

DEEPLY REGIONAL JAPAN®

‘GAPPARA-MOCHI’: NORTHERN JAPANESE THICK RICE PANCAKES

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The word ‘mochi’ is most often associated with the Japanese pounded glutinous (sticky) rice cakes, especially the dessert versions filled with sweet adzuki bean paste. However, the word is a generic term for steamed cakes made from pounded grains or from flour. Some mochi varieties are made from non-glutinous rice, sweet potatoes, wheat, horse chestnuts, kudzu or brackens. Whatever its form, mochi has been an important food and ceremonial item in the Japanese culture, with its origins believed to be around the introduction of wet rice cultivation to Japan over 2500 years ago.

‘Gappara-mochi’ is a mochi variety particular to Aomori Prefecture in the Tōhoku region of northern Japan. It was traditionally eaten in farming communities as a snack during breaks in agricultural work. In the olden days, laundry starch was traditionally made from mashed steamed rice. Grains that could not be fully turned to paste in this process were recycled and made into what was to become the gappara-mochi—one of many Tōhoku customs borne out of life’s hardships in the northern land. Gappara-mochi today is generally made from glutinous rice flour or steamed rice left over from a meal. There are many variations in recipe depending on the district or even between families, and other flours and starchy vegetables such as wheat, buckwheat, potato, pumpkin and sweet potato are commonly included. Some versions also include walnuts, sesame seeds or beans for added texture and flavour.

In this recipe, I provide a version using steamed rice and steamed sweet potato, both left-overs from a previous meal. You can use white or brown rice and even mixed grains (in my case, brown rice, white rice and pearl barley), bearing in mind that wholegrains will not bind as well as white rice, so

you may need to adjust the amount of binding flour or starch. I have used white wheat flour as a binder, but you can also use glutinous rice flour or potato starch for a wheat-free version. The addition of sesame seeds lends a nutty twist; finely chopped walnuts and boiled adzuki beans are other traditional Japanese ingredients that will add depth to the flavours, and you can also experiment with non-traditional additions such as finely chopped almonds or dried fruit, and desiccated coconut.

INGREDIENTS

- Steamed rice c. 300 g
- Sweet potato, steamed and mashed (only use 'floury' varieties with reddish purple or white skins) c. 200 g
- White wheat flour (or glutinous rice flour, potato starch) 1 cup (c. 100g)
- Raw sugar ½ cup (c. 100 g)
- White sesame seeds ¼ cup (c. 25 g)
- Salt One or two pinches
- Water As required
- Oil (for greasing the pan) As required

INSTRUCTIONS

1. If steaming the sweet potatoes from scratch, steam them unpeeled, and whole if possible—cut in half if absolutely necessary, but avoid cutting into smaller pieces. Steam on medium–high heat for 30 to 45 minutes, turning them over half-way for even steaming. Test with a thin bamboo skewer to see if cooked through to the middle (the skewer should pass through without any resistance). When fully cooked, remove from the heat and allow to cool sufficiently for handling (keep the lid on during cooling, so this may take a while).



2. Peel the steamed sweet potatoes. Remove also any woody or hard parts in the flesh. Slice crosswise across the fibres, then chop coarsely. Set aside.
3. Place the sesame seeds in a pan and lightly toast until aromatic and golden brown. Stir frequently for even roasting and take care not to burn the seeds, which will make the flavours bitter. Remove from the heat and allow to cool. Set aside.



4. In a large heat-resistant bowl, combine the steamed rice with a little water. Mash the mixture evenly until sticky enough to bind; the rice grains need to be broken but not completely mashed. Use as little water as possible; too much will make the mashed rice too loose. If the steamed rice is cold, then use hot water (80 to 90 °C).



5. Add the chopped steamed sweet potato, sugar and salt. Continue mashing for even mixing and smooth texture.



6. Add the flour/starch in increments, stirring continually for even mixing and to prevent lumps from forming. Finally, add the toasted sesame seeds and mix well. If the mixture becomes

dry, add some water until sticky enough to bind strongly; it should be a sticky and wet dough, not runny and not crumbly.



7. Form the dough into a single mass.



8. Heat a well-greased frying pan over medium-high heat. The pan should be large enough to accommodate the dough spread into a 'pancake' 1.5 to 2 cm thick. When the pan has heated fully (test with a tiny piece of dough for sizzling), place the dough in the pan and flatten into a circular disc 1.5 to 2 cm thick. Once sizzling steadily, drop the heat to low-medium and bake slowly.



9. Monitor regularly and turn over to bake the other side when the bottom has hardened sufficiently. It may help to use an inverted plate or lid over the pan to help in turning over your gappara-mochi (please take extreme care to prevent burning yourself with hot oil etc when doing this). Best results are obtained if the gappara-mochi is turned over a few times for slow and even baking. Remove from the heat when both sides have become crisp and golden brown.



10. Serve while warm. If your gappara-mochi has hardened after going cold, or because of overbaking, you can soften it by wrapping it with baking paper and steaming it for 10 to 15 minutes—this should result in a soft, moist and sticky texture.