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Regional Japanese: Home Cooking from Hokkaido to Okinawa

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Introduction

Regional Japanese: Home Cooking from Hokkaido to Okinawa is a guide to everyday meals shaped by place, season, and the quiet power of umami. This book invites you into home kitchens across Japan, where practicality meets grace and where dinner is built from what the market, the sea, and the pantry can provide. While restaurants often define Japan's culinary image abroad, it is the regional table—humble, resourceful, and deeply seasonal—that nourishes daily life.

Our focus is weeknight cooking: recipes designed to fit real schedules without sacrificing flavor or tradition. You will learn how to lean on a well-organized pantry—miso, soy sauce, mirin, vinegars, rice, noodles, seaweeds, preserved fish, and pickles—to build meals quickly. Each chapter offers clear home pantry lists, plus suggestions for substitutions so you can adapt to what you have. Whether you are cooking for one, feeding a family, or preparing a small gathering, the methods here emphasize efficiency, repetition, and confidence.

Regionality is the thread that ties these pages together. From Hokkaido's cold seas and dairy-influenced comfort dishes to Okinawa's island staples and longevity foods, the recipes and techniques reflect local climates, crops, and tastes. Along the way, we explore the quiet variations that make each region distinct: Niigata's snow country rice culture, Kyoto's vegetable-rich obanzai, Hiroshima's griddled specialties brightened with citrus, Shikoku's udon and yuzu, and Kyushu's bolder miso and garlic accents. These dishes are meant for home cooks everywhere; the regional stories guide your choices but never limit them.

Technique is your anchor. You will learn dashi in multiple forms—kombu alone for clarity, katsuobushi for lift, shiitake for depth, niboshi for rustic savor, and even light chicken or vegetable broths when that suits the moment. We'll practice pickling methods that range from five-minute asazuke to nurturing a living rice-bran bed for nukazuke. Grilling and broiling (yakimono) will become weeknight tools, not weekend projects, with strategies for tidy prep, reliable heat, and crisp, caramelized finishes. These core skills, once learned, allow you to cook regionally inspired meals with whatever ingredients are available.

Seasonality and presentation matter, but they should serve the cook, not the other way around. You'll see how to translate the rhythm of Japan's micro-seasons into flexible shopping and menu planning: a bright spring ohitashi, a summer sashimi-style salad with citrus and herbs, an autumn nabe that turns the table into a shared hearth, a winter miso soup enriched with root vegetables. Simple plating cues—the five colors, varied textures, and a balance of cooked and fresh—help make food look and feel

complete without demanding perfection.

Above all, this book emphasizes adaptability. If you cannot find a specific mushroom, use another; if local fish is scarce, choose frozen, canned, or tofu; if time is short, a quick brine or stovetop glaze can deliver satisfying umami in minutes. Each recipe offers regional context and substitution notes so you can improvise with confidence. By the end, you will have a small set of techniques that travel easily, a pantry that works hard, and the pleasure of bringing Japan's regional spirit to your table on any weeknight.

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CHAPTER ONE: Hokkaido: Cold Seas, Warm Kitchens

Hokkaido sits at Japan's northern edge, a place where winter begins early and leaves late. Its kitchens reflect the climate: generous, warming, and built around ingredients that thrive in the cold. The island's expansive seas yield sweet shellfish and fat fish; its broad fields produce potatoes, corn, and the wheat that gives Hokkaido noodles their satisfying chew. Dairy, introduced in the 19th century, is now inseparable from the region's identity, contributing richness to soups, pastas, and even soufflés that blur the line between Japanese home cooking and Western-influenced comfort. Here, meals often lean into abundance, even on a weeknight.

Umami in Hokkaido starts with the sea. The kelp known as kombu grows in the cold currents, thick and dark, with a gentle sweetness that defines Hokkaido dashi. Local katsuobushi, shaved from bonito dried over cherry wood, adds aromatic lift, but many Hokkaido cooks also rely on niboshi, dried sardines that bring a briny depth to miso soup and nimono simmered dishes. In coastal towns, fresh or frozen scallops and clams are everyday proteins, their liquor used to enrich broths. Even simple pasta gets a lift from a splash of sake and a knob of butter, marrying oceanic savor with dairy fat in a way that feels uniquely Hokkaido.

Your Hokkaido pantry begins with good dashi components: kombu (kelp), katsuobushi (bonito flakes), and, if you like, dried sardines. Sake, mirin, soy sauce, white miso, and red miso provide a spectrum of seasoning, with butter on hand for that regional touch. Stock up on potatoes, onions, cabbage, corn, and burdock when in season; keep frozen scallops, shrimp, and clams for quick weeknight meals. Wheat noodles—udon and ramen—anchor many dinners. Flour, eggs, and milk are essential for Hash Brown Potatoes and soufflé-style pancakes. Pickles, like thinly sliced cabbage with sesame dressing, add crunch and brightness.

Adaptations for non-Hokkaido kitchens are straightforward. If fresh Hokkaido scallops are unavailable, frozen scallops or large shrimp work well in chawanmushi or miso soup. Butter can be replaced with a neutral oil plus a splash of cream for richness, though you'll lose a bit of that Hokkaido aroma. For kombu dashi, use any good-quality kombu; if you can't find katsuobushi, a light shiitake dashi or a pinch of dried shiitake powder will still give depth. Potatoes are easy to find; choose waxy varieties for scallop gratin, starchy ones for hash browns. Fresh corn can be swapped with frozen when winter demands it.

Technique-wise, Hokkaido cooking favors gentle simmering and quick grilling. Nimono, a simmered dish, coaxes flavor from root vegetables and fish by keeping the liquid just below a boil. For chawanmushi, the savory egg custard, careful steaming yields a

silky texture; a covered ramekin in a lidded skillet or a improvised steamer works at home. Gratin, usually a Western dish, becomes Japanese with a white sauce enriched with local dairy and a hint of soy. For hash browns, a hot pan and patience produce crisp edges without deep-frying. These methods are low-stress and weeknight-friendly.

Now, let's cook. We'll begin with a Hokkaido-style nimono of potatoes and scallops, then a quick cabbage sesame salad, and finish with a miso soup featuring buttered clams. Each dish highlights the region's ingredients and techniques, and each is flexible. You can swap scallops for shrimp, use canned clams in a pinch, or replace butter with a touch of sesame oil. The key is to respect the balance of oceanic umami and dairy richness that makes Hokkaido home cooking so satisfying.

Hokkaido-Style Potato and Scallop Nimono

This simmered dish, known locally as a variation of Jaga Nimono, leans on Hokkaido's famous potatoes and the sweet brine of scallops. The potatoes absorb the dashi-sake-sugar-soy balance, becoming tender but not mushy. Scallops, added late, stay juicy. It's a one-pot meal that pairs beautifully with rice and pickles. If scallops are scarce, large shrimp or even firm tofu can stand in, and a few mushrooms will lend their own savor. The result is humble, nourishing, and deeply regional.

Serves 2 to 3 as a side or 2 as a main with rice.

Ingredients:

- 2 medium Hokkaido potatoes (waxy or all-purpose), peeled and cut into 2-3 cm cubes
- 100 g fresh or frozen scallops, patted dry (or large shrimp)
- 1 cup Hokkaido kombu dashi (see Chapter 13) or light chicken/vegetable stock
- 2 tbsp sake
- 1 tbsp mirin
- 1.5 tbsp soy sauce
- 1 tsp sugar
- Optional: 1 tbsp butter for finishing; 1/4 onion sliced for aromatic base

Method:

1. Rinse potato cubes briefly to remove surface starch. If using onion, place it in a small pot with the dashi and bring to a gentle simmer; the onion will melt into sweetness.
2. Add potatoes, sake, mirin, and sugar. Keep the liquid at a bare simmer; too vigorous a boil will break the potatoes. Skim any foam.
3. Cook for 12-15 minutes until the potatoes are nearly tender. Add soy sauce and simmer 2 more minutes to set the flavor.
4. Tuck in the scallops (or shrimp) and poach gently for 2-3 minutes, just until opaque and firm. Overcooking toughens them.
5. If using butter, turn off the heat and swirl it in for a silky sheen. Serve in a shallow bowl, spooning broth over the potatoes and shellfish.

This dish captures Hokkaido's coastal agriculture: potatoes from the fields, scallops from the cold sea. The simmering liquid should taste balanced—salty, sweet, and savory—without overwhelming the ingredients. If the broth seems thin, reduce it briefly with the lid off. If too salty, add a splash of water and a pinch of sugar. It's a forgiving pot, ideal for nights when you want something warm and substantial without hovering over the stove.

Quick Cabbage Sesame Salad

Hokkaido cabbage is famous for its sweetness and crunch, thriving in the cool climate. This salad brings that crispness to the table in minutes, dressed in a sesame-miso-soy blend that lands squarely in the “saveable weeknight” category. Cabbage, sliced paper-thin, wilts just enough to catch the dressing. A handful of toasted sesame seeds adds nuttiness, and a squeeze of lemon brightens everything. If cabbage isn't on hand, use romaine hearts or even thinly sliced Brussels sprouts.

Serves 2 as a side.

Ingredients:

- 3 cups finely shredded cabbage (Hokkaido green cabbage if available)
- 1 tbsp white miso
- 1 tbsp soy sauce
- 1 tbsp toasted sesame oil
- 1 tsp rice vinegar
- 1 tsp sugar or mirin
- 1 tbsp toasted sesame seeds, plus more for garnish
- Optional: pinch of chili flakes or grated daikon for heat and freshness

Method:

1. Whisk miso, soy sauce, sesame oil, rice vinegar, and sugar until smooth. The miso should dissolve completely.
2. Toss the cabbage with the dressing in a bowl. Massage gently for 30 seconds to soften the fibers and help the dressing adhere.
3. Add sesame seeds and toss again. Taste and adjust: a little more vinegar if you want brightness, more sugar if you prefer a mellow profile.
4. Serve immediately or let it sit for 10 minutes; the cabbage will soften but retain crunch. Garnish with extra seeds and, if using, a sprinkle of chili or daikon.

This salad is versatile: add leftover shredded carrots, cucumbers, or blanched bean sprouts for texture. It travels well for bento and can be made ahead by keeping the dressing separate until serving. The interplay of miso umami and toasted sesame gives depth without heaviness, a Hokkaido signature that balances rich dishes like gratin or nimono.

Miso Soup with Buttered Clams

Miso soup in Hokkaido often takes a turn toward the sea. Clams, especially small hard-shell varieties, release a sweet liquor that marries beautifully with miso and a knob of butter. This is not a traditional rule so much as a local habit, born from convenience and the desire for richness in cold weather. The result is a quick, luxurious soup that feels indulgent yet remains weeknight-simple. Use fresh clams if you can; frozen clams or cockles work when necessary.

Serves 2.

Ingredients:

- 10-12 small clams (or 1 cup frozen clams, thawed and rinsed)
- 2 cups water or light dashi
- 2 tbsp miso (white or mixed)
- 1 tbsp butter
- 1-2 scallions, thinly sliced
- Optional: handful of tofu cubes; a few shiitake slices for extra depth

Method:

1. Clean clams thoroughly; if using fresh, soak in salted water for 20 minutes to purge sand.
2. Bring water or dashi to a gentle simmer. Add clams and cover; cook until shells open, 3-5 minutes. Discard any that stay closed.
3. Lower heat to keep the broth just below boiling. Dissolve miso in a ladleful of broth, then stir it back in. Avoid boiling after miso is added to preserve aroma.
4. Stir in butter until it melts, enriching the broth. Add tofu or shiitake now if using; simmer briefly until heated through.
5. Serve in bowls, garnished with scallions. The broth should taste sweet from the clams, savory from miso, and round from butter.

For substitutions, canned clams with their liquid can replace fresh; reduce added salt and soy. If butter feels too rich, a touch of sesame oil adds similar roundness without dairy. The soup is excellent alongside rice and pickles, or with a slice of toast for a Hokkaido-style breakfast-for-dinner.

Hokkaido-Style Hash Browns

Potatoes are Hokkaido's pride, and hash browns are a weeknight hero. While the Western version often lives in the deep fryer, Hokkaido home cooks favor the skillet, keeping things manageable. The technique is simple: crisp edges, tender centers, and a pinch of salt to let the potato flavor shine. These hash browns can serve as a side to grilled fish or, with a poached egg, become a meal. The local touch is subtle: a pat of butter at the end or a dusting of seaweed salt.

Serves 2 as a side.

Ingredients:

- 2 medium potatoes (starchy or all-purpose), peeled
- Salt and pepper
- 2 tbsp neutral oil (or a mix of oil and butter for flavor)
- Optional: 1 tbsp butter for finishing; pinch of finely chopped scallion; dash of soy sauce for a savory finish

Method:

1. Grate potatoes using the large holes of a box grater. Squeeze out excess moisture in a clean towel; dry potatoes are crisp potatoes.
2. Season with salt and pepper. Heat oil in a skillet over medium-high heat.
3. Spread the potatoes in a thin, even layer, pressing lightly. Cook undisturbed for 4–5 minutes until the bottom is golden.
4. Flip in sections and cook another 3–5 minutes until crisp. Resist the urge to stir; patience rewards you with crust.
5. Optional: add butter and swirl, or finish with a tiny splash of soy sauce and scallions for a Hokkaido touch. Serve hot.

For variations, add finely diced onion or grated carrot to the mix. If you prefer a softer interior, cover the pan for a minute after flipping. These hash browns are excellent with a simple side salad or under a piece of grilled salmon. They're also sturdy enough to pack in a bento, though they're best crisp from the pan.

Scallops and Corn Miso Gratin (Hokkaido-style)

Gratin is not traditionally Japanese, but Hokkaido adopted it with gusto, mixing local dairy with miso for a savory twist. The creamy sauce, thickened with flour and milk, gets a hint of umami from miso, and the topping is usually breadcrumbs or, for extra indulgence, sliced potatoes. Corn, another Hokkaido staple, adds sweetness that balances the brine of scallops. This is a weekend-leaning dish that can be streamlined for weeknights by using frozen scallops and corn.

Serves 2 to 3.

Ingredients:

- 150 g scallops, cut into bite-size pieces if large
- 1 cup corn kernels (fresh or frozen)
- 2 tbsp butter
- 2 tbsp flour
- 1.5 cups milk
- 1 tbsp white miso
- 1/2 cup grated cheese (Gruyère, cheddar, or mozzarella)
- Salt, pepper, pinch of nutmeg

- Breadcrumbs for topping (or thin potato slices)

Method:

1. Melt 1 tbsp butter in a saucepan. Stir in flour and cook for a minute to remove raw taste. Gradually whisk in milk to make a thick white sauce.
2. Off heat, stir in miso and half the cheese. Season with salt, pepper, and nutmeg. The miso should be prominent but not overpowering.
3. Fold in scallops and corn. Transfer to a small baking dish. Top with remaining cheese and breadcrumbs (or arrange thin potato slices brushed with butter).
4. Bake at 200°C (400°F) for 12–15 minutes until bubbling and golden. If you have a broiler, finish there for extra color.

This gratin is flexible: replace scallops with shrimp, smoked fish, or tofu. If you want a lighter sauce, use half milk and half dashi. Serve with a crisp salad; the richness needs a fresh counterpoint. Hokkaido's dairy and seafood meet here in a dish that feels homey and a touch luxurious.

Savory Soufflé Pancakes (Fuwa Fuwa)

Hokkaido's love of dairy and eggs shows up in tall, airy pancakes that lean savory. The technique is simple: whipped egg whites folded into a yolk batter, then cooked low and slow with a lid to trap steam. A pinch of flour keeps them light, and toppings can swing from butter and soy to smoked salmon and scallions. While sweet versions exist, this savory take fits the dinner table and showcases Hokkaido's soft, fluffy textures.

Serves 2.

Ingredients:

- 2 eggs, separated
- 3 tbsp flour
- 2 tbsp milk
- Pinch of salt
- 1 tsp sugar (optional, for balance)
- Neutral oil for cooking
- Toppings: butter, a drizzle of soy sauce, chopped scallions; or smoked salmon, crème fraîche, and dill

Method:

1. Whisk yolks with flour, milk, salt, and sugar until smooth. In a separate bowl, whip egg whites to soft peaks.
2. Fold a third of the whites into the yolk batter to lighten, then gently fold in the rest. Keep as much air as possible.
3. Heat a nonstick skillet over low heat, lightly oil it. Spoon in tall mounds of batter. Cover and cook 4–5 minutes until the bottom is golden and the top mostly set.
4. Flip carefully (use two spatulas if needed), cover again, and cook another 2–3

- minutes until puffed and cooked through.
5. Serve immediately with butter and soy, or smoked salmon and crème fraîche. A sprinkle of scallions adds color and bite.

If you don't have a lid large enough, a baking sheet can serve as a cover. These pancakes are forgiving: if they deflate a bit, they'll still taste delicious. The texture is cloudlike, the flavor gently savory. For a weeknight shortcut, skip the whipped whites and make a thicker pancake; it won't be as tall but will still satisfy.

Quick Dashi Broth Variations for Hokkaido Soups

While the recipes above use light dashi, it's worth having a few variations in your repertoire. Hokkaido cooks often choose kombu-only dashi for delicate dishes like chawanmushi or potato nimono, letting ingredients speak clearly. For heartier soups, katsuobushi adds lift and aroma. For depth without fish, shiitake and niboshi create a rustic savor that stands up to butter and miso. The key is to keep things simple: one or two umami sources, properly extracted, will beat a complicated blend every time.

For kombu-only dashi, soak a strip of kombu in cold water for 30 minutes, then gently heat until just below simmering; remove kombu before boiling to avoid bitterness. For katsuobushi dashi, add a handful of flakes to nearly boiling water, let them sink, then strain. For shiitake dashi, soak dried shiitake in water overnight; the soaking liquid is fragrant and sweet. For niboshi dashi, simmer whole dried sardines briefly and strain; use a light hand, as niboshi can dominate.

These dashi bases can be mixed: kombu plus shiitake makes a clean vegetarian broth; kombu plus niboshi is rustic and hearty. Keep small jars of dashi in the fridge for fast soups and simmered dishes. A splash of sake or mirin can round out sharp edges. With these few building blocks, you can adapt nearly any Hokkaido soup to your pantry and schedule, letting the region's oceanic umami lead the way.

Weeknight Plate: Rice, Soup, Pickles, and Main

Hokkaido home cooking often follows a simple rhythm: a bowl of rice, a soup, a pickled side, and a main that might be simmered, grilled, or pan-fried. This approach, streamlined for busy nights, makes meal planning straightforward. Start with a pot of short-grain rice. While it cooks, make a quick miso soup with whatever you have—clams, tofu, scallions, or mushrooms. Slice cabbage and dress with the sesame-miso mixture for crunch. Finish with a nimono or hash browns, depending on your appetite and time.

In Hokkaido, the order of dishes reflects the season. Spring might bring fresh greens in ohitashi and lighter soups. Summer favors corn and cold tofu next to grilled fish. Autumn welcomes mushrooms and heartier miso. Winter is the time for butter, rich gratins, and warming nimono. The constant is balance: salty and sweet, hot and cold,

soft and crisp. Your table doesn't need to be elaborate to capture this spirit. It simply needs to be thoughtfully composed.

Adapting the rhythm to non-Hokkaido kitchens is easy. If rice isn't your staple, noodles work too; a small bowl of udon with scallions and soy can serve the same role. Soup can be a quick kombu dashi with greens and miso. Pickles can be as simple as cucumbers in vinegar or store-bought takuan. The main can be whatever protein you have. The aim is to create a meal that feels complete and comforting, channeling Hokkaido's warmth in the face of cold.

Shopping and Storing for Hokkaido Home Cooking

When you can, buy Hokkaido kombu; it's thicker and sweeter than many varieties. Keep katsuobushi in an airtight jar to preserve aroma. Frozen scallops are a smart buy; thaw in the fridge and pat dry before cooking. Potatoes should be firm and free of sprouts; store them in a cool, dark place, not the fridge. Cabbage keeps well in the crisper; slice only what you need to maintain crunch. Butter freezes well; portion it into small sticks for easy weeknight use.

For longer storage, blanch corn and freeze it in portioned bags. Miso varies in saltiness and richness; taste and label jars so you know what you're reaching for. If you make a larger batch of dashi, freeze it in ice cube trays for quick additions. Pickles, homemade or store-bought, are your weeknight friend; a few bites can transform a simple plate. With a well-stocked Hokkaido pantry, even a bare fridge can yield a satisfying meal in under thirty minutes.

Quick Reference: Hokkaido Weeknight Building Blocks

For easy navigation during busy evenings, here's a compact view of the core components we've covered. Use it to improvise: choose a main, a soup base, a crunchy side, and a starch. Keep substitutions in mind for flexibility.

Component	Examples	Swaps and Notes
Main	Potato & scallop nimono; scallop-corn gratin; buttered clam miso soup; hash browns; savory pancakes	Shrimp for scallops; tofu or mushrooms for shellfish; canned clams if fresh are scarce; oil instead of butter if needed
Starch	Short-grain rice; udon or ramen; potatoes	Use noodles if rice is unavailable; leftover rice works for fried rice variations
Side/Crunch	Cabbage sesame salad; quick pickles; ohitashi (blanched greens with soy)	Romaine or Brussels sprouts for cabbage; cucumbers or daikon for pickles
Umami Base	Kombu dashi; katsuobushi dashi; shiitake dashi; niboshi	Mix and match; kombu + shiitake for vegetarian;

dashi

kombu + niboshi for rustic

Hokkaido kitchens are practical places where warmth is coaxed from simple tools: a good pot, a sturdy skillet, and a well-stocked pantry. The recipes here are designed for nights when you want comfort without complexity. Whether you're simmering potatoes with scallops, crisping hash browns, or folding air into savory pancakes, the goal is the same: bring the cold island's warmth to your table with ease.

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