

Oysters-on-the-River-Bank Hot Pot

(*Kaki no Doté Nabé*)

牡蠣の土手鍋



Kaki (oyster) *no Doté* (riverbank) *Nabé* (hotpot) is a Tohoku region specialty. The name comes from its appearance: the rich earth-colored *miso* that is smeared around the rim of the pot looks like a riverbank. As the broth bubbles the *miso* is drawn, little by little, into the pot flavoring and thickening the broth (think riverbank silt sliding into a stream after heavy rains).

Vegetables can simmer leisurely in the broth, waiting to be plucked out when each person is ready. The oysters, however, are best dipped briefly until just firmed a bit, then grazed along the rim to pick up extra *miso*.

I urge you to try your hand at hot-pot camaraderie with your family and friends.

Serves 4 to 6

1/2 cup *aka neri miso* ("stirred" red *miso* sauce)

5 to 6 tablespoons *Sendai miso* or other pungent *aka miso* ("red" bean paste)

2 to 3 tablespoons sugar

2 to 3 tablespoons *saké*

1 to 2 tablespoons water

One 2-3-inch piece of *kombu* (kelp) soaked in 1/2 to 2 cups water

Shucked oysters (4 or 5 per person)

vegetables (about 3 ounces per person)

a combination of leeks (white portion cut thinly on the diagonal); mushrooms (*shiméji*, *énoki* and/or fresh *shiitaké* trimmed and sliced into easy-to-eat pieces); *hakusai* cabbage (cut in 1-inch wedges); carrot (decoratively carved to look like plum blossoms in the winter, from 1/4-inch thick slices if you can

- source special cutters)
- 1 package firm *tōfu*, about 14 ounces, drained and cut in half lengthwise then across into 8-12 slabs
- 2 to 3-quart heatproof casserole with a rim or lip (on which *neri miso* can be smeared), preferably a glazed ceramic *donabé* that is wide and rather shallow.
- A cook-at-table unit such as an electric hotplate; optional

Begin by preparing ***Aka Neri Miso***. Seasoned *miso* sauces are referred to collectively as *neri miso*, or “stirred bean paste.” Among the many *neri miso* pastes commonly used to prepare *washoku* dishes, a pungent red is the most versatile. This sauce can be made with any *aka miso* (“red” fermented bean paste). The consistency and saltiness of *miso* vary considerably from type to type and brand to brand. That’s why I’ve given you a range, rather than exact measurements, for quantities of ingredients such as sugar, sake, and water. Begin with the least amount called for in the recipe, adjusting later for sweet/salty balance and to achieve the proper consistency.

Combine the ingredients directly in a saucepan. Before placing the pan over your source of heat, stir ingredients with a wooden spatula until they are thoroughly mixed.

Cook, stirring constantly, over medium-high heat until the mixture is glossy and the consistency of tomato ketchup. (The sauce will stiffen and thicken a bit as it cools later.) The sauce will bubble and splatter as you cook, so use caution, and long-handled pans and spatulas.

Use a spoon to take a small sample from the pot. Allow the sample to cool before tasting. Adjust, as needed, by adding more sugar (if too salty) and/or water (if too stiff). Set aside to cool completely. Transfer the cooked and cooled sauce to a glass jar with a tight-fitting lid. Refrigerated, it will keep 3 to 4 weeks.

Next, prepare your **oysters**. If you have purchased shucked oysters in a glass jar, carefully strain the liquid (a flavorful essence) adding it to the heatproof casserole or pot. Shucked oysters can have bits of shell and grit clinging them, so examine carefully. If need be, briefly swish the plump meats in salted water (1 teaspoon salt for 2 cups tap water), **gently** rubbing with your fingers to clean the surface. Rinse the meats in fresh water and drain immediately on paper towels (you don’t want the shucked meats to absorb the rinse water). Place cleaned oysters on your platter, ready to add to the hotpot.

Arrange the vegetables, *tōfu* and oysters attractively on a platter within easy reach of the cooking unit. Smear the *neri miso* mixture around the inner edge of the casserole/pot. Line the casserole with the piece of kelp that was used to make the *kombu* (kelp) stock. Pour in 1 cup of the kelp broth and set the casserole on the cooking unit over medium heat. Allow the broth to come to a boil before adjusting to maintain a steady but not vigorous simmer. If need be, start the cooking in your kitchen on the stove, then (carefully) move the casserole to your table cooking unit.

Add half the vegetables and *tōfu*, giving them time to become tender and absorb flavor from the broth as it slowly becomes enriched by the “melting” *miso*. Help

yourself. When ready to enjoy a few oysters, add several to the pot, swish and let cook for one minute, until just firm.

As you retrieve your share, slide the oyster around the edge to pick up some of the crusted *miso* that clings there (try eating the *tōfu* this way, too... yum). It is best to cook the oysters in batches, allowing one for each person in the first round. That way the broth becomes imbued with briny flavor early on, yet you can savor the oysters at the end, too. Continue to add vegetables and oysters to the pot, adding more *kombu* stock as needed to keep from scorching.

GOOD TO THE LAST DROP: *Ojiya*

The *kombu* that remains at the bottom of the casserole is delicious (and can be nibbled on the spot), as is the broth. Strain the broth (and nibble the bits you have captured or discard them) and use immediately (to make the porridge-like dish *ojiya*, described below) or store in a glass jar, refrigerated for up to 2 days.

To make *ojiya* for 4 people you will need at least 1 cup of cooked rice (cold, refrigerated leftovers from a previous day are perfect) and 2 cups liquid – the strained broth from the hot pot, adding water or *kombu* stock if need be. Place liquid in a saucpan over low heat until barely at a simmer.

If your rice is gummy or clumped, place it in a fine-meshed strainer and briefly rinse it in water, swishing to separate the grains. Drain well before adding to the simmering broth. Cook over low heat, stirring, to make a thick porridge. Scoop out into small bowls and top with finely chopped scallions. This richly flavored porridge makes a perfect *shimé*, or finale, to the oyster stew.