

FOOD

Fresh take on an old favorite

SIMPLY JAPANESE: MODERN COOKING FOR THE HEALTHY HOME

By Yoko Arimoto (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 2010, 160 pp., \$27.95, hardcover)

Reviewed By AKIKO MINAGA
Nichi Bei Weekly Contributor

With her new book "Simply Japanese," Yoko Arimoto injects a breath of modern air into traditional Japanese home cooking. While Japanese cooking is often considered to be somewhat time-consuming, given its focus on serving multiple smaller dishes, Arimoto not only modernizes traditional Japanese dishes, but also streamlines its process, making it more accessible to everyone. Arimoto's book focuses on home-cooking — dishes that you might find on the table for lunch or dinner in a typical Japanese household. She puts particular emphasis on basics such

as using fresh ingredients and precise technique.

The layout of the book is modern and clean. Arimoto relies minimally on supplementary information in smaller sidebars, instead providing clear step-by-step photographs of the cooking process for every recipe. Every recipe is supplemented with full color pictures. Chapters are organized by ingredients, with exception to a chapter on deep-frying, and another dedicated to more traditional Japanese foods such as *nikujaga* and *chirashisushi*. There is also a glossary at the end that not only defines ingredients and processes, but also provides helpful tips on purchasing, usage and storage.

While most recipes can easily be done at home, there are a few that may pose specific challenges. The wood grilled fish would require cooking on a grill and open flame, and the vinegared mackerel requires, as Arimoto puts it, "extraordinarily fresh mackerel," since it is

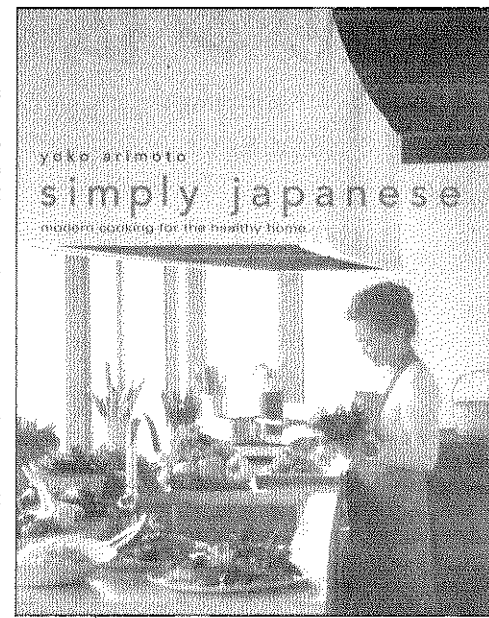
essentially served raw, although it is salted and vinegared. Something to keep in mind is that the heart of the taste in many of these recipes lie in having access to the freshest ingredients possible, as her dishes are designed to showcase the taste of the primary ingredient, using few dressings or sauces. While most recipes center on ingredients that can be found in most Asian supermarkets, Arimoto also provides substitutions for potentially harder to find ingredients, such as *mirin* or certain types of fish.

While Arimoto includes recipes with tried-and-true flavor combinations, such as her tuna avocado rice bowl or vanilla and black sesame ice cream recipe, she still manages to surprise us with a few unexpected takes on traditional Japanese recipes. One is a mimolette cheese and *nori* sandwich recipe, which sounds odd at first, but with the combined flavors of brine and salt, turns out to be a match. Carrot and *tarako* cod

roe is another recipe where Arimoto brings together two unexpected ingredients to create a sweet and savory, yet simple, dish.

The range of expertise needed for these dishes varies greatly, from simple recipes with few ingredients, to more complex dishes that involve more time and preparation. The most detailed dishes and processes are ironically the ones that seem the most basic in nature, such as cooking rice and making *tofu*. While more time consuming, Arimoto shows how to create basics such as *gari* (pickled ginger) that can be stored in the refrigerator and served with multiple meals.

With "Simply Japanese," even the most seasoned Japanese home



cook will find new recipes to try, all modernized for today's kitchen, yet keeping with the traditional *wafu* taste that we all know and love in Japanese cuisine.

Go macro like Madonna

MAYUMI'S KITCHEN: MACROBIOTIC COOKING FOR THE BODY AND SOUL

By Mayumi Nishimura (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 2010, 160 pp., \$29.95, hardcover)

Reviewed By AKIKO MINAGA
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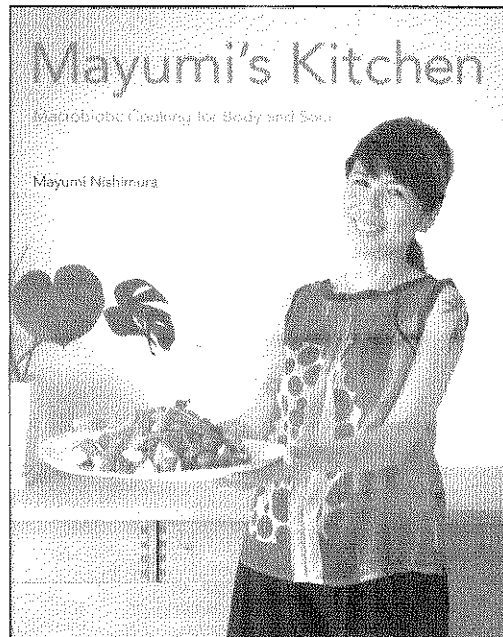
Macrobiotic lifestyles have steadily become popular and mainstream over recent years thanks to Hollywood stars, who rave of their benefits. As Madonna's personal macrobiotic chef for seven years, Mayumi Nishimura is an expert at creating dishes that she claims will not only give you more energy, but also have the power to improve your skin, mind and body. Her recipes generally avoid meat, eggs, dairy or anything processed. Sugars and artificial sweeteners are also avoided, although she does use maple syrup and agar-agar flakes in her dessert recipes. Nuts, oils and seafood are also used, although sparingly.

While this food regimen may seem rather restrictive, Nishimura has compiled a book of over a hundred recipes that support a macrobiotic lifestyle. A macrobiotic diet puts a large emphasis on whole grains, vegetables, beans and sea vegetables, with a more moderate emphasis on fruits, seafood, nuts and seeds.

This cookbook uses plenty of enticing full-color photos, and the layout is fairly straightforward. Chapters

are organized mostly by type of dish, such as soups or condiments. Nishimura also includes a section that explains macrobiotics more concretely, as well as a glossary of ingredients and a section on basic techniques she uses. Also included are recommended menus for those who have specific goals, such as losing weight or improving skin. For macrobiotic beginners, Nishimura recommends starting with a 10-day detox diet that introduces people to basic dishes that can be built upon later.

There are a handful of recipes in this book that are probably exclusive to the hard-core macrobiotic eater, such as *tofu* cheese or grain coffee, a caffeine-free coffee substitute made with barley and rye. However, there are many recipes that have translated beautifully, and would be enjoyed by anyone, such as the *soba* salad with Asian-style dressing, a colorful and beautifully plated dish served with a rainbow of vegetables including *myoga* ginger, *shiso* leaves, purple cabbage and yellow bell pepper. The sea bass with green lentils, fresh corn and parsley is also visu-



ally arresting, and would be perfect for a dinner party. For dessert, the mixed fruit tart provides a stunning finish to a meal, baked with an almond base and garnished with berries, kiwis and an apricot glaze.

While there are a good number of Japanese-style recipes, Nishimura has also created dishes that borrow influences from ethnic cuisines, such as her vegetable lasagna, brown rice *mochi* waffles and tahini sauce. Nishimura's array of dressings, sauces and drinks is impressive, and help add more variety to her menus by accompanying other dishes, widening the range of flavor to an otherwise simple dish.

While this book is obviously recommended for those who want to reap the benefits of following a macrobiotic diet, it is also strongly recommended for vegetarians, vegans and anyone who might want to incorporate healthy dishes into their regular meals. Whether you decide to follow a full-blown macrobiotic lifestyle, or simply want to learn how to make a healthier brownie that doesn't use a stick of butter, "Mayumi's Kitchen" will surprise you with its sheer creativity in finding healthful substitutes for your diet.

Itadakimasu

A COOK'S JOURNEY TO JAPAN

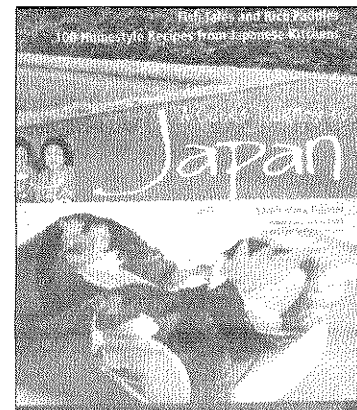
By Sarah Marx Feldner (Tokyo: Tuttle Publishing, 2010, 160 pp., \$27.95, hardcover)

Reviewed By AKIKO MINAGA
Nichi Bei Weekly Contributor

Sarah Marx Feldner had just finished college with a bachelor's in Spanish and applied linguistics when she decided to take a job in Japan. There, she was first introduced to Japanese culture and its food. A few years later, she went back to Japan and with the help of many people compiled a hundred recipes, along with the stories behind every single dish.

Feldner's book is half cookbook, half narrative, as each recipe is preceded by an anecdote: a personal story of the first time she ate the dish, a brief account of the significance of the dish, or how the recipe was acquired. The beauty of this book is that it actively captures the feel of home cooking in Japan. Feldner has listed everything from the most basic, common knowledge recipes for Japanese home cooks such as rice with green peas (*mame-gohan*) and curry rice, to special recipes shared by seasoned chefs such as oolong tea chiffon cake, showcasing the incredible range of tastes and styles Japanese home cooking has evolved into.

Divided into seven chapters by ingredient and type of dish, this cookbook is extremely comprehensive, including a tools and utensils list, and explanation of basic cooking techniques. Feldner also devotes a section to Japanese ingredients, complete with labeled pictures and a detailed glossary, explaining the unique properties of each ingredient. The layout is denser than most books, and the instruction and ingredient text may be small for some people to refer to with ease while cooking. There is a good selection of photos, although they are mostly of the finished product. Some recipes provide photos of preparation, but there are also a few recipes that



have no photos.

Feldner has 14 recipes she introduces in the beginning as "the basics." These include fundamentals such as stock (*dashi*), rice (*sushi* and white) and pickled vegetables (*tsukemono*). None of the recipes are overly complicated, and readers will find they have a wide array of styles and tastes to choose from. Feldner has drawn recipes from friends, professional chefs and her own unique experiences traveling throughout Japan, and they range from very traditional dishes — such as brown rice with red beans (*azuki gohan*) and miso-slathered *dai-kon* (*daiikon dengaku*) — to the most casual snacks and street food, such as crispy rice snacks (*okoge*) and fried *soba* noodles and rice (*soba-meshi*).

This book is ideal for people who have little or no experience with Japanese food and those who want to learn the stories behind the food, as opposed to just learning how to cook a dish. Many of the recipes that Feldner has gathered have a distinctly homey, family feel, such as the fried rice logs (*konetsuke-reiko*) and get-well-soon *udon* soup (*kenchin udon*). Feldner takes her time introducing her audience to Japanese cooking in a friendly and personable way, while including helpful tips and endearing stories.

"A Cook's Journey to Japan" is a surprisingly entertaining read, which is unusual for a cookbook. One could easily spend an afternoon just reading her story of how she wrote this book, along with the stories behind each recipe. Her anecdotes will charm you, and the recipes will warm your home.



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