



Harvesting *aramé* the old-fashioned way

ABOUT *Aramé*... a recipe with tips & some trivia

It seems that for many who live outside Japan *aramé* is easier to source than *hijiki*. So it is no surprise that many people have asked me the same question: can *aramé* be used **INSTEAD** of *hijiki*?

Indeed, *aramé* is often listed as a substitute for *hijiki* in soy-braised *nimono* dishes; and *aramé* can easily be made into *tsukuda ni*. Like *hijiki*, *aramé* is dark brown and when sold as *kizami* or “cut” *aramé*, it is thread-like in appearance. *Aramé* has a similar (seashore) flavor and nutritional profile (rich in calcium, also iodine) to *hijiki*.

However, ***hijiki* and *aramé* are different sea “vegetables”** – *aramé* is a variety of *kombu* (kelp; ***Eisenia bicyclis***) while *hijiki* is an algae (***Sargassum fusiforme***).

If you prefer your soy-stewed *aramé* very tender (rather than *a la dente*), “prep” it by par-boiling in acidulated water (for every cup of tap water, add 1 teaspoon of rice vinegar). The acidulated water helps tenderize the *aramé*, breaking down fibers to permit better transfer of flavor (from the soy-based braising liquid). “Extra” pre-steps such as this vinegar treatment are called *shita koshiraé* (下こしらえ) in Japanese. Although it sounds annoyingly troublesome to perform this extra step beforehand, it makes a HUGE difference in the outcome.

The same vinegar *shita koshiraé* treatment is called for in the ***TSUKUDA NI*** recipe that combines *kombu* and *enoki* mushrooms into a soy-stewed condiment (page 110 of [WASHOKU: Recipes from the Japanese Home Kitchen](#), Ten Speed Press, 2005).

Because *aramé* is a variety of *kombu* it benefits from being treated like *kombu*.



荒布の佃煮
Aramé no Tsukuda Ni

The origins of the dish known as **Tsukuda Ni**... During the Edo period (1603-1868), the fish market serving the area now known as Tokyo, was located in Tsukuda. There, small and bruised fish with little or no commercial value, were preserved by simmering them in a mixture of soy sauce and *mirin* (*saké* made from sweet rice). Huge vats of seasoned soy were re-used, becoming more intense with each new batch of fish simmered in it. When necessary, the soy sauce mixture was thinned with water. In the households of those who worked at the market, kitchen scraps and bits and pieces of kelp, fish flakes, and dried mushrooms left from making stock were re-cycled in a process of soy-stewing that came to be known as *Tsukuda ni*, or “simmered in the manner of Tsukuda.”

Aramé is delicious prepared Tsukuda-style.

Yield: a scant cup

2 ounces (about 55 grams) dried *aramé*
tap water to soak *aramé*
acidulated water: 2 cups water + 2 teaspoons rice vinegar
1 tablespoon sugar
1 teaspoon *saké*
3-4 tablespoons soy sauce

Soak dried *aramé* in tap water to cover in a glass jar, bowl (or other container made from a non-reactive material) for at about 15 minutes. Drain and **DISCARD the soaking water.**

In a non-reactive pot (enamel, glass, or lined with non-stick coating), bring the acidulated water to a steady, though not vigorous, boil. Cook the *aramé* for about 5 minutes. The water may become murky with a green cast to it and/or the surface of the *aramé* may begin to blister – this is entirely normal. Test for tenderness with your fingernail; it should leave a mark easily. If necessary, continue cooking for another 2 to 3 minutes.

Drain; rinse in cold water; drain again. Briefly rinse your saucepan before adding sugar, *saké*, and soy sauce. Over low heat, bring the mixture to a gentle simmer. Return the parboiled *aramé* to the saucepan and simmer for 2 to 3 minutes.

When soy-stewing *aramé*, it is best to use an *otoshi-buta* (wooden dropped lid) and/or a sheet of cooking parchment (cut in a circle slightly smaller in circumference than the pot so that the sheet sits directly on the food, not on the rim of the pot) to keep the *aramé* covered as it cooks.

When the *aramé* looks glazed, and the liquid is nearly gone, remove the pan from the heat and let the *aramé* cool to room temperature. Store *Aramé no Tsukuda Ni* in a glass jar in the refrigerator for up to two weeks. Each time you take some relish from the jar, reseal it with fresh plastic wrap before replacing the lid.



Some interesting *aramé* trivia:



The sea vegetable *aramé* is harvested in Japan from several regions including Shizuoka, Shimane and Mie Prefectures (the *aramé* from 伊勢志摩 Isejima is especially prized). In general the temperature of the water where *aramé* is found is higher than the chilly waters that produce nearly all other varieties of *kombu* (Hidaka, Rausu, Rishiri and ma kombu are harvested in Hokkaido). Freshly harvested fronds of *aramé* are rinsed in seawater and hung to dry. Most commercially processed *aramé* is cut (*kizami*) into thread-like pieces before being packaged.

Aramé is an ancient food in Japan; records kept at Ise Jingu shrine list *aramé* as being part of ritual offerings from the mid-8th century AD. In the Kansai region *aramé* is made for *Obon* (お盆) the annual summer Buddhist festival. It is believed that during *obon* the ancestors' spirits return to this world in order to visit their relatives. On the morning of August 16 *aramé* is soy-stewed and the acidulated water that is drained off is used to “wash” the entrance of the home. This, as part of the ritual send-off of the ancestors returning to the spirit world.

And in some Kyoto households on summer days that include the number 8 (8, 18, 28), soy-stewed *aramé* is eaten. The number 8 is written 八 widening, increasing/growing at the base. The sound *mé* (of *aramé*) can also be written as 芽 or “bud.” The combination makes an auspicious meaning: ever-increasing, budding prosperity.