

Chirashi In Autumn



As the autumn leaves begin to scatter in the wind, I am reminded of a November visit to Japan where I not only enjoyed the changing colours of the trees but a visit to the famous Tokyo fish market where I encountered chirashi. Chirashi means *scattered*, a descriptive name for unassembled sushi served in a rice bowl. Raw or cooked pieces of fish, shellfish and vegetables are put on top of sweet, vinegared Japanese rice. The freshness of the fish at the Tsukiji market was amazing and although the concept of eating a raw prawn was a little daunting at first, it tasted just fine. Putting pieces of salmon, tuna, avocado, cucumber, fish roe on top the cooled rice can be done by fanning out the slices in little clusters according to type or by a random placement of everything. As with anything in Japan both approaches are done artfully. However, it is not meant to be a fussy dish but one easily and quickly prepared at home without the skill of a sushi master. Contrasts of colour and texture are key to an attractive chirashi and freshness of ingredients is a given. Sushi grade fish is getting easier to buy at Japanese grocers and

fishmongers around Melbourne but if you are out of luck a lightly poached and flaked salmon works well too. Another ingredient that is delicious to add to chirashi is roasted nori (seaweed sheets used for nori rolls). It can be bought in packets as small roasted strips or you can briefly pass a nori sheet over the gas flame and cut it with scissors yourself. I find the texture and taste of crispy nori is fabulous and can understand why Japanese stores also sell hand rolls with the nori sheet separated from the rice roll by cellophane, allowing you to assemble it just before eating.



chirashi from Tokyo fish market

Some suggested ingredients for chirashi

- tuna
- salmon

- kingfish
- cooked prawns
- Yarra Valley caviar
- pickled ginger
- wasabi
- avocado
- cucumber
- daikon
- pickled lotus root
- enoki mushrooms, raw
- plain Japanese egg omelette, sliced
- blanched green beans, sugar snap peas, snow peas or asparagus
- shiso (perilla) leaf
- chives
- roasted nori strips

Simple vinegared rice for chirashi

For Two

- 180 g Japanese rice
- 220 ml water
- 50 ml rice bran vinegar
- 1 1/2 tbs caster sugar
- 1/2 tsp salt

Wash the rice well under running water and then place it in a small, enamel cooking pot with the water and leave to soak for 15-30 minutes. Heat the rice until it starts to boil, then turn down to a very low simmer and cook with a tight fitting lid for 13 minutes. This is the best method for cooking small amounts of rice. Gently warm the vinegar, sugar and salt until dissolved. Using a wooden paddle moistened with water, spread the warm rice out on a tray and then sprinkle the seasoned vinegar over the paddle to help spread it over the rice. Gently mix through by moving the paddle up under and then over the rice a few times. Fan the rice as you do this to rapidly

cool it and stop it becoming mushy. When the rice is completely cool divide it into two rice bowls and scatter your chosen ingredients on top.

One Bowl Wonder

The Japanese donburi or rice bowl truly is a one bowl wonder. The Japanese make cooking for one a simple affair. It is partly the mindset of simplicity and partly a frugal approach to eating that is not only healthy and economical but practical when your fridge contents don't look that promising. Probably one of my favorite one bowl wonders is oyakodon, *don* referring to the rice bowl and *oyako*, meaning parent and child, which in this dish refers to the chicken and egg. It is a very comforting dish and can be made with one chicken thigh fillet or even left over cooked chicken. All you need is a bowl of a rice, an egg, onion or a couple of spring onions, your chicken and the usual suspects of the Japanese pantry; dashi stock powder, soy sauce and mirin. Cook your Japanese rice and while it is resting gently fry the onion and the chicken pieces (if using cooked chicken you just need to heat it), add 100 ml dashi stock and a tablespoon each of soy and mirin. Bring that to the simmer and then turn off the heat. Put your hot rice into a rice bowl then gently beat the egg in a small bowl with your chopsticks. Pour it onto the still hot chicken, mix it through quickly and then scrape it immediately onto the rice. You want the egg to retain a creamy texture. Done.

For a vegetarian donburi I use silken tofu, a couple of spring onions, one shiitaki mushroom and maybe something green like a

handful of shaved Savoy cabbage, some spinach leaves or a few small florets of broccoli. For the sauce I like the one used for the dish, mapo tofu. For one serve you just need a dessert spoon each of sweet chili sauce, oyster sauce, soy, mirin and water. You can also add a teaspoon of miso. Simmer a small block of silken tofu in water for 5 minutes, drain it in a sieve and let it cool to firm it up a bit before cutting into cubes. Fry the sliced onion and shiitaki, mix in the sauce and the vegetable, letting it cook for 2-5 minutes, depending on what vegetable you are using and then finally add the tofu and heat it gently. Add to the top of your rice bowl. Done.

The most important part of these frugal meals is the rice. Japanese short grain rice is really beautiful and once you try it you will find it hard to go back to other types. I recommend getting a big bag from an Asian grocery that stocks Japanese goods. For one-person cooking using a small cast-iron enameled casserole dish, like Le Creuset, is the best way to prepare the rice or alternately you can buy a small ceramic Japanese rice pot at a specialty store. A rice cooker is useful when cooking for more people. For one person you only need 90 grams of rice.

To prepare your rice. Weigh out 90 grams of rice and then wash it in a sieve under running water, moving your fingers through the grains to saturate them with water. Put the rice into the cast-iron pot along with 110 mls of water and leave that to soak for about 30 minutes. Heat the rice and when it starts to boil, cover with the lid and place the dish on the lowest heat setting possible for 13 minutes. Once the time is up turn the heat off and rest the rice for a further 13 minutes. During that 13 minutes of rest time you can cook the topping for your one bowl wonder. Use a plastic or wooden paddle to transfer big scoops of the rice to your rice bowl. It should be a little bit sticky and hold together nicely, so it is easy to eat with chopsticks. Cooking the rice until it is just right

might take a few goes but once you get the hang of it you can virtually do it blindfolded. If you are concerned about eating too much white rice, try brown rice for a change or add some mixed grains or cooked adzuki beans to the rice. Grain mixes for rice can also be purchased at Japanese grocers.

[Tokyo Hometown Supermarket, Elizabeth Street, Melbourne](#)

[Suzuran, Camberwell](#)

[Hinoki, Fitzroy](#)

[Fuji Mart, South Yarra](#)



Mushroom Risotto With Truffle Butter

It's wild mushroom time again and pine mushrooms and slippery jacks provide perfect flavour and texture for a risotto. But if you want to raise the bar another notch, a mushroom risotto finished with some truffle butter can add a wonderful extra dimension to your mushroom taste experience. Truffle butter is subtle, adding that special flavour of truffles without the over dominant, often lingering flavour, of truffle oil. And with truffle butter you actually get the real deal, bits of truffle. [King Valley Dairy](#), formerly the Myrtleford Butter Factory, I think make the best cultured butter in Australia. It has a lovely fresh tang, without any unpleasant cheesy or rancidness I have found with other brands. They also produce a range of [Fancy Butter](#) with various interesting flavours like smoked salt but the black truffle butter is a clear winner and perfect for risotto, pasta, mashed potatoes or smothered on a piece of rib eye steak. King Valley Dairy is concentrating on expanding wholesale production, so while there are not a lot of stockists in Melbourne as yet this should improve. Try [Obelix and Co](#) in North Fitzroy, Prahran and Queen Victoria markets, shop online or stop at the dairy while in Moyhu, it's a stunning drive to the King Valley taking the Mansfield-Whitfield road. Buy up big and freeze the butter in small lots if you don't think you are going to use it all by the expiry date.



For Two

- 1 cup carnaroli rice
- 1 cup white wine
- 1 litre chicken stock
- knob of butter
- salt
- leaves of 3 sprigs fresh thyme
- 300 g [pine mushrooms](#)
- 200 g mix of [shimeji, shiitake and nameko mushrooms](#), sliced
- 2 shallots, finely diced
- 1 clove garlic, finely diced
- 1-2 tsp truffle butter (King Valley Dairy)
- 3 tsp butter
- 50 g grated Parmesan cheese

Clean and then blanch the pine mushrooms in boiling water for 2 minutes. Drain and place on kitchen paper to dry. Slice the

mushrooms. Warm the stock in a small saucepan and keep it on a simmer while you cook the risotto. Melt a small knob of butter in a sauté pan (or whatever pot or pan you like to use for risotto) and gently cook the chopped shallots for a minute or so until soft and translucent. Add the thyme, garlic, sliced pine mushrooms and sautéed for 2 minutes. Turn the heat to medium, add the rice and stir to coat in the butter; after a minute or so when the grains show a slight translucence, pour in a glass of wine. Keep the heat up to bring the wine to a rapid simmer and reduce. When almost evaporated, add a ladle or two of hot stock, swirl the pan and allow to simmer gently until nearly all the liquid is absorbed. Add the sliced shiitake. Keep adding ladles of stock and occasionally swirling the pan until the rice is cooked to al dente, with just a fine thread of chalky white in the middle of the rice grains while a slightly thickened, starchy liquid surrounds them. All up, it will take 15 to 20 minutes to cook. In the last 5 minutes add the softer mushroom, the shimeji and nameko. Turn off the heat, add the grated Parmesan and the truffle and plain butters and stir them in gently so as to amalgamate with and thicken the remaining starchy liquid without breaking up the rice grains. Loosen the risotto with a little stock if needed; it should be creamy without the grains sticking to each other. Serve immediately.

Spring Vegetable & Herb Risotto

This spring vegetable and herb risotto is full of seasonal asparagus, double peeled broad beans, peas, fresh young herbs

and finished with a spoon of sorrel "pesto" for extra lemony tang. I guarantee you will love this combination. [Sorrel is](#) not widely used in Australia but is popular as a creamy soup in France or to make a wonderful lemony sauce, good with fish, poultry or other light meats. The leaves are a lovely spring green but when cooked and wilted quickly become a less pleasant grey green colour. Cooking also reduces the lemony bite somewhat, giving way to a more earthy lemon flavour. To retain a bright tang you can eat the leaves raw in a salad; just slice several leaves thinly and toss in with a mix of leaves. Another way to maintain the sharper tang and the bright colour is to blitz the leaves in a blender with some olive oil to make a paste. A couple of spoons added to the risotto at the end of cooking gives it a real lift. If you are familiar with sorrel you will be amazed at the result. The combination of herbs I have suggested (mint, tarragon, parsley, thyme and sorrel) are well balanced with none being overwhelming; the mint and sorrel, in particular, partnering well. Asparagus, peas and young broad beans are wonderful seasonal stars and combining them in a risotto with soft herbs really does put spring on a plate. Enjoy.



I use the Italian carnaroli variety of rice, which is quite firm and gives its starch readily without the need for constant, gentle stirring like arborio rice. The Ferron brand of carnaroli (available from [Entoteca Sileno](#), various grocery stores and some supermarkets) is more expensive but worth it for the texture and taste and the reduced stirring during preparation.

For Two

- 1L chicken or vegetable stock
- 1/2 a small leek or a shallot, finely sliced
- 1/4 cup finely diced fennel bulb
- salt
- olive oil
- 1 cup carnaroli rice
- 100 ml white wine – something with a bit of acid zing
- 1/4 cup of peas (fresh or frozen)

- 1/3 cup broad beans, double peeled*
- 6 large spears of asparagus, cut into pieces about 1 cm long (keep the tips whole for their decorative quality)
- leaves from 3 sprigs of fresh thyme
- 1 tbs of finely sliced fresh mint
- 2 tbs chopped parsley
- 1 tbs tarragon leaves
- 6-8 sorrel leaves, washed and patted dry
- 80 g unsalted butter
- 50 g grated parmesan cheese

Warm the stock in a small saucepan and keep it on a simmer while you cook the risotto. Melt a small knob of butter in a sauté pan (or whatever pot or pan you like to use for risotto) and gently cook the leek or shallot for a minute or so until soft and translucent. Turn the heat to medium, add the rice and stir to coat in the butter; after a minute or so when the grains show a slight translucence, pour in a glass of white wine. Pour another glass and keep handy: by the end of the cooking process this should be empty. Keep the heat up to bring the wine to a rapid simmer and reduce. When almost evaporated, add a ladle or two of hot stock, swirl the pan and allow to simmer gently until nearly all the liquid is absorbed. Keep adding ladles of stock and occasionally swirling the pan until the rice is cooked to *al dente*, with just a fine thread of chalky white in the middle of the rice grains while a slightly thickened, starchy liquid surrounds them. All up, it will take 15 to 20 minutes to cook the rice, longer if you are on a mountain.



sorrel leaves blended with olive oil

While the rice is cooking, add each of the vegetables in time to allow them to cook through while retaining their freshness: first the diced fennel, then the peas, the cut up asparagus stems and finally the asparagus tips. The herbs can be added near the end to keep their colour and flavour, then the broad beans and the sorrel pesto. Finally, when the rice is almost cooked and there is just a little more liquid left than you want, turn off the heat, add the grated parmesan and a good knob of butter and stir them in gently so as to amalgamate with and thicken the remaining starchy liquid without breaking up the rice grains. Serve for an evocation of spring.

***To double peel broad beans:** remove the broad beans from their pods and blanch in boiling water with a pinch of salt for 1 minute. The skins will loosen in this time and young broad beans should not need more than a minute to become tender. Drain and run under cold water to cool them down and then

using your thumb nail pinch an edge to pierce the outer skin and gently push out the tender little green gems without crushing them. This is relaxing work for some people and also a great job for little fingers, so enlist the kids.

Nature's Perfect Food Steamer-Sticky Rice in Lotus Leaves

One of nature's most water-repellent surfaces, lotus leaves are a remarkable wonder of nature. The wonder of the lotus leaf is that it is as porous as a sponge but rain drops literally bounce off due to waxy surface projections and microscopic air pockets that form an outer layer that doesn't allow much surface contact for the water droplets. I am sure physicist, [Brian Cox](#), would explain contact angles of water droplets more eloquently but my simplified take on it is this; the greater the contact a water droplet has with a surface the more it is absorbed and the less contact (greater contact angle for boffins) the more it is repelled. The lotus leaf's ultrahydrophobic character is known as [the lotus effect](#) and has been studied and applied to waterproofing fabrics (e.g., Gortex breathable water-proof jackets) and a myriad of other coating technologies. So what has it got to do with cooking? Well, it turns out lotus leaves are nature's perfect food steamer; maintaining just the right moisture content of the food while letting in the cooking steam and also imparting a subtle, fragrant, tea-like flavour.

Sticky rice cooked in lotus leaves (Lo mai gai) is a Cantonese yum cha classic and has always been a favourite of

mine. I am fortunate to have a Chinese friend who not only is a wonderful cook but who generously used to bring these delightful food parcels into work occasionally for lunch. We recently got together and she taught me how to make this wonderful dish. The sticky rice generally encases chicken, Chinese pork sausage, quail eggs and shiitaki mushrooms but feel free to add to or adapt this combination, bearing in mind that the parcels will be steamed for 1 hour.

First you need to get to a local Asian grocer (easy to do in Melbourne) and buy a few of the more unusual pantry items, including those exotic dried lotus leaves. Fresh quail eggs are obtainable from some grocers and Queen Victoria market's egg section. You need to hard boil and peel them. While fresh eggs will have a better taste you can go the easy route and use canned quail eggs. Dried shiitaki mushrooms and glutinous rice are common now and can be found at supermarkets but an Asian grocer will have everything you need for one stop shopping. There is a fair bit of soaking (rice, lotus leaves and mushrooms) and marinating (chicken, mushrooms and eggs) to do, so plan ahead by doing some steps the night before or well ahead of cooking.



dried lotus leaves



lotus leaf after soaking



Chinese preserved pork sausage



canned quailed eggs

Sticky rice makes a wonderful meal paired with steamed greens and is also an eminently transportable meal package that is

easy to reheat in a steamer or a microwave at medium power.

Makes 12 parcels

- 1 cup long grain rice
- 5 cups glutinous rice
- salt
- 6 lotus leaves, soaked overnight in a tub of water
- 1 can quail eggs
- 3-4 Chinese preserved sausages, cut into 3 cm pieces
- 300 g chicken thighs fillets, cut into 3 cm cubes
- 6 large dried shiitaki mushrooms, soaked in water for 2 hours, cut in quarters
- 4 tbs light soy sauce
- 1 tbs dark soy sauce
- 3 tbs dry white wine or shaoxing wine
- olive oil

Cook the rice in a rice cooker according to instructions or soak the rice for several hours, drain and steam it for 15 minutes. If using fresh eggs, boil them for 4 minutes, rinse in cold water and peel. Make a small cut in each cooked quail egg. This is useful if you intend to reheat the parcels in a microwave as it will stop the egg from disintegrating. Place the chicken, shiitaki and eggs in a bowl and mix through 3 tablespoons of the light soy sauce, the dark soy sauce, white wine and a couple pinches of salt. Leave to marinate for as long as you can. Put the cooked rice in a bowl and sprinkle with a little salt, the remaining tablespoon of soy sauce and 2 tablespoons of olive oil and gently mix it all through.

Assembly: Cut each lotus leaf in half with scissors and brush the inner surface that will be in contact with the rice with olive oil. Spoon some rice into the palm of your hand and press down to form a palm sized patty. Place this on the leaf and then add a layer of your marinated filling (3-4 pieces of chicken, 1-2 eggs, 2 pieces shiitaki and 2 pieces of sausage). Overlay the filling with another layer of rice and shape into

a square bundle with your hands and brush the top with olive oil. Wrap up in the lotus leaf, folding over the sides to make a neat parcel. Steam the sticky rice parcels for 1 hour. You will have to do this in batches depending on the size and number of layers of your steamer.



Variations: add 1-2 teaspoons soaked dried split mung beans for a creamy textured filling; add peanuts or cooked chestnuts for some crunchy texture; substitute chicken with pieces of pork belly; add sliced spring onions; add 1/2 teaspoon five spice powder to the marinade.