

Starting the New Year in Health

七草粥

Nanakusa-Gayu

Rice Porridge with 7 Spring Herbs



More than a thousand years ago, the Japanese spoke of *watari-dori* ("migrating birds") coming from the Asian mainland in wintertime bringing with them unwanted viruses – early evidence of avian flu epidemics! Eating nutritious *nana* (seven) *kusa* (grasses) *gayu* (porridge) on the 7th day of the New Year was believed to strengthen resistance to infection and colds. Indeed the seven grasses, or herbs, traditionally cooked into rice gruel are vitamin and mineral rich leafy herbs and flowering greens. The classic Japanese spring herbs *haru no nana kusa* are (left to right):



芹 *seri*

なずな *nazuna*

御形 *gogyō*

はこべら *hakobera*

仏の座 *hotoké no za*

すずな *suzuna* (turnip)

すずしろ *suzushiro* (daikon)

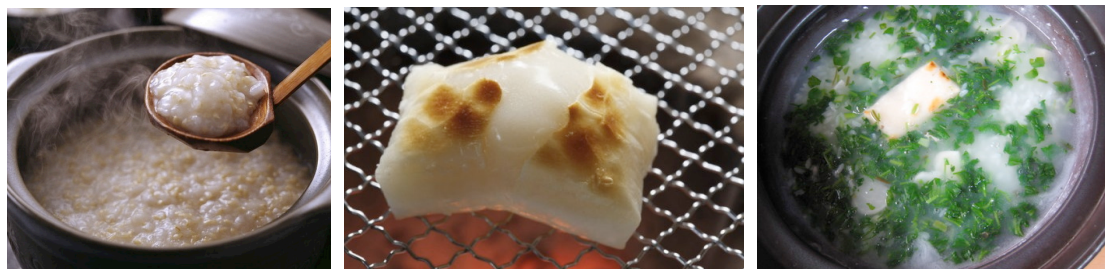


For those who like to make *nana kusa-gayu* in their own kitchen, follow the recipe on the next page.

Rice Porridge with Seven Herbs

Nana Kusa-Gayu

七草粥



Technically speaking, the word *okayu* connotes porridge made from raw rice cooked with about three times the amount of water normally used to cook plain rice. *Ozosui* is the correct term for cooked rice that is rinsed and then simmered in a flavored broth. This recipe, like most homemaker versions of *okayu* uses leftover rice... and after the New Year celebrations, leftover *omochi* (pounded rice taffy).



By the way, any blue-colored mold that may appear on your rice taffy is related to penicillin (indeed the molds were cultivated and used centuries ago in Japan to limit infection in open wounds!).

Unless you have allergies that counter-indicate consumption of related antibiotics, the moldy *omochi* can be used as is... for a boost to fighting off infections.

Serves 4.

- 2 cups cooked rice (white, brown or mixed grains; leftovers are perfect)
- 4 cups Basic Sea Stock (*Dashi*, see below) and/or water or other broth
- 1/4 teaspoon salt (optional)
- 4 pieces of square *omochi* (rice taffy, grilled until puffy)
- Tops from turnips, radishes, or other dark, leafy greens such as kale or watercress

This porridge can be as thick as oatmeal, or as thin as a pureed soup. If you like your porridge stick-to-your-ribs thick and creamy, place 2 cups cooked rice in a 2-quart pot and add 2 cups *dashi* sea stock or water or broth. If you prefer a thinner, rice gruel, rinse your cooked rice (place rice in a fine mesh strainer and shower with cold water) BEFORE adding it to the pot. Stir with a wooden spoon to break up any clumps of rice.

Cook over low heat, stirring frequently, until the grains of rice swell and begin to lose their shape, about 5 minutes. Add 1 and 1/2 cups more stock or water; stir to incorporate. Add 4 pieces *omochi* rice taffy and continue to simmer several minutes over very low heat until the rice taffy become soft and stretchy. Season the soup with a scant 1/4 teaspoon salt if you wish, and continue to cook, stirring occasionally.

Tops from turnips, radishes, or other dark, leafy greens such as kale or watercress will taste similar to the Japanese *nana kusa* greens and have a similar nutritional profile. These greens can be a bit tough and fibrous, and the leaves much larger, than their Japanese counterparts. You may want to briefly wilt, blanch or parboil your greens in boiling water first, then drain and chop them coarsely before adding to your porridge. Stir to distribute, cook for one minute, and taste. Adjust with a pinch more salt, if wanted. Serve piping hot in individual deep bowls. Eat with a spoon and/or chopsticks.

Basic Sea Stock *Dashi*

出汁



Makes about 1 quart.

1 generous quart cold water; use filtered or bottled water for best results
2 x 4-inch (about 20 square cm) *kombu* (kelp)
2, 5-gram packets or 1/2 cup loosely packed *katsuo bushi* (dried bonito flakes)

Soak *kombu* in a pot with the water for 10 to 15 minutes before placing the pot over medium-high heat. Remove the pot from the burner as soon as small bubbles begin to rise and a few of them break at the rim of the pot. Add the fish flakes, scattering them across the surface of the broth. The fish flakes at the top of a freshly opened bag might take 5 or 6 minutes to begin to sink, while the powdery bits that settle at the bottom of the package could sink almost immediately. To keep the stock from tasting “fishy” it is best to strain the broth through a cloth or paper-lined colander within 3 or 4 minutes of adding the flakes, even if the flakes have not sunk.

Dashi loses its delicate aroma and subtle flavors when frozen, so it is best to make it fresh when you need it. Any unused *dashi* will keep well in a lidded glass jar for 3 to 4 days in the refrigerator. Depending on the type, and quality of *kombu* used, a sediment sometimes forms at the bottom of the jar – it alone, is not cause for concern. Signs of spoilage include a sweet, rather than smoky, smell, a film forming on the surface or around the edges of your container, or stickiness when pouring.

