

All About Miso

This traditional Japanese ingredient makes dishes shine.

≧ BY VALERIE SIZHE LI ≦

Miso is a Japanese household staple that dates back a millennium. Depending on the variety of miso, the color can range from beige to chocolaty brown to deep mahogany red. Its consistency varies, too, from smooth and whipped to chunky and even fudgy. Some misos evoke the fragrance of champagne and some are barnyard-y like an aged alpine cheese.

According to William Shurtleff and Akiko Aoyagi, authors of *The Book of Miso* (1983), the predecessor of miso originated in China some 2,500 years ago as a fermented soybean paste-like ingredient called “jiang,” or “sauce” (in its closest English translation). It was brought to Japan in the seventh century by Buddhist monks. Since then, jiang has been transformed by craftspeople and farmers into miso and other fermented Japanese ingredients with their own distinctive styles and characteristics.

“Miso is very regional in Japan. What people stock at home depends on where their mom and dad are from. For instance, people from Kyoto like white miso and [those from] Nagoya like hatcho miso.”

— Shohei Miyajima, general manager of Dashi Okume in Brooklyn, New York

Today, many people in Japan start their day with a bowl of miso soup, which is the most common use for this beloved ingredient. It’s also used in a wide variety of other applications, from marinating fish and meat to pickling vegetables. It can also serve as a dip, balance flavors in desserts, and provide a finishing touch to cooked dishes.

How Is Miso Made?

As with many Japanese fermented ingredients such as shoyu and natto, miso making starts with inoculating rice, barley, or soybeans with koji (*Aspergillus oryzae*), a cultivated fungus. Rice koji is used to make kome miso, barley for mugi miso, and soybean koji for mame miso. During fermentation, the koji converts starch into sugar and protein into amino acids,



one of which is glutamic acid, which gives food a savory flavor. Typically, cooked soybeans are mixed with the inoculated grains and left to ferment for anywhere from a few weeks to years. Younger miso has a higher sugar content than the more aged versions. As a result, young miso tends to be fruitier, with some sake-like winy notes, whereas aged miso leans meatier, more complex, and more savory.

The World of Miso

Of the more than 1,300 varieties of Japanese miso, the majority are kome miso. Within the kome miso category, there are two main subgroups: shiro (“white” in Japanese) miso and darker brown-looking aka (“red” in Japanese) miso. The key difference between those two is how the soybeans are prepared. For shiro miso, the soybeans are boiled. “Sugar and protein get washed away, which prevents coloring the miso,” said Shohei Miyajima, the general manager of Japanese specialty food shop Dashi Okume in Brooklyn, New York. Aka miso, which is made with steamed soybeans, retains the sugar and protein that darken the miso’s appearance. The color turns even darker during fermentation.

Then there are the regional varieties. Barley grows well in the mild and temperate climate of Kyūshū Island in southern Japan, so mugi miso dominates the region, said Ayako Yuki, founder of The House of Umami, an online specialty food store. But in much of the country, kome miso takes precedence, with small pockets of mame miso dotting the eastern part of Honshu, Japan’s main island.

When assembling our tasting lineup, we considered a number of regional Japanese misos as well as common brands that have made their way to grocery stores across the United States. We also chose a few from online retailers that carry niche varieties, such as hatcho miso, a mugi miso, and a country-style inaka miso (“inaka” means “rural”) made by farmers. Finally, we included an awase (“mixed”) miso

because blending different types of miso is popular in Japanese households.

How to Shop for Miso

The length of fermentation impacts a miso’s flavor and appearance. The longer the fermentation, the darker and more savory the miso gets. If you prefer a sweeter miso, seek out a lighter-colored or rice-based product as a starting point. On the other hand, if you’re interested in complex flavors and rich umami notes, try an aged miso. The labels of most misos clearly indicate their styles; if not, look for clues in their ingredient lists for the types of grains used.

We tasted each miso plain, as a dip with cucumbers, and mixed into a homemade dashi. We’ve listed the misos from light to dark, which roughly corresponds to the length of fermentation. Each one is worth seeking out, but we’ve highlighted some standouts and provided tasting notes to help you find those suited to your preferences.

How long does miso last, and what’s the best way to store an opened container?

Miso should generally last from six months to several years depending on the style, according to Emiko Davies, author of *Gohan: Everyday Japanese Cooking* (2023). The darker the miso, the longer the shelf life. She notes that a miso’s flavor can change over time.

It’s advisable to keep your containers of miso in the back of the refrigerator, where the temperature remains the most constant. To prevent miso from drying out and forming a crust in the fridge, Davies recommends cutting a piece of parchment paper to put on top of the paste. If you purchase miso packaged in a plastic bag, transfer it to an airtight glass jar for storage.

EXPLORING MISO



RECOMMENDED



BEST SUPERMARKET SWEET WHITE MISO HIKARI Saikyo Sweet Miso

PRICE: \$14.98 for 14.1 oz (\$0.94 per oz)

TYPE: Kome

STYLE: Shiro (Saikyo) miso

INGREDIENTS: Organic rice, water, organic soybeans, organic spirits (organic rice, salt, koji culture), salt, koji culture

COMMENTS: Saikyo miso is a sweet variety of shiro miso that originated in Kyoto. The one we tasted had a "soft," "smooth" texture and tasted "nutty" and "fruity." We praised its "pleasantly sweet flavor" when it was whisked into dashi, as it reminded us of "sweet plums and peaches in the summer."



BEST SUPERMARKET SAVORY WHITE MISO HIKARI Shinshu Miso White

PRICE: \$20.00 for 26.4 oz (\$0.76 per oz)

TYPE: Kome

STYLE: Shiro miso

INGREDIENTS: Water, soybeans, rice, salt, alcohol

COMMENTS: This "cheesy" miso had a "buttery" aroma and a "butterscotch" appearance. It was "mild," "nutty," and "savory." When dissolved in dashi, it imparted a "mild" aroma that was "woody" and almost "piney." Its flavor had a "good balance of sweet and salty."



SANO Miso Sakurajima Miso

PRICE: \$21.00 for 7.05 oz (\$2.98 per oz)

TYPE: Mugi STYLE: Mugi miso

INGREDIENTS: Barley, soybean, salt

COMMENTS: This "pale beige"-colored miso was "chunky" in texture with a "boozy" aroma. Some likened it to "cookie dough," noting "warm spices" and "malty sweet" flavors. It made a "cloudy" broth when mixed with dashi. It had a "white tea" aroma and a "sweet" flavor that tasted like "summer stone fruits" and "peaches."



BEST ARTISANAL RED MISO SANO Miso Mori no Jukuo Miso

PRICE: \$20.00 for 7.05 oz (\$2.84 per oz)

TYPE: Kome STYLE: Aka miso

INGREDIENTS: Soybeans, rice, salt, koji mold

COMMENTS: This "super dark brown" miso had an aroma of "butter" and "alpine cheese." The flavor was "earthy" and "intensely salty," which one taster described as having "been macerating in a jar for 100 years." It made an "amber"-colored broth, which was delightfully "tannic," "savory," and "smoky," with notes of "apricot."



BEST SUPERMARKET RED MISO SHIRAKIKU Red Miso Soybean Paste (Aka Miso)

PRICE: \$12.95 for 35.2 oz (\$0.37 per oz)

TYPE: Kome STYLE: Aka miso

INGREDIENTS: Water, organic soybeans, organic rice, salt, yeast, koji culture

COMMENTS: This "dark amber" miso had a "light fruity" and "floral" aroma that smelled like "sake." It was "mostly smooth," though some described its texture as "coarse." Tasters enjoyed its "subtle nuttiness" that was "almost butterscotch"; it also had a "deep soy sauce flavor" with a "slightly boozy" finish.



MARUMAN Mutenka Aka Miso

PRICE: \$10.39 for 26.5 oz (\$0.40 per oz)

TYPE: Kome STYLE: Aka miso

INGREDIENTS: Soybean (non-GMO), rice, salt, water

COMMENTS: This "toffee-colored" miso had a "buttery" and "fruity" aroma. The texture was "mostly smooth" and the flavor delightfully "meaty." When dissolved in dashi, it had a "golden raisin" color and "fermented fruits" fragrance. We liked that it was well balanced, with flavors of "dried apricots and dates" backed by "deep umami" and "rich mushroom."



MUTENKA Shinshuichi Tomemajikome Aka Miso

PRICE: \$24.00 for 14.1 oz (\$1.70 per oz)

TYPE: Kome STYLE: Aka miso

INGREDIENTS: Soybean (from Japan), rice (from Japan), salt

COMMENTS: We noted its "amber" color, "wine-like" aroma, and the "thick," mostly "smooth" texture. Its flavor was "citrusy" and "a little boozy." When mixed with dashi, it made a "golden"-colored soup with a "mature" and "slightly smoky" fragrance. Tasters liked the soup's "enjoyably salty and savory smack of flavor" with a "hint of creaminess."



NOMURA-SAN Awase (Mixed) Miso

PRICE: \$21.00 for 7.1 oz (\$2.96 per oz)

TYPE: Kome

STYLE: Awase miso

INGREDIENTS: Rice, barley, soybean, salt

COMMENTS: This "dark" miso had a "brownie batter"-like consistency and a "soy sauce," "winey" aroma. Its flavor reminded tasters of "sherry," "cheddar," and "raisin." The broth was "dark amber" in color, almost like a "beef broth"; it started off with strong "boozy" flavors and then transitioned to "umami" and "mushroom" notes that were "a little sweet."



SANO Miso Country-style Jindai Miso

PRICE: \$21.00 for 7.05 oz (\$2.98 per oz)

TYPE: Kome

STYLE: Inaka miso

INGREDIENTS: Soybeans (from Nagano), rice (from Nagano), salt

COMMENTS: This "dark chocolate"-colored, soft miso had "gritty" pieces. Some tasters likened it to "savory banana bread," while others compared it to "boozy fruit" and "marmite." It made a "caramel" broth with a "deeply woody" aroma. We also noted its "beefy," "robust, savory profile" with "a hint of caramelized sweetness."



SANO Miso Okazaki Hatcho Miso

PRICE: \$21.00 for 7.05 oz (\$2.98 per oz)

TYPE: Mame

STYLE: Hatcho miso

INGREDIENTS: Soybeans, salt, incense, koji starter

COMMENTS: This "thick" and "dense" miso had a "dark mahogany brown" color and "fudgy," "almost crumbly" texture. Its "meaty," "yeasty" aroma reminded some of "marmite" and it tasted "chocolately" and "umami rich." The broth resembled a "deep, dark consommé." The flavor had the essence of "mushroom," "coffee," and "beef broth" with some "faintly sweet" notes.



For the complete tasting results, go to AmericasTestKitchen.com/JUNE25.