

DEEPLY REGIONAL JAPAN®

‘SHIRATAMA-DANGO’: CHILLED MOCHI BALLS

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Matcha shiratama-dango (right) with mizu-yokan (adzuki bean agar jelly; left)

‘Shiratama-dango’ is a popular type of dessert mochi (glutinous rice cake) in Japan, often served cold in combination with other ingredients such as sweet boiled beans, adzuki bean paste, fruit and kanten jelly—a classic recipe being the summer favourite ‘mitsumame’. Shiratama-dango is made from a special type of glutinous rice flour called ‘shiratamako’, traditionally produced by stone-milling glutinous rice in very cold water, allowing it to settle and leach for about 10 days, before being air-dried. The result is a very fine-grained flour that keeps its elasticity after cooking and being allowed to go cold. As such, it is prized in Japan for chilled desserts, where mochi made from normal glutinous rice flour would stiffen and become unpalatable.

Shiratamako can be hard to obtain outside Japan, so the recipe here offers the alternative of using the normal glutinous rice flour—the trick is to add some sugar, which helps to keep the mochi softer when cooled. [Note that you must still use glutinous rice flour, not the common rice flour.] You can optionally tint your shiratama-dango an attractive green with matcha tea powder, as described here. You can also tint them pink using natural beetroot or blueberry-derived colouring, and a great visual effect can be achieved if you serve different coloured shiratama-dango in one dish. The syrup is not mandatory; just add an equal part of sugar to the topping powder, together with a pinch of salt, if you wish to omit the syrup.

INGREDIENTS (makes 14 to 18 balls)

Shiratama-dango

- ‘Shiratama’ glutinous rice flour (‘shiratamako’) OR normal glutinous rice flour (‘mochiko’) with 1 tablespoon of sugar added 100 g (c. 1 cup)
- OPTIONAL: Matcha (green tea powder) 10 g (i.e. 10% weight of the flour)
- Water $\frac{3}{4}$ to 1 cup, or as required

Syrup

- Sugar c. $\frac{1}{2}$ cup
- Water c. $\frac{1}{2}$ cup
- Soy sauce or tamari $\frac{1}{2}$ to 1 level tablespoon, depending on taste
- Potato starch (can substitute with other flours, but you may not achieve the same consistency or translucency) c. 1 level teaspoon, dissolved in a little water to form a slurry

Topping powder (select one of the following)

- Roasted white or black sesame seeds, coarsely ground c. $\frac{1}{4}$ cup
- Kinako (Japanese roasted soybean powder; can substitute with lightly toasted barley bran) c. $\frac{1}{4}$ cup

INSTRUCTIONS

1. If using a syrup, combine the sugar, water and soy sauce/tamari in a small saucepan and bringing to the boil on medium heat. Drop to medium–low heat and boil gently, uncovered, until the liquid has reduced to half to one-third of the initial volume. Add the potato starch slurry just before removing from the heat, stirring constantly to prevent lumps from forming and burning on. When the syrup has thickened (no longer runny) and developed a clear lustre, remove from the heat and set aside.
2. Place the ‘shiratama’ glutinous rice flour (or normal glutinous flour plus sugar) in a large bowl. Break up any lumps of flour present. If you are using matcha, combine it with the flour and mix thoroughly using a whisk.



3. Slowly add water to the flour mixture, stirring constantly. When the flour is starting to stick to form a dough in parts, but still crumbly in other parts, stop adding water. [The dough should form clumps that stick easily to a wooden spoon, but can also be easily removed.] Knead the dough thoroughly. The dough should have the consistency, as the Japanese say, of an earlobe. Adjust the consistency with additional flour or water if required.



4. Using your palms, roll the dough into balls c. 2 cm in diameter. You may wish to moisten your hands first to prevent sticking.



5. In a saucepan large enough to hold all the dango at once, bring water to the boil on medium–high heat. Once the water is boiling vigorously, add all the dango. Stir gently with a spoon or ladle to prevent the balls from sticking to the base of the saucepan.



6. When the dango float to the surface, keep boiling for another 2 to 3 minutes, then skim them off. Refresh immediately in a bowl of cold water, then drain.



7. Place the cooked dango in small individual serving bowls. Using a spoon, pour a little syrup prepared at Step 1 over the top of the dango (reheat the syrup briefly over low–medium heat if it has cooled and hardened).
8. Sprinkle with the topping of your choice. Serve immediately. [If you cannot consume your dango immediately, store in the warmest part of your refrigerator for up to two days—soften them just before serving by boiling them for a few minutes, or microwaving them in a closed container moistened with a little water. Refresh in cold water after reheating, then serve.]



Matcha shiratama-dango sprinkled with toasted barley bran and raw sugar