Dish Featuring Irizake as a Resurgent Seasoning

Neo Guo Qing (34 years old, Singapore)

When Neo Guo Qing was young, J-Pop rode a wave of popularity in Singapore and it was out of this that he developed a desire to learn more about Japanese culture including washoku. Qing's parents owned a small café where he helped out as a youth, and it was only natural that he would go on to a culinary career after graduating from school. When that moment arrived, Qing went straight to a Japanese restaurant to seek work.

One of the major reasons that washoku has gained popularity outside of Japan is its reputation as a healthy cuisine. Qing believes that it is not just the use of fresh, seasonal ingredients that makes washoku healthy, but the fact that the nutritional value of ingredients is considered in addition to appearance and taste. Qing feels that approach "creates value unlike any other cuisine."

At the start of his culinary career, Qing thought about learning other cuisines and after working at several Japanese restaurants, he was involved in launching a Korean restaurant and gained experience at a Chinese restaurant. However, after a while, Qing came to feel that these foods were over-seasoned, and he went back to working at a Japanese restaurant. "Note how the dashi stock used in washoku is clear and quite simple," says Qing. "I started learning to cook Japanese a long time ago, but there are still ingredients that I have yet to see." There are many levels to washoku as one digs deeper into the cuisine. To further grow as a chef, Qing says that he is focusing these days on learning about the seasonal aspects of washoku. He currently works at the Fat Cow Restaurant, a Japanese establishment that features wagyu dishes on its menu, which has inspired Qing to hone his wagyu knowledge.

Qing was also a finalist at the World Washoku Challenge 2015 and came to Japan for the final competition. He notes that the katsudon and ramen that he tasted last year in Japan was completely different from what he had tasted in Singapore, despite looking similar. Qing was also surprised at the many varieties of katsuo and konbu that were available, compared with Singapore, where only one or two varieties can typically be found. "I wish I could make food in Singapore using the same kind of ingredients," says Qing, whose interest in washoku has only grown.

Qing has reached the final competition of the World Washoku Challenge 2016 on a mission. His entry is a preparation of Kan buri tataki to fuyu irizake featuring richly-fleshed winter yellowtail, paired with delicious winter vegetables featuring lotus root, kabu turnip, and shungiku greens. For seasoning, Qing uses irizake, which was often used as a seasoning during the Edo Period and ties the flavors of the dish together. Qing learned about irizake from the Japanese head chef of his current restaurant, and it is the key ingredient of his dish. There is resurgent interest today in using irizake in Japan. Qing purposely gave the dish a simple appearance, saying that "While it looks very simple, the strong flavor of irizake works well to tie the ingredients together."

Qing would one day like to own his own restaurant. "Right now, I am trying to learn as much as I can about washoku to become a better chef," says Qing, who hopes to use his knowledge to raise the level of washoku in Singapore.



Kan Buri Tataki To Fuyu Irizake