



Fresh Herb Mixture (*Dashi*) from Yamagata Prefecture

山形だし



Somewhere between a salsa and chutney, Yamagata's summertime signature dish *Dashi* is a refreshing mixture of chopped vegetables and herbs. It often tops cubes of silky *tōfu* to make a dish called *Dashi Yakko*, truly restorative on days when temperatures and humidity soar.

The Japanese generally embrace foods with viscosity (think positive cling, not negative slime) and in this dish, vegetables such as okra and a slippery yam called *nagaimo* encourage other minced morsels to bind with each other. The result is a mixture of crisp, succulent tidbits with a slightly slick mouth feel.

Hoping you will use this classic rendition of *Dashi* as a point of departure from which to create your own personal version, I suggest several possibilities to start you off. Yamagata *Dashi* will keep, refrigerated, for up to 5 days. Having a jar on hand will make it easy to pull together a main course salad for supper on a muggy summer evening. In Japan, the veggie-herb mixture also garnishes cold noodles, or plain cooked rice. Other (eclectic) uses for *Dashi* include wrapping some in lettuce leaves (with, or without, the addition of shredded poached chicken), stuffing tomatoes or bell pepper cups with it or adding it to a pita-pocket sandwich.

Makes about 1 quart, enough for 10 to 12 portions.

Basic mixture:

- 3 small Japanese eggplants, about 7 ounces/200 grams total
- 2 seedless cucumbers with edible skin, about 7 ounces/200 grams total
- 4 or 5 leaves fresh *shiso*
- 1 bulb *myōga* (a ginger-like rhizome) and/or a small knob fresh young ginger
- Salt, about 2 teaspoons total, used in preparing several of the vegetables

1 tablespoon soy sauce

Suggested classic additions:

- 4 or 5 okra pods, about 2 ounces/55 grams)
- 1/3 cup shelled (frozen) *édamamé* (green soy beans) about 3 ounces/100 grams, boiled for 2 minutes and drained
- 4 or 5 *shishitō* peppers (mild fresh green chili), about 3 ounces/100 grams

Other possible *dashi* ingredients:

- Corn, cooked and shucked
- Lima beans or green peas, prepared as *édamamé*, above
- Summer squash, prepared as cucumbers, above
- Fresh mint or basil, prepared as *shiso*, above
- Fresh chives, sniped into small pieces or minced
- Anaheim, poblano or serrano (for greater heat) chiles; prepared as *shishitō* peppers

This dish is all about preparing and assembling various raw vegetables and herbs, each ingredient handled in a slightly different way. The various components are then tossed together. To prevent unwanted metallic or plastic odors mix the ingredients in a glass bowl, covering the mixture before chilling it in the refrigerator.

Prepare the EGGPLANTS... Trim away the stems and sepals but keep the dark skins intact. Dice the eggplant finely and place the bits in a glass bowl or wide-mouthed jar filled with salted water (1 teaspoon salt + 3 cups tap water). To insure that bits stay submerged as they soak, place an *otoshi-buta* (dropped lid) on top or press a piece of paper towel on the pieces to serve as a clinging lid). Allow the eggplant bits to soak for at least 15 minutes and up to 2 hours. The soaking liquid will turn brown. Drain and gently squeeze to remove excess liquid. Add the bits to whatever bowl or container will hold the final mixture.

Prepare the CUCUMBERS... Slice off the very top (the non-flowering end where the cucumber had been attached to the vine as it grew) and rub the cut edges against each other in a circular motion. The friction caused by this action draws out pasty white foam that the Japanese call *aku* (naturally occurring but unpleasant tasting bitterness). Rinse away the foam and slice the cucumbers in half, lengthwise. With a spoon, scrape away any large seeds. Dice the cucumbers finely and place them in a bowl. Toss with quarter teaspoon salt; let sit for at least 5 minutes and up to 20 minutes. Rinse in cold water and drain; lightly squeeze to remove excess moisture before adding the cucumbers to the final bowl or container.

Prepare the SHISO... Rinse the leaves and shake off excess moisture. Remove the stems, stack the leaves, slice in half, lengthwise. Stack and roll tightly before cutting across into thin shreds. Toss these shreds in the bowl with the other vegetables.

To **prepare the MYŌGA...** Slice the bulb in half lengthwise, then across into thin half-moon shreds. Add to the other vegetables.

Prepare the OKRA... Rub the pods with quarter teaspoon salt. This will remove any fuzz and ensure the pods will be brightly colored after being blanched. Trim away the stem without cutting into the pod (this will help control “stickiness”). Bring a small pot of water to a rolling boil, add the salted pods and blanch them for 1 minute (begin counting when the water returns to a boil). Drain and let cool naturally – no NOT refresh under cold water. When cool enough to handle comfortably (about 1 minute later), slice the okra thinly into rounds – they will “string” – you want them to, to help hold the mixture together. Add the okra slices to the final mixture.

To **prepare the ÉDAMAMÉ...** If you are using the beans straight from the freezer, place them in a small strainer and rinse under hot water and drain. Bring a pot of lightly salted water to a rolling boil over high heat. Add the beans and blanch them for 1 minute after the water returns to a boil. Drain but do NOT refresh; set aside to cool. When no longer emitting steam, add to the other vegetables.

To **prepare the SHISHITŌ peppers...** typically mild and aromatic though one in every dozen or so can be as blisteringly hot as a Serrano chile, trim off the stem top and slit the chilies in half lengthwise. Remove the seeds before finely dicing or slicing into thin threads.

Place all of the ingredients in a glass bowl, stirring and tossing to mix them well. Drizzle with a few drops of soy sauce. Sticky items such as the okra will “string” as you stir the mixture and help keep the various ingredients clinging together. Spoon the mixture over blocks of silken *tōfu*, cold noodles, or hot rice and serve immediately.



(left to right) squeeze diced eggplant; remove *aku* from cucumber; salt-rub okra pods



Adding chopped *myōga* and sliced okra. Drizzle in soy sauce and stir to mix.



Dashi topping *sōmen* noodles (left) and cold *tōfu* (right)