

胡瓜の辛子麹漬け  
*Kyuuri no Karashi Kōji-Zuké*  
**Mustard-Spiked Kōji-Pickled Cucumbers**



Supermarkets in Japan often have a table with less-than-gorgeous-looking produce steeply discounted. Whenever I see bags of odd-shaped cucumbers at my local market I'll assemble a batch of these spicy cucumbers. And for those who grow their own, keep this recipe in mind when you have an abundance of curled or misshapened cucumbers.

Because these cucumbers are pickled with *shio kōji* which already has salt as a component there is no need to do a preliminary salt-rubbing and/or brining as is common with many *tsukémono*. More about *shio kōji* in **KITCHEN NOTES** after recipe

The pickles are ready to eat within 30 minutes of assembling, and for 4 or 5 days thereafter. The cucumbers retain their zippy taste and crunch, though the color fades as time passes.

Makes about 8 portions.

*karashi kōji* pickling medium:

1/2 cup *shio kōji*, see **KITCHEN NOTES**

1 Tablespoon *karashi*, see **KITCHEN NOTES**

6-7 Japanese cucumbers (misshapen cukes are fine!), about 340 grams/12 ounces

1-inch piece of *kombu* (kelp) cut into 2 or 3 strips, optional

In a glass jar (or other non-reactive container) mix the *shio kōji* with mustard (powdered *karashi ko* is preferred because its aroma is released directly into the *shio kōji* rather than being “diluted” with emulsifiers before being packaged in tubes). I use a small whisk to blend the two ingredients but the back of soup spoon works well, too.

Set aside the pickling medium while you cut your cucumbers; they will taste sweeter if you follow a procedure known as *aku nuki* or “bitterness removal” first.



Slice off a sliver from the darker green, stem end of each cucumber. Holding the sliver in one hand, and the rest of the cucumber in the other, rub the cut ends together in a circular motion. The friction from this action causes a white, pasty substance to appear on the rim of the cucumber. This is what the Japanese call *aku* or “bitterness.” Rinse away the *aku* under cold water, trim off the opposite end, and pat the cucumbers dry.

Cut the cucumbers into small, multi-faceted chunks using the *ran-giri* (roll-cut) technique. This produces lots of surface area to interact with the pickling medium (*shio kōji* and *karashi* in this instance).

Begin slicing the cucumber at the thicker end; slice 1/2 inch from the edge, on the diagonal. Keeping the knife pointing in the same diagonal direction, roll the cucumber towards you (about 1/3 turn) on the cutting board and slice again. Continue, adjusting length and angle of rolling to produce small, multi-faceted but uniform chunks.



Place the sliced cucumbers in a sturdy re-sealable storage bag and add the *karashi kōji* paste. Toss and shake to distribute evenly among the pieces of cucumber. As moisture begins to appear, apply slight massage-like pressure to begin to wilt the cucumber pieces. Set aside for about 30 minutes (while you make dinner). The moisture in the cucumbers is drawn out by the *kōji* and you will notice a fair amount of liquid forming in the bag.



When ready to serve, lift cucumber pieces from the bag and mound in small individual plates or a serving bowl. No need to rinse or blot the cucumbers, though you can if you prefer.



I suggest you make the *karashi kōji* pickling medium ahead and store it in the refrigerator in a glass jar (label with the date; use within 2 months). You'll find that having it on hand will enable you to quick-craft tasty pickles within a half an hour. Cut your cucumbers before you start dinner preparations and by the time you are ready to sit down and eat, the pickles are done!

## KITCHEN NOTES

### Japanese mustard (karashi) 辛子



Like other mustards, Japanese mustard is made by crushing the dried seeds of *Brassica juncea* (mustard greens). It is sold in powdered form (in small cans and bags) and as a paste (in tubes). Both forms are intensely yellow, sharp and spicy (nasal-spicy).

To make a paste from powdered *karashi*, mix it with lukewarm water (104°F/40C and 140°F/60C), a few drops at a time, stirring until a thick, smooth paste forms. To avoid bitterness, let the paste rest covered with a plain sheet of paper (to keep air out) for about 5 minutes.

Although tubes of mustard paste are convenient, they typically have vegetable oil added as an emulsifier. Check labels to be sure that no artificial coloring, preservatives or animal fats have been added. Once a can or tube of mustard has been opened, store it in the refrigerator to maintain optimal aroma and full spicy punch.

In Japan, commercial market share is split between S&B and House, the two dominant brands. Many who make *tsukémono*, however, prefer Yamasei's Oni Karashi (pictured on the right) for its intensity.

### Shio Kōji (Aspergillus oryzae) fermenting agent 塩麹 (しおこうじ)



Various packages of *shio kōji* mixture from thick paste (left) to thin gruel-like consistency (right)

*Kōji* (*Aspergillus oryzae*) has been used in Japan for centuries to make a wide range of fermented foods including *saké*, *miso*, *shōyu* (soy sauce) and many kinds of *tsukémono* (pickles). In the past few years there has been renewed interest in home pickling in Japan and as a result *shio kōji* packaged in ready-to-use jars and soft pouches have become widely available. Refrigerate after opening and use within 2 months; freezing compromises the probiotic value of *kōji* and makes texture grainy.

*Shio kōji* paste can be used to pickle vegetables and cure fish, seafood, meat, chicken and *tōfu*. No need to rinse away pickling paste before eating vegetables or *tōfu* pickled/cured with *shio kōji*. Fish, seafood, meat, and chicken **MUST BE COOKED** before eating; **curing in *shio kōji* does not render food safe to consume raw.**

**DO NOT RE-USE** *kōji* paste that has been used as a marinade.