

A Delightful Cooling Food Ideal for Summer

Shaved Ice, Japanese Style

Flavors range from matcha green tea to plum and fresh seasonal fruits. Some are even made from natural ice.

Shaved ice (kaki-gori) is a quick remedy for the overheated body. Though deceptively simple in terms of ingredients – the basic ingredients are shaved ice with some syrup poured on top – kaki-gori delivers a surprising depth of flavor. This article will give you a glimpse into Japan's unique and varied kaki-gori culture, which is underscored by painstaking efforts towards excellence by traditional confectionary shops and sweet parlors.



S H A V E D I C E
A L A
J A P A N E S E

Kaki-gori

A millennium-old dessert, which even Sei Shonagon and Murasaki Shikibu fell in love with

Kaki-gori melts away even as it is served. It is surprising to discover that this ephemeral gem was invented long before the age of iceboxes and refrigerators. Records show that a dish of shaved ice with syrup poured over it made its debut as early as the Heian Period (circa 792-1190 A.D.). Sei Shonagon also described it in her Pillow Book. Here's a brief history of kaki-gori, along with some tips on making superb kaki-gori.

Text: Hikaru Nozawa; Drawings: Itaru Mizoguchi

Japanese love affair with ice spans over 1600 years

Everyone craves something cool to help cope with the heat on a hot summer day. Around 1000 years ago during the Heian Period, Sei Shonagon wrote about shaved ice in her diary, the Pillow Book, listing "shaved ice with syrup presented in a silver bowl" as one of her favorite "elegant things."

Her kaki-gori is the oldest recorded kaki-gori in Japan, and it was made by shaving precious ice stored in a himuro imperial ice cave in the mountains during winter and transported to Kyoto to serve the imperial court during summer. It was flavored with liana syrup.

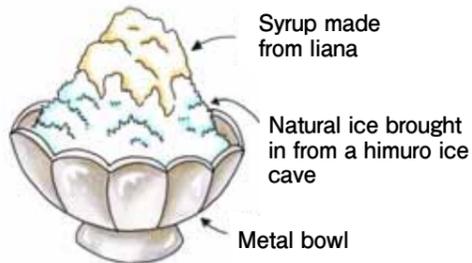
About 1600 years ago the Imperial Court set up a system of stocking ice in mountainous regions in winter and offering ice to the emperor and the imperial court as a summertime luxury. The Chronicles of Japan, one of the oldest books on the history of Japan, mentions "immersing the ice transported from the ice cave in a cup containing Sake and savoring it under a midsummer moon" – the very first mention of a "on the rocks" serving in Japan. The Tale of Genji also depicts a scene in which ice was served to young people to help them cool off in hot weather. Natural ice was a luxury enjoyed only by the nobility – something that commoners could only dream of.

Fast forward to 1862, when a shrewd businessman named Kahei Nakagawa started shipping natural ice produced in Goryokaku in Hokkaido to Tokyo and launched mass-marketing of his ice under the brand name of Hakodate Ice. Nakagawa's venture allowed the common people to enjoy ice for the first time. Georges Ferdinand Bigot, a French artist living in Japan in the 1890s, painted a Geisha tasting kaki-gori. The cotton sign prominently displaying the Chinese character for ice in the painting is the same summer icon that we still see today.

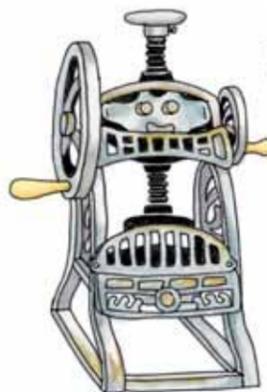
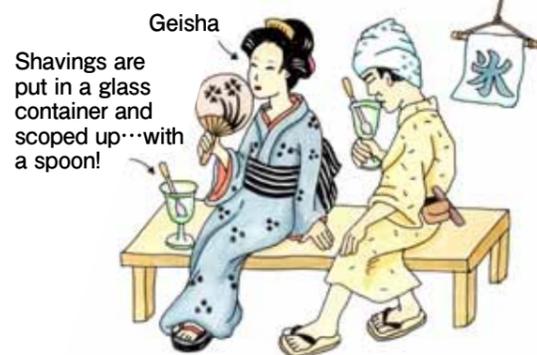
Sake on the Rocks, circa 500 A.D.



Shaved ice enjoyed by Sei Shonagon about 1000 years ago

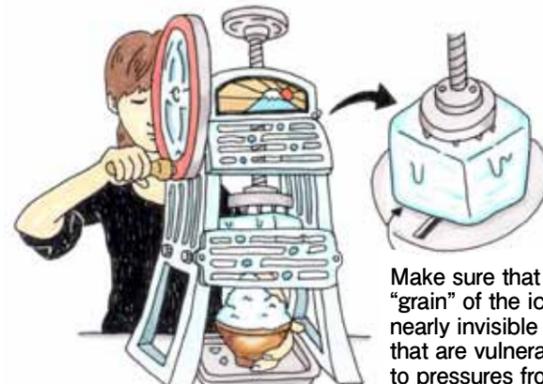


Drawing by Bigot depicting everyday life in Tokyo, circa 1890s

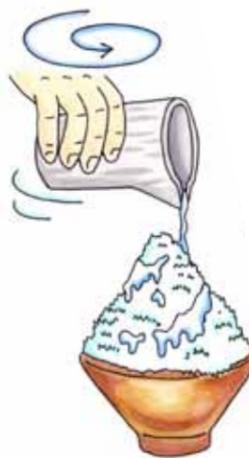


Manual ice-shaving machine popular in the Taisho-Showa periods. The shape of the machine has hardly changed!!

Spin the crank with the right hand while adjusting the blade angle with the left hand



Make sure that the "grain" of the ice – nearly invisible lines that are vulnerable to pressures from outside – is facing sideways



Pour syrup over ice carefully and slowly with a swirling motion so as not to disfigure the shape of the kaki-gori below.

Twirl the bowl under the machine while spinning the crank to create a beautiful mound of paper-thin shavings



Daruma (potbelly) style formed by ladling ice shavings into a bowl. Yama (or mountain) created by twirling the bowl

Shaved ice

In the olden days, ice shavings were produced by placing an ice block on a kanna plane and sliding the ice back and forth repeatedly. This time-consuming method is ill-suited for ice shaving as the ice melts as it is being shaved. In the Meiji period, an ice merchant named Hanzaburo Murakami invented the very first ice-shaving machine. Equipped with a rotating blade, this Murakami ice shaver spread across Japan. It was the prototype of the ice shaving machines used today.

Until the early Showa Period, the common practice was serving shaved ice sprinkled with sugar or topped off with sweet red beans. In the post-war period, shaved ice flavored with a wide variety of syrups, such as melon, strawberry and lemon, gained popularity as households were increasingly equipped with home refrigerators, which in turn made ice production a simple task. Today's colorful kaki-gori took hold around that time.

Thus, Japan's kaki-gori culture was cultivated by its people's longing for natural ice – a product of the temperature variance from season to season, and was given a framework by the invention of the ice-shaving machine. That is why the Japanese have developed the custom of savoring and appreciating the quality of the ice itself, setting kaki-gori apart from ice cream or sorbet. The evolution of Japan's kaki-gori is a path far more lengthy than we imagined.

The secret behind perfect kaki-gori: Warming the ice discs before shaving!

Each shaved-ice pro has their own method for shaving ice, but there is one secret they all share: They all prime ice discs by "warming" them a bit prior to shaving after bringing them out of the refrigerator. They simply leave ice at room temperatures until the surface becomes sweaty, indicating a certain degree of melting has occurred and the temperature of ice has climbed to between minus 5 and minus 3 degrees centigrade, which makes for perfect ice shavings. Timing is crucial as the ice melts away progressively. Pros need to figure out when customers are likely to order shaved ice to ensure that the ice is in its best condition precisely at the point when the customers ask for shaved ice.

Despite the painstaking preparation efforts, the temperature of the ice keeps going up as it is shaved. For this reason, ice-shaving pros typically tweak the blade angle in a very subtle way. Ice shaving is an art in itself, where varied weather and temperature elements need to be addressed correctly and reflected in the shaving techniques to fit the day: coarser shavings on humid days and fluffy ones on cooler days, and so on.

Beneath the veneer of the almost identical appearance of different shaved ices, you'll be amazed at the wide range of flavors and taste sensations kaki-gori offers, thanks to the ingenuity of each shop proprietor.

Instant Body Freezers are Served Here...

Have you had a chance to try kaki-gori this summer? If not, consider the following places.

Looking for traditional kaki-gori? Interested in exploring the diverse food-texture universe available by savoring different ice shavings and syrups made from real fruits?

Seeking the ultimate in the harmony produced by integrating sweet and chilly sensations?

We compiled this list for you by running around Tokyo on hot, humid days.

Photos: Susumu Nagao; Text: Hikaru Nozawa

DARUMAYA



The luxury of natural ice topped off with quality matcha green teapowder

Tokusen Ujikintoki special green tea/red bean paste ¥1,180

Darumaya serves kaki-gori year-round using natural ice shipped from himuro ice caves tucked away in the mountains. Their unsweetened matcha topping is prepared individually after an order is placed by making koicha thick tea with a chasen bamboo whisk in a chawan bowl. Azuki red beans are ladled on to finish. The sweetness and umami inherent in matcha spread in your mouth as the ice melts and comes into contact with your taste buds. You'll experience very little bitterness because Darumaya's high-quality matcha is naturally and subtly sweet. Extra toppings include syrup made from wasanbon sugar (+¥200). *Purified ice is used if natural ice supply is depleted.

Darumaya

1-3-6 Jujo Nakahara, Kita-ku, Tokyo 11:00 a.m. to 6:30 p.m.
Closed on Tuesdays (except for August when special schedule is in effect)
Tel: 03-3908-6644

FUNAHASHIYA KOYOMI



A harmony produced by ice and pulpy fruits bursting with juice

Natsu-mikan (a citrus fruit unique to Japan) ¥750

Funahashiya Koyomi is a relaxing café surrounded by treasured antique furniture. Its natsu-mikan citrus shaved ice comes with specially prepared syrup made by combining sweet syrup and natsu-mikan preserve. The slightly bitter undertone of the syrup may bring back bittersweet memories of the past. You will love the combination of citrus vesicles bursting in your mouth with flavor and the extremely fine ice shavings. Also popular are Ichigo Miruku (strawberry milk) shaved ice featuring strawberry puree (with minuscule seeds intact for extra diversity in texture) (¥750) and Ujikintoki (green tea/red bean paste kaki-gori) (¥750). The items are available for takeout as well (¥450).

Funahashiya Koyomi

5-17-1 Hiroo, Shibuya-ku, Tokyo
11:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. (last order) Open seven days a week
Tel: 03-5449-2784

IMOJIN



Refreshing encounter between milk and lemon

Kori Gyunu (Ice Milk) ¥450

Kori Gyunu features milk mixed with homemade lemon syrup for added sweetness and tanginess, and is the choice of connoisseurs at this old establishment. The father of the current proprietor came up with this unusual lemon/milk combination for children who didn't like the taste of milk. You scoop ice and drench it in the yellowish milk before carrying the spoon to your mouth. The moderately tangy flavor of lemon will travel through your nostrils. Imojin was founded in 1912. They still stick to the old recipes of the early Showa period for many offerings including Aisu Monaka (ice cream wrapped in wafer) ¥110, whose wafer is still made from glutinous rice with no eggs added.

IMOJIN

2-30-4 Nezu, Bunkyo-ku, Tokyo
11:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. Closed on Mondays
Tel: 03-3821-5530

MITSUBACHI



Roasted aromas of the ingredients underscored by rich sweet taste

Kori Wazanmai (Ice with three delicacies)650, Shiratama topping (+¥50)

This shaved ice boasts a triple feature of homemade syrup made from roasted soybean powder, sesame ice cream and Ogura red beans. The roasted aroma of the ingredients spread all over your mouth. The Dainagon variety of red beans is shipped from Hokkaido and cooked al dente to the point where you can still feel the firmness of the skin. The taste of the beans themselves is also conspicuous. The silky smooth ice shavings are made from purified natural water. "As long as we put up this signboard that says Kanmidokoro (sweet parlor), everything that ought to be sweet is very sweet here," says the shop manager. Their richly flavored kaki-gori demonstrates their proud commitment to and love for sweetness. For an extra charge, you can top your kaki-gori with pillow-soft Shiratama rice-flour dumplings.

Mitsubachi (main store)

1st Floor, Honey Bldg., 3-38-10 Yushima, Bunkyo-ku
10:30 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. Open seven days a week
Tel: 03-3831-3083

Shaved ice





ori HIGASHIYA



The refreshingly tangy flavor melts away the heat

Umemitsu (shaved ice with plum syrup): ¥950

The shaved ice with homemade plum syrup appeals to ice lovers who seriously need to cool down with potent acid flavor. They shave the ice in front of your eyes – an added treat. Many customers are lured into ordering kaki-gori by the “swooshing” sounds of the machine. Another favorite, Ujikintoki (green tea/red bean paste kaki-gori) (¥950) allows you to experience the bitterness derived from unsweetened matcha green tea juxtaposed with the extreme sweetness of condensed milk. The same menu is also offered at HIGASHIYA GINZA.

ori HIGASHIYA

1st Floor, le bain, 3-16-28 Nishi Azabu Minato-ku, Tokyo
11:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m.
Closed on Mondays Tel: 03-5786-0024

TORAYA KARYO



Uji syrup made from wasanbon – the syrup of regal magnificence

Ujikintoki (green tea/red bean paste kaki-gori) ¥1260

Founded in Kyoto during the Muromachi Period more than 480 years ago, Toraya serves Ujikintoki shaved ice featuring matcha green tea syrup that combines wasanbon sugar, (the same wasanbon sugar supplied to the Imperial Family) and the Kyo-no-Shirabe matcha green tea. The thick green matcha syrup is gracefully absorbed by the ice shavings, creating impressively elegant and yet refreshing aftertastes. Hidden beneath the ice is Shirazarato crystal sugar of extreme purity and whiteness, a regular ingredient in Toraya's Wagashi confectionary, and Ogura red bean paste prepared specifically as an accompaniment to kaki-gori. Other recommended kaki-gori are Ujimizore served with white azuki bean paste (¥1,260) and Kori Anzu (stewed apricot), which is available only at this Akasaka flagship shop (¥1,155).

Toraya Karyo Tea Room, Akasaka Shop

4-9-22 Akasaka, Minato-ku, Tokyo
11:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. (last order) on weekdays
11:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. (last order) on Saturdays, Sundays and public holidays
Open seven days a week Tel: 03-3408-4121

HIMITSU-DO



Attempts to unleash natural fruit flavors to the fullest

Himitsu no Ichigo Miruku (Himitsu's shaved ice with strawberries and milk) ¥500

At Himitsu-do, a new venue that opened its doors in May this year, a manual ice-shaving machine is still used. Its Himitsu no Ichigo Miruku comes with light-pink strawberry syrup that contains a generous supply of the Beni-Hoppe variety of strawberries produced in Shizuoka. The strawberries are flash frozen after harvesting, and Himitsu-do uses a low flame to stew the strawberries for an extended time so as not to destroy the vitamin content. This process also allows the sauce to thicken nicely to a pulpy consistency packed with strawberry flavor. The proprietor is eager to extend his menu. You may be pleasantly surprised by new sauces featuring seasonal fruits each time you visit.

Himitsu-Do

3-11-18 Yanaka, Taito-ku, Tokyo
11:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. Closed on Mondays
Tel: 03-3824-4132
New seasonal items are subject to availability.

CAFÉ DINING BAR ANGELUS



Original syrup made from stewed green plums

Ume (Plum) (front) and Mocha (back) ¥500 each

Angelus sources its ice from an ice cave in Nikko. Ume shaved ice aficionados swear by Angelus' original syrup, which is made by stewing green plums, whose delicate tartness and gentle sweetness go extremely well with the texture of the soft-melting natural ice shavings.

Angelus serves the type of kaki-gori that only a café would come up with. Its mocha shaved ice, for instance, is doused with rich espresso coffee (¥500). They are planning to roll out a new variation in August, featuring a sweet, preserve-like fruity tomato sauce with seeds left intact for an added texture variation.

Café Dining Bar Angelus

1st Floor, Nishikokurega East Tower, 3-35-1 Izumicho, Kokubunji-shi, Tokyo
9:00 a.m. to 11:00 p.m. Open seven days a week
Tel: 042-312-2403