



**Inspired by Washoku in Romania,
Where Japanese Restaurants are Still Rare**

Pircu Ionut (Romania)

Romanian-born Pircu Ionut studied economics at university. “I went to university to keep my parents happy, but I liked food, so I wanted to work at a restaurant,” says Ionut. He was particularly interested in Asian cuisine, and so after graduating from university, he got a job at Tokyo Japanese Restaurant in the city of Cluj-Napoca in northwestern Romania, where Ionut grew up. While it was something of an accident that he first worked at a Japanese restaurant, Ionut came to be inspired by the simple elegance of washoku and would learn a great deal under chef and proprietor Naofumi Tsuchiya. “Tsuchiya-san taught me everything in great detail. I was extremely lucky,” he recalls. At the same time, it was a challenge to learn about washoku. “Japanese chefs are very serious in their pursuits. The food has to be perfect and the same every time. It requires 100% concentration all the time.”



Sushi, miso soup, dishes made with shoyu—everything was new to Ionut. “I came from a Western background where we eat foods that are cooked. When I first ate raw fish, it was strange but delicious.” At the same time, Ionut says, “Compared with Western cuisine, washoku uses simple seasonings, whether it is for rice, vegetables or meat, yet the food is amazingly delicious. I am also greatly impressed at how the dishes incorporate the wonders of nature and change with the seasons.” One dish that Ionut particularly likes is beef grilled with miso on a magnolia leaf. He loves the intense flavor of beef eaten with miso that takes on the aroma of magnolia leaf.

Ionut’s entry for the World Washoku Challenge 2016 is a preparation of sake saikyo-yaki with nasu dengaku, enoki mushrooms, and apple and mustard vinaigrette. “I wanted to give the dish a variety of flavors—the sweet white miso, rich salmon flavor, enoki mushrooms in a spicy marinade infused with togarashi pepper, and an acidic apple and mustard vinaigrette,” says Ionut. The salmon is served with hatcho miso-glazed eggplant, both to add a vegetable element to the dish and for its deep color, to artistically color the plate.

Ionut says he would like to keep concentrating on washoku, without veering into other cuisines. On his ambitions, Ionut says, “By absorbing as much knowledge as I can about washoku, I would like to help spread authentic washoku in Romania, where we do not have that many Japanese restaurants.”



Sake Saikioyaki with Nasu Dengaku, Enoki mushrooms and Apple & mustard Vinaigrette