

# Let's Party-Japanese Style

article by Marian McGuiness

Sushi, ninjas, anime, sumo wrestlers. How many things can you list when you think of Japan? Let's add this to your list, Japan's unique *matsuri*.

## What's a matsuri?

It's a festival that originated in ancient times from the Shinto belief that the gods lived in every part of nature. Sacred spirits called *kami* took the form of wind, rain, mountains, trees and rivers.

Today, the festival includes a colourful street parade of wooden floats on giant wheels. The floats are topped with decorated images of the gods, heroes and warriors. It's a time of celebration, music, dance and delicious street food.

## Party parade

In Sawara, near Tokyo, the whole town is buzzing. There are street stalls of food and fun things to buy. Many people who are not dressed as samurai warriors are dressed in colourful *happi coats*, which are a shorter version of a kimono.

The excitement builds as music is heard around the corner. It's the sound of taiko drums, gongs, cymbals and wooden flutes. There's singing and chanting followed by rumbles of giant wooden wheels. Then the

first enormous wooden float, called a *dashi*, appears in the rickshaw-narrow street and everyone is cheering. On top of the *dashi* is a gigantic, colourful wooden carving (about the height of an elephant) that depicts a mythical hero.



photo courtesy Wikimedia/katorisi





The base is decorated with ancient carvings of dragons, trees, lions and fish. It has curtained inserts where the musicians sit and play the traditional songs of the festival.

Dozens of people pull on a thick rope, much like tug-of-war, as they haul the dashi onwards.

'Wass-hoi ... Wass-hoi ... Heave-ho ... Heave-ho ...' they chant, pulling the dashi forward, inch by inch.

Street dancers follow each dashi. Every now and then, they stop and perform a Japanese line dance, much like the macarena. Everyone joins in copying their hand gestures and body turns. Lines of kids, wearing identical happi coats, carry metal poles with rings on the top. They bang their pole instruments on the ground to the rhythm of the music.

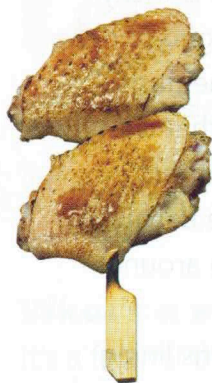
The parade continues with dashi after dashi of ancient gods, warriors and mythical figures.

Turning the street corners is tricky. Long wooden poles are wedged under the large wooden wheels. The dashi is manoeuvred bit by bit so that it's kept upright and doesn't tip over. There's more chanting as the dashi is propelled like a spinning top around the corner.

As dusk comes, the lanterns lining the deck of the dashi are lit. It's so magical you can imagine the samurai warriors in their traditional armour guarding this ancient town. It feels like you've tumbled down a time tunnel into a medieval world.



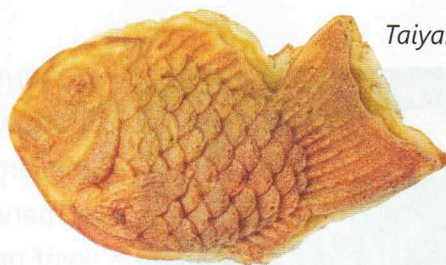




*Yakitori*



*Dango*



*Taiyaki*



*Takoyaki*

## Party food

The streets are filled with *yatai*, pop-up stalls where you can buy food on a stick.

There are the famous yakitori grilled chicken skewers and cups of soba noodles. There's also *takoyaki*, a ball-shaped pancake with a piece of octopus inside and *taiyaki*, fish-shaped cakes filled with sweet red bean paste.

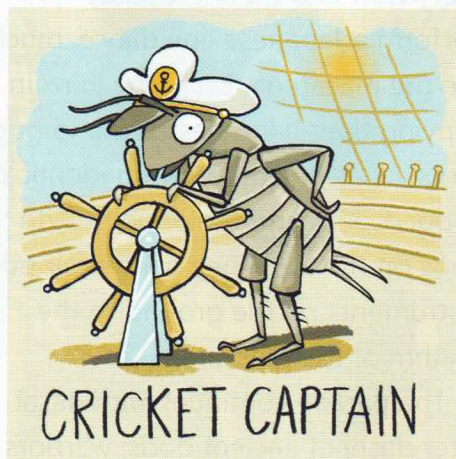
Find a seller with a charcoal pan and you might buy a bamboo skewer lanced with a tiny silver mackerel—toasty on the outside and tender to eat.

For something deliciously sweet there's *dango*, a trio of sticky rice dumplings on a skewer, one coloured by red beans, one coloured by eggs and the third coloured by green tea.

Ice cream is another favourite to enjoy as you wander the matsuri. Apart from the usual ice cream flavours, there are lots of other interesting choices like squid ink, soy sauce, pumpkin, ginger, sesame and green tea.

I'm sure you'll agree that the matsuri is an amazing celebration. It brings the whole community together to say thank you to the gods and to honour their Shinto beliefs. And the best part is that everyone can join in. All you need is a happi coat. ■

## THE CARTOON



by Michel Streich



## Who were the samurais?

Samurais were highly-trained warriors who served and protected the emperors of Japan. In ancient times they would go at dawn into sacred forests to draw their energy from the cosmic powers of the sun goddess as she rose from the darkness.

Samurais were from noble families and were educated in mathematics, calligraphy (writing using an ink-dipped brush) and *Ikebana* (flower arranging). They wrote poetry and created ink paintings. Their code was one of self-discipline, bravery and honour.

Some of the legendary samurai were women known as *onna-bugeisha* (woman warrior). All samurais trained in the military tactics of archery, sword use, horse riding and unarmed combat, like *ju-jitsu*. Their iron, steel and leather

armour was highly-crafted and ornately decorated with family crests, symbols and intricate designs. As well as using bows and spears, they also carried a curved sword known as a *katana*.



