

**SSC 490, SEC. 756: FOOD IN MODERN JAPANESE HISTORY AND CULTURE (4 cr.)**

Japan Center for Michigan Universities

Spring 2026

Professor: Elizabeth D. Lublin

Mtg. times: TBD

Mtg. room: TBD

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Office hrs.: TBD

Office location: TBD

**Course description:** It goes without saying that food provides the sustenance of life. It also serves as a useful lens for exploring a country's historical evolution, notions about national identity, the nature of interactions with the outside, the role of the government and class in shaping consumption, gender expectations, aesthetic values, and popular culture. This course will explore these topics and more as it takes you on a culinary tour of modern Japan.

**Course materials:** I have listed your reading assignments below under the “schedule of class meetings.” These include scholarly articles and chapters, a novel, and a manga. I expect you to complete these before each session and to come prepared to discuss them. Without that preparation and the knowledge and context that come from doing the work, you hinder your ability to contribute in meaningful ways, limit what you get out of conversations, and impact your participation grade. You will be able to access most of these readings online as PDFs. In addition, you will read the following two books:

Murata, Sayaka. *Convenience Store Woman*. Translated by Ginny Tapley Takemori. New York: Grove Press, 2018.

Tsukada, Yuto. *Food Wars!: Shokugeki no Soma*. Vol. 1. San Francisco: VIZ Media, 2014.

**Graded work – participation (and attendance):** Not to sound like a broken record, but active and thoughtful engagement with this course's content, your classmates, and me is essential to your success in this class. Why and what does that mean? This class will operate much like a seminar, with a focus on discussion with mini-lectures and audiovisual presentations woven throughout. So, you should not expect to act like a wallflower during each session. Rather, participation entails contributing regularly to the conversation with comments, questions, interpretations, opinions, and personal observations from your time exploring Japan outside of JCMU. To encourage/reward such, I have allocated 20% of your final grade to participation. As the above comment about being a wallflower should have made clear, attendance is not the same thing as participation. Note as well that anyone who misses more than three classes will receive zero points for participation unless the reasons are particularly extenuating.

**Graded work – short essays:** For this course you will submit two short essays. These papers are designed to improve your ability to analyze sources critically, write coherently, and make arguments convincingly. Each essay is due at the start of class on the designated day. Both papers should be typed, double spaced, and in a font equivalent to 12 Times New Roman. They should be written in the third person [so, no “I,” “my,” or “me”]. Both should also have a clear introduction and conclusion with the thesis highlighted in the former and with the body paragraphs including specific references to the related readings as evidence. If those references are quotations, page citations need to be provided in parentheses right after. Any paper without proper citations, based

on AI, or otherwise plagiarized will receive a zero for the assignment. See below for descriptions of these two essays.

*Analysis of Food Wars!: Shokugeki no Soma*: While no manga series focused on food or cooking yet rivals *One Piece*, *Naruto*, or *Dragon Ball* in terms of sales, this genre has definitely taken off. One of the most popular such manga is *Food Wars!: Shokugeki no Soma*, which was serialized in *Weekly Shōnen Jump* from 2012-2019 and subsequently made into a TV anime series and two video games. In 1-½ to 2 pages, evaluate the manga as an educational tool. Namely, considering both the text and the drawings, discuss what it relates about cooking techniques, about the Japanese diet, and about who should be in the commercial kitchen. **Due Feb. 23**

*Commentary on Convenience Store Woman*: Since its publication in Japanese in 2016, this short novel by Murata Sayaka has become a bestseller and winner of the Akutagawa Prize, one of Japan's most acclaimed literary prizes. In 2 to 2-½ pages, explain why. Also comment on what light this book sheds on the place of the convenience store in the Japanese diet, its operations, part-time labor [*arubaito*], and expectations regarding the roles that women should play. **Due March 23**

**Graded work – journal entries**: Over the course of the semester, you will submit journal entries each 1 to 2 pages long. These are akin to reflection papers and aim to take advantage of the fact that you are in Japan and our classroom so easily can extend beyond the physical walls of the room in which we meet. The “schedule of meetings” below lists six entries. Note that you only need to submit five. If you hand in a sixth, I will factor the five highest scores in your final grade. Although you should use the first person in these write-ups, like the short essays, they should be typed, double-spaced, and in a font equivalent to 12 Times New Roman. They should also be well organized and free of grammatical mistakes.

**Graded work – group presentation**: PechaKucha [Japanese for chit-chat] is a storytelling format that two architects at a Tokyo firm created in 2003. In short, it is a PowerPoint presentation with twenty slides, each of which is shown for twenty seconds and is accompanied by narration. As your final assignment for the course and together with two or three classmates, you will put together a research project in the form of a PechaKucha on some aspect of Japanese food culture. Given that the runtime is only 6 minutes and 40 seconds, your script, i.e., the commentary that your group will provide to explain the images, will be around 3½-4 pages. I stress here the need for a script as your comments should be well thought out rather than spontaneous. You must also make an argument just as you would in a paper.

The choice of topic is up to your group - with one caveat. It should be on an aspect of Japanese food culture that we will not specifically delve into during the semester through readings and in-class audiovisual presentations. Note that each group needs to pick a different topic, and I am happy to field ideas not listed below.

<i>miso</i>	<i>senbei</i> [savory crackers]	<i>osechi</i> [New Year's foods]
<i>rice</i>	<i>tempura</i>	festival foods
<i>tsukemono</i> [pickles]	<i>tonkatsu</i> [fried cutlets]	tea
<i>curry</i>	<i>umami</i> [MSG]	sake
soy [beans, sauce, tofu]	plastic food/Kappabashi	beer
<i>soba</i>	<i>kyūshoku</i> [school lunches]	vending machines

As you will see on the “schedule of meetings” later in the syllabus, I have set aside one class meeting for you to work on your presentations. By the end of that session, you should have formed your groups, confirmed your topic with me, figured out a plan of work, and signed up for your presentation day. In relation to that plan, keep in mind the following about your PechaKucha and script:

- 1) The slides should focus on images rather than text. I highly encourage you to include at least a few photos that you and your group members have taken during your adventures off campus.
- 2) The last slide should list the sources that you used. At least one of those should be a scholarly article, chapter, or book.
- 3) Each presentation should include a historical section in the range of three to four slides.
- 4) Your group should share narrating duties. This means that, if you have four members, each person should provide the narration for five slides. If you have three members, then two people should each narrate seven slides and the third six.
- 5) Your group’s script is due by the beginning of class on the day when you present.
- 6) I realize that group work can be tricky if one person shirks his/her/their duty and leaves the bulk of the work to others. To try to mitigate any unfairness with the scoring and have your grade reflect what you actually contributed, I ask that you each submit a typed self-evaluation of no more than one page clarifying what each member of the group did and giving yourself a grade for the PechaKucha. That self-reflection is also due by the beginning of class on the day when your group presents and will be factored into your PechaKucha grade.

<b>Grading policy:</b>	<b>% of final grade:</b>
Participation	20%
Analysis of <i>Food Wars!</i>	10%
Commentary on <i>Convenience Store Woman</i>	12.5%
Journal entries	37.5% [each worth 7.5%]
Group presentation	20%

**Grading scale based on MSU’s GPA and point system:** 4.0 (90-100), 3.5 (85-89), 3.0 (80-84), 2.5 (75-79), 2.0 (70-74), 1.5 (65-69), 1.0 (60-64), 0.0 (59 or less)

### **Schedule of Meetings**

[I may adjust this schedule if necessary.]

#### **Week 1:**

Jan.12 (M)    *Ikuzo!: Let’s Go [i.e., Get Started]*  
                          Viewing in class: *Wa-shoku: Beyond Sushi* [2016, 107 mins.]

Jan. 14 (W)    *Defining Traditional Japanese Food*

#### Readings:

- Rath, “What is Traditional Japanese Food?” pp. 17-33 [in *Japan’s Cuisines: Food, Place, and Identity*]

- Cwiertka, “Washoku, heritage and national identity,” pp. 376-388 [in *Routledge Handbook of Modern Japanese History*]

## Week 2:

Jan. 19 (M) The Meiji Restoration and Changes in Foodstuffs

Viewing in class: *Yoshoku* [*Begin Japanology*, 29 mins.]

### Readings:

- Cwiertka, “Western food and the making of the Japanese nation-state,” pp. 121-139 [in *The politics of food*]
- Kushner, “The Meiji Restoration: Menu Renovation on the Road to Ramen,” pp. 89-117 [in *Slurp!: A Social and Culinary History of Ramen*]
- Note: Fukukawa, “On Meat Eating,” pp. 1-2; Kanagaki, “The Beefeater,” pp. 31-33 [do as handouts in class]

Jan. 21 (W) Cooking, Dining, and the Construction of Gender in Meiji Japan

### Readings:

- Higashiyotsuyanagi, “The History of Domestic Cookbooks in Modern Japan,” pp. 129-144 [in *Japanese Foodways: Past & Present*]
- Cwiertka, “Eating the world: Restaurant culture in early twentieth century Japan,” pp. 89-116 [in *European Journal of East Asian Studies*]

Jan. 24 (Sat.) Optional Field Trip

Dinner at a local family or Western-style restaurant

## Week 3:

Jan. 26 (M) Food and the Japanese Empire

### Readings:

- Kushner, “Imperial Cuisines in Taishō Foodways,” pp.145-165 [in *Japanese Foodways: Past & Present*]
- Francks, “Rice for the masses: food policy and the adoption of imperial self-sufficiency in early twentieth-century Japan,” pp. 125-146 [in *Japan Forum*]

**Due:** Journal entry analyzing the kinds of cookbooks on sale at a local bookstore for what they say about Japanese home cooking

Jan. 28 (W) WWII and its Impact on the Japanese Diet

### Readings:

- Cwiertka and Yasuhara, “Beyond Hunger: Grocery Shopping, Cooking, and Eating in 1940s Japan,” pp. 166-185 [in *Japanese Foodways: Past & Present*]
- Reilly, “Food Fight: Eating and Identity in Japan during the Second World War,” pp. 188-209 [in *International Journal of Arts and Sciences*]

#### **Week 4:**

Feb. 2 (M) Eating Under the Umbrella of the U.S. Occupation

##### Readings:

- Solt, “Rāmen and U.S. Occupation Policy,” pp. 186-200 [in *Japanese Foodways: Past & Present*]
- Koikari, “‘LOVE! SPAM’: Food, Military, and Empire in Post-WWII Okinawa,” pp. 171-186 [in *Devouring Japan: Global Perspectives on Japanese Culinary Identity*]

Feb. 4 (W) American Multinationals and Their Influence on Postwar Japanese Consumption  
Viewing in class: *The Colonel Comes to Japan* [1981, 28 mins.]

##### Readings:

- Ohnuki-Tierney, “McDonald’s in Japan: Changing Manners and Etiquette,” pp. 161-182 [in *Golden Arches East: McDonald’s in East Asia*]
- Grinshpun, “Deconstructing a global commodity: Coffee, culture, and consumption in Japan,” pp. 343-364 [in *Journal of Consumer Culture*]

#### **Week 5:**

Feb. 9 (M) Television: A Teaching Tool for Cooking in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century  
Viewing in class: Clips from *Samurai Gourmet*

##### Readings:

- Varmazi, “Taste, memory and cooking recipes in fictional TV series: The case of *Samurai Gourmet* (2017),” pp. 93-102 [in *The Journal of Popular Television*]
- Stalker, “Gourmet Samurai: Changing Food Gender Norms in Japanese TV,” pp. 78-90 [in *Gastronomica*]

**Due:** Journal entry comparing the menu of a Japanese chain such as MOS Burger or Doutor with a McDonald’s or Starbucks menu at home and highlighting the ways in which the Japanese chain reflects both globalization and glocalization

Feb. 11 (W) The Sweet Side of Japanese Cuisine  
Viewing in class: *Wagashi* [*Japanology Plus*, 28 mins.]

Readings:

- Nakayama, “Wagashi – Treats for All Seasons,” pp. 64-74 [in *Japan Quarterly*]
- Rath and Watanabe, “Amai: Sweets and Sweeteners in Japanese History,” pp. 1-6 [in *Gastronomica*]
- Holtzman, “To Love Sugar One Does Not Have to Eat It,” pp. 44-55 [in *Gastronomica*]

Feb. 14 (Sat.) Field Trip

Sites to visit:

- Kyō-gashi Shiryōkan [to visit a Kyoto-style *wagashi* museum and tea room and to make sweets]
- one or more of the following purveyors of *wagashi*:
  - \* Ichimonjiya Wasuke [established in 1000 and Japan’s oldest sweet shop still in business]
  - \* Kameya Kiyonaga [established in 1617 in Gion and known for its *seijō-kankidan*, a fried dumpling]
  - \* Tawara-ya Yoshitomi [in business over 300 years]
  - \* Kagizen Yoshifusa [established in the early 1700s in Gion and known for *kuzukiri*, arrowroot noodles dipped in a sugary sauce]
- JR Kyoto Isetan [to see what is on sale for Valentine’s Day]

**Week 6:**

Feb.16 (M) In-Class Group Presentation Prep Work

**Due:** Journal entry describing your own consumption of sweets in Japan and comparing the sweets and stores visited on Feb. 14 with the same at home

Feb. 18 (W) Manga Meets Food

Viewing in class: Clips of *Oishinbo*

Readings:

- Brau, “*Oshinbo*’s Adventures in Eating: Food, Communication, and Culture in Japanese Comics,” pp. 34-45 [in *Gastronomica*]
- Nakamura, “On One’s Own or with Someone Else: Desire and Gourmandism in Contemporary Japanese Mangas,” pp. 26-35 [in *Gastronomica*]

**Week 7:**

Feb. 23 (M) A Taste Test of a Gourmet Manga

Reading: Tsukada, *Food Wars!: Shokugeki no Soma*, vol. 1

**Due:** Analysis of *Food Wars!*

Feb. 25 (W) A Cinematic Culinary Treat: Itami Jūzō's "Ramen Western"  
Viewing in class: *Tampopo* [1985, 115 mins.]

**Week 8:**

Mar. 2 (M) Ramen: Crossing Class and Gender Boundaries

Reading: Fukutomi, "Ramen Connoisseurs: Class, Gender, and the Internet," pp. 257-274 [in *Japanese Foodways: Past & Present*]

**Due:** Journal entry comparing your own experience eating ramen with the scenes of ramen restaurants in *Tampopo* or commenting on the kinds of ramen that you found in a local grocery store and what that variety says about influences on Japanese cuisine

Mar. 4 (W) Bento: A Reflection of the "Good Wife, Wise Mother"  
Viewing in class: *Bento* [*Begin Japanology*, 29 mins.]

Readings:

- Allison, "Mothers and Obento: The Lunch-Box as Ideological State Apparatus," pp. 195-208 [in *Anthropological Quarterly*]
- Selden, "Bento blogs: Japanese women's expression in digital food culture," pp. 301-319 [in *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*]

**Week 9:**

Mar. 9 (M) Mascots, Characters, and Other Figures in Pop Culture Meet Food

Reading: Occhi, "Kyaraben (character bento): The cutesification of Japanese food in and beyond the lunch box," pp. 63-77 [in *East Asian Journal of Popular Culture*]

**Due:** Journal entry discussing examples that you have found of mascots and characters being used to market foodstuffs, with your thoughts on how effective that strategy is

Mar. 11 (W) Food Tourism and the Promotion of Local Cuisines  
Viewing in class: *Ekiben* [*Begin Japanology*, 28 mins.]

Readings:

- Hashimoto and Telfer, "*Ekiben*, the Travelling Japanese Lunchbox: Promoting Regional Development and Local Identity Through Food Tourism," pp. 103-122 [in *Food Tourism in Asia*]
- Kim, "Understanding the Historical and Geographical Contexts of Food Festival Tourism Development: The Case of the Tatebayashi Noodle Grand Prix in Japan," pp. 433-446 [in *Tourism Planning & Development*]

Mar. 14 (Sat.) Field Trip

Sites to visit:

- Ajiwai-kan/Kyoto Food Culture Museum [to tour the regular and special exhibits and participate in a cooking class]
- Obentobako Museum [to see the displays of bento boxes and consider their evolution over time]
- Kyoto JR Station [to explore the *ekiben* on sale]

**Week 10:**

Mar. 16 (M) Japan's Variety of Dining Experiences

Viewing in class: *Conveyor Belt Sushi* [*Begin Japanology*, 48 mins.]

Readings:

- Bestor, "Kaiten-sushi and Konbini: Japanese Food Culture in the Age of Convenience," pp. 115-130 [in *Fast Food/Slow Food: The Cultural Economy of the Global Food System*]
- Ashkenazi and Jacob, "Eating Out," pp. 127-144 [in *Food Culture in Japan*]

**Due:** Journal entry describing the *ekiben* that you saw at Kyoto JR Station and sharing your thoughts on how those particular *ekiben* help to promote local identities

Mar. 18 (W) The Phenomenon of the Convenience Store

Viewing in class: *Convenience Stores* [*Begin Japanology*, 28 mins.]

Reading: Whitelaw, "Konbini-Nation: The Rise of the Convenience Store in Post-Industrial Japan," pp. 69-88 [in *Fast Food/Slow Food: The Cultural Economy of the Global Food System*]

**Week 11:**

Mar. 23 (M) A Literary Take on a Convenience Store Worker

Reading: Murata, *Convenience Store Woman*

**Due:** Commentary on *Convenience Store Woman*

Mar. 25 (W) Sushi

Viewing in class: *Jiro Dreams of Sushi* [2011, 88 mins.]

Reading: Bestor, "Constructing Sushi: Culture, Cuisine and Commodification in a Japanese Market," pp. 151-190 [in *Critical Readings on Food in East Asia*]

**Week 12:**

Mar. 30 (M) Sushi and Globalization



Reading: McKevitt, "Authenticity in a Hybrid World: Sushi at the Crossroads of Cultural Globalization," pp. 154-176 [in *Consuming Japan: Popular Culture and the Globalizing of 1980s America*]

Apr. 1 (W) Sustainability and the Ethics of Food Consumption  
Viewing in class: *Bluefin* [2018, 53 mins.]

Reading: Arch, "Whale Meat in Early Postwar Japan: Natural Resources and Food Culture," pp. 467-487 [in *Environmental History*]

**Week 13:**

Apr. 6 (M) Organic Foods and the *Teikei* Movement

Readings:

- Kondoh, "The alternative food movement in Japan: Challenges, limits, and resilience of the teikei system," pp. 143-153 [in *Agriculture and Human Values*]
- Moen, "The Japanese organic farming movement: Consumers and farmers united," pp. 14-22 [in *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*]

Apr. 8 (W) Japan's Food Culture post-3/11

Readings:

- Frid, "Food Safety in Japan: One Year after the Nuclear Disaster," pp. 1931-1945," pp. 1-5 [in *Japan Focus*]
- Kleeman, "The Unbearable, Endless Anxiety of Eating," pp. 302-311 [in *Devouring Japan: Global Perspectives on Japanese Culinary Identity*]
- Ochiai, "The Manga 'Oshinbo' Controversy: Radiation and Nose Bleeding in the Wake of 3.11," pp. 1-11 [in *The Asia-Pacific Journal*]

Apr. 11 (Sat.) Field Trip

Site to visit: Midori Farm [to tour this organic farm founded by Chuck Kayser near Takashima-shi in Shiga and possibly volunteer depending on his growing schedule]

**Week 14:**

Apr. 13 (M) Group Presentation

**Due:** Scripts for those groups presenting

**Due:** Self-evaluations for those presenting

Apr. 15 (W) Presentations

**Due:** Scripts for those groups presenting  
**Due:** Self-evaluations for those presenting

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### **A Few Additional Pointers**

**Course etiquette:** How we communicate with each other is as important as what we communicate to each other. Below are a few baseline expectations that I have for all to try to ensure that we have a productive, engaging, and meaningful semester together:

- 1) Have an open mind. This means being willing to: a) consider different opinions and perspectives on their own merits; b) learn from others; and, c) reconsider one's own position.
- 2) Keep in mind that learning is a collaborative endeavor and the more you encourage others' participation and promote their understanding the more enjoyable and productive the class will be for all.
- 3) Ask questions. Everyone will benefit by learning something from the answer, and the response may spark interest and a new and stimulating direction to the discussion.
- 4) Be respectful of others, their opinions, and their understanding of the material that we will cover. This means no name-calling, no teasing, no hazing, no cyberbullying, and no demeaning or discounting of what a classmate has said or written or of a classmate's race, religion, or sexual identity.
- 5) Be constructive rather than critical, condescending, or judgmental with your comments. Put another way, be polite and professional with your communications, and do not say or write online what you would not utter in person or say to your grandparents.
- 6) Whether you agree or disagree with what a classmate has conveyed, explain why. Your reasoning will advance the conversation and enhance the learning experience for all.

**Communication with me:** Outside of our class meetings, you can connect with me via email and during office hours. Email is your best bet for a relatively quick response, as I promise to check at least once a day. Office hours will be conducted in person. If my scheduled hours do not work for you, send me an email, and we will find a convenient time for both of us.

**Special needs:** Please communicate with me any special needs that you have as soon as possible. These include a documented disability that merits accommodations for any part of this class, religious observances, medical and mental health issues, and technology failures. While I do not mean to pry, the more that you share with me about anything that impacts your ability to succeed in this class the more accommodating I can be.

### **A few final requests and ground rules:**

- 1) Check your email regularly. I will use email to share out-of-class announcements, and saying that you did not see a message will not work as an excuse for missing something.
- 2) Cell phones and recording devices should be turned off at the beginning of every class unless you have an accommodation for a recording device.
- 3) Using a laptop during class for anything other than taking notes or accessing readings pulls your attention away from discussion and disturbs the learning environment for everyone. So, avoid engaging in such distracting behavior.

- 4) If you arrive late or need to leave early, please do so quietly in order not to disrupt class.
- 5) If you bring in food, plan to provide enough for everyone to have a taste.
- 6) Not to sound like a broken record, but please be in touch with me if you have any questions and/or concerns about the course. I am a resource and one who is interested and invested in seeing you do your best.