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S A V E U R

NO. 62

# SUMMO

## STEW

BY TANIA KADOKURA  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY  
CHRISTOPHER HIRSHEIMER  
A BANNER OUTSIDE TOMOEGATA, ABOVE LEFT. ABOVE  
RIGHT, WRESTLERS KOTOMITSUKI (LEFT) AND KOTO-  
NOWAKA. FACING PAGE, KOTOFUBUKI STIRS NABE.

Japan's famed wrestlers have been bulking up on chanko-nabe, a hearty, protein-rich one-pot meal, for more than a century

**I** SPENT the summer of my senior year of high school working as a guide at Tokyo's Disneyland. Because it was too far to commute from my home in Kobe, about 300 miles away, I stayed with my uncle Toshi in downtown Tokyo. One morning when I was sitting by an open window in his living room, trying to

keep cool, I heard the most alarming sounds coming from the building across the street—deep groans, repetitive massive slaps, and an occasional thump so powerful that it made my uncle's two-story wooden house shake. Upon investigation, I learned that the building housed a sumo stable and that these were the sounds of wrestlers practicing.



N A B E

SUMO, Japan's national sport, is some 1,500 years old; the original matches were religious rituals dedicated to the Shinto gods. It later evolved into an exciting competition full of pomp and ceremony in which two uncommonly large men—naked except for loincloths—square off and try to push each other out of the ring or force each other to touch the ground with any part of the body besides the soles of the feet.

Today's wrestlers train and live at *beya* (stables) run by former sumo champions, where everything from their grooming to their diet is carefully controlled. Because strength and size are factors key to success in sumo, what and how much a wrestler eats are of particular importance. No wonder, then, that the staple dish of the sumo world is a hearty, filling one-pot meal, consisting of broth, vegetables, and meat or seafood, called nabemono, or nabe for short. (*Nabe*, pronounced nah-bay, means pot; *nabemono* means things in a pot.) The dish likely dates to the Jomons, who inhabited Japan a dozen millennia ago. The inventors of pottery, they were apparently the first people to cook food in pots.

When nabe is prepared by sumo wrestlers, it's called chanko-nabe, a name whose origin is unclear—although since *chan* means father and *ko* means child, some believe the term refers to a stable master and his apprentices. The tradition of sumo wrestlers' eating nabe supposedly began in the early 1900s, when star wrestler turned stable master Hitachiyama (sumo wrestlers traditionally go by a single ring name) made a batch for his charges one day. He quickly realized that the meal—usually cooked over a gas burner set on the table with diners gathered around—was not only nu-

tritious and inexpensive but also easy to prepare and eaten in a way that reinforced the communal aspect of the stable. It wasn't long before other stable masters were serving chanko-nabe, too.

SOON AFTER discovering the stable across from my uncle's house, I saw some wrestlers on the street. Wearing light cotton

kimonos and straw sandals, with their hair pulled back in old-fashioned topknots, these slow-moving giants seemed like actors in a period play. I was disappointed to learn that visits to sumo stables by outsiders are rarely permitted. As consolation, Toshi took me to a sumo tournament and then to my first chanko-nabe restaurant, Tomoegata (see box,



PREVIOUS PAGES, TOP CENTER: COURTESY SHUZO ICHIBARA

SCENES FROM SADOGATAKE STABLE, BOTH PAGES, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: INGREDIENTS FOR PORK AND MISO NABE; WRESTLER KOTOIWAKUNI READING IN THE KITCHEN; SCOOPING OUT WHITE MISO; SHAPING THE PRACTICE RING.

TANIA KADOKURA is a Tokyo-based cooking teacher.



page 72), where I ate more than my share of this storied stew.

Many years have passed, and I am again living in Tokyo, still intrigued by the secretive world of sumo. As a cooking teacher, I've become particularly interested in seeing how chanko-nabe is made at the source. And as luck would have it, I recently got the chance to do so, thanks to a family connection.

Standing at the imposing gate of Sadogatake—a stable just outside Tokyo, founded in 1974 by Kotozakura, the sport's 53rd *yokozuna* (grand champion)—I hear those familiar slapping sounds and grunts. I ring the bell tentatively and am welcomed by the *okami-san* (the stable master's wife), Taeko Kamatani, since the master himself is out of town. She leads me to the practice room, and as she quietly slides open the door, we're greeted by a rush of thick air. To our right is a dirt-floor training area with a clay ring in the center where the stable's 22 wrestlers are going through their paces. They throw themselves against one another, fall down, roll over, pull themselves back up. The atmosphere is tense; only the coach and the senior wrestlers are allowed to speak, and they are either yelling instructions or scolding the junior wrestlers, who are smeared with dirt and sweat: "Push harder, push harder! Keep your balance!"

The wrestlers begin practicing at six in the morning, Okami-san explains, as we watch two men pummel each other. They don't eat breakfast, she continues, because this kind of exercise can't be performed on a full stomach, but they eat a lot at lunch and dinner and take a long nap in between—that's how they get so big. About halfway through the practice session, I notice several junior wrestlers (continued on page 75)

## Chanko-Nabe Outside the Stable

**N**abe is served in homes and eateries all over Japan, but chanko-nabe, the sumo version of this one-pot feast, can be found only in sumo stables and specialty restaurants. In the stable, nabe is the quintessential throw-it-into-a-pot dish—perfect for junior wrestlers who must get a tasty and filling meal on the table fast. In a chanko-nabe restaurant, however, the repast, from the broth to the meat, is considerably more refined.

Such restaurants, which are generally owned by retired sumo stars, are extremely popular in Japan. The phenomenon began in Tokyo in 1937, when a former wrestler named Yokoteyama opened Kawasaki Chanko—an immediate hit. Today, similar establishments exist throughout the country (although most are located in Tokyo's Ryogoku district, the center of the sumo world) and are usually packed with sumo memorabilia, including photographs, trophies, and silk aprons previously worn at competitions. One even boasts a wrestling ring.

One of author Kadokura's favorite chanko-nabe restaurants is Tomoegata (see page 94), which is now run by the son of the legendary, eponymous founder, who died in 1979. With its attentive staff and straightforward menu, Tomoegata is an ideal training ground for nabe novices. Its menu features four types of nabe, including a beef and chicken version (see recipe, right). Nabe is meant to be shared, so go in a group. But as each table of four to six uses only one burner, you'll have to agree on a single nabe. Minutes after you order, your server will bring out a pot of broth and a large platter of raw vegetables and meat or seafood. After the broth comes to a simmer on the burner, she'll deftly fill the pot with the raw ingredients, starting with the items that take the longest to cook. As soon as everything is tender, individual bowls are filled. Fresh ingredients—and more broth, if the liquid reduces too much—are added to the pot as necessary by either the server or anyone at the table. Throughout the meal, your server will also skim any impurities from the broth. When you've had enough, she will pluck the scraps from the pot and, if you wish, add either udon noodles or steamed rice and a raw egg to the remaining broth. The rich, delicious result makes an appropriate finale for sumo wrestlers in training and curious diners alike. —HOWIE KAHN



TOMOEGATA, A TOKYO CHANKO-NABE RESTAURANT, ABOVE LEFT. ABOVE RIGHT, PART OF A PLACE SETTING AT TOMOEGATA. FACING PAGE, MAKING TACHIYAMA'S BEEF AND CHICKEN HOT POT, NAMED AFTER A WRESTLER.

## RECIPE

### Tachiyama Chanko-Nabe

(Tachiyama's Beef and Chicken Hot Pot)

SERVES 4

TYPICALLY, a hot pot, like this one prepared at Tokyo's Tomoegata, is cooked at the table on a portable stove and eaten communally. However, it can also be cooked entirely in the kitchen, then served at the table. See page 94 for a source for hard-to-find ingredients.

3 lbs. chicken bones	¼ head napa cabbage, cored and cut into large pieces
1 2.8-oz. package abura-age (deep-fried tofu), cut into large pieces	4 shiitake mushrooms, stemmed
1 clove garlic, peeled	4 oz. shimeji mushrooms, trimmed and separated
¼ cup soy sauce	4 oz. fresh burdock root, trimmed, peeled, and shaved into long thin strips
2 tbsp. mirin (sweet rice wine)	10 oz. yaki-dofu (grilled tofu), halved lengthwise and cut into ½"-thick pieces
Salt	½ lb. boneless chicken thighs, cut into thin strips
1 medium waxy potato, peeled, quartered lengthwise, sliced crosswise, and blanched	½ bunch chrysanthemum greens, trimmed
2" piece daikon, peeled, quartered lengthwise, sliced crosswise, and blanched	½ lb. very thinly sliced prime rib eye of beef
1 small carrot, trimmed, peeled, sliced on the bias, and blanched	1 lb. udon noodles
1 leek, white part only, trimmed, washed, and sliced on the bias	

**1.** Bring a medium pot of water to a boil over high heat. Put chicken bones and fried tofu into 2 separate colanders set in sink and pour two-thirds of the boiling water over the bones to rinse off any impurities and the remaining boiling water over the tofu to rinse off excess oil. Transfer bones to the medium pot and set tofu aside to drain.

**2.** Add garlic and 14 cups cold water to pot with bones and bring to a boil over high heat, skimming any foam that rises to the surface. Reduce heat to medium-low and simmer until broth has reduced by one-third, about 2½ hours. Strain broth into a clean, wide medium pot, discarding solids, and skim off fat.

**3.** At the table, set pot on a portable stove (see page 90) in center of table, add soy sauce and mirin, season to taste with salt, and bring to a simmer over medium heat (**A**). Add about one-third of the potatoes, daikon, carrots, leeks, cabbage, mushrooms, burdock, grilled tofu, chicken, fried tofu, and chrysanthemum greens to simmering broth (**B**) and cook until vegetables begin to soften and chicken is just cooked through, about 5 minutes. Add about one-third of the beef (**C**) and simmer (**D**) until just cooked through, about 1 minute (**E**). The hot pot is now ready to be eaten "self-serve" style in small bowls. Add more of the remaining vegetables, tofu, chicken, greens, and beef to pot of broth as depleted.

**4.** Once all the vegetables, tofu, chicken, greens, and beef have been eaten, use a small sieve to pick out scraps. Bring remaining broth in pot back to a simmer, add noodles, and simmer until cooked through, 6–8 minutes. Serve in individual bowls (**F**).

N A B E

(continued from page 71) leaving the ring. Okami-san tells me that they are going to prepare lunch.

After the wrestlers emerge from their living quarters, freshly bathed, I ask permission to join them in the kitchen. There, the counters are covered with ingredients for a lunch of nabe, steak, stir-fried vegetables, and pickles. The menu is determined daily by

Okami-san and a wrestler named Kotofubuki—the *chanko-ban* (the person in charge of preparing the meals)—and is based on the season and what's in the larder. I sidle up to Kotofubuki, who has begun preparing today's nabe, pork-miso. There are no rules for what goes into a nabe. Sukiyaki (see page 89), the best-known hot pot, is made with

beef and a sweetened soy sauce base, while Ishikari nabe, a regional classic from Hokkaido, consists of salmon and vegetables in a miso-kelp broth. As Kotofubuki quickly cuts some tofu, I muster the courage to ask him where he learned to cook. "I watched the previous *chanko-ban*," he responds shyly. "But there are no recipes; you just taste as you go along."

Soon Kotofubuki emerges from the kitchen with a huge pot of water, which he places on a portable gas stove at the head of the table. When the water comes to a boil, he stirs in some instant dashi flakes, then turns down the heat and adds sliced pork belly and splashes of sake and mirin. When the pork is tender, he warms ladles of salty red miso and sweet white miso in the broth before swirling in the paste with a pair of long chopsticks. "Mixing the misos is the key to this dish," he says while tasting the broth. "The red miso emphasizes the sweetness of the white one." After several adjustments, Kotofubuki is satisfied and throws in the vegetables and tofu. Minutes later, the entire meal is ready.

In the stable, the high-ranking senior wrestlers, or *sekitori*, command the most respect. As soon as the stable's four *sekitori* enter

the dining area, trailed by their junior-wrestler attendants, everyone snaps to attention. Once seated, they start eating. It doesn't take long for the *sekitori* to finish; without saying a word, they leave the room, and as the next rank of wrestlers take their place, Kotofubuki replenishes the food. Fascinated, I watch this process over and over until the most junior wrestlers finally make it to the table. "Often, there isn't any nabe for the last group, so we add cooked rice to the broth and break an egg into it," Kotofubuki tells me. (Adding rice or noodles to the broth is standard practice when nabe is eaten in homes and restaurants, too.)

Luckily, today there's plenty of food to go around, and I am invited to join the junior wrestlers. With the seniors gone, they've started to chat and relax. Kotofubuki hands me a bowl and chopsticks, and I shyly reach for the nabe. The meat is soft and flavorful, the broth just right. And despite the fact that I feel so small and out of place among these giants, I, too, start to relax. 🍣

IN THE SAVEUR KITCHEN, page 89: A recipe for *sukiyaki* and all about portable stoves; THE PANTRY, page 94: Information on visiting *Tomoeogata* and a source for Japanese ingredients.

RECIPE

**Buta Chanko-Nabe Miso-Aji**

(Sumo-Style Pork and Miso Hot Pot)

SERVES 4

THIS IS THE RECIPE used by junior wrestler Kotofubuki at the Sadogatake sumo stable, just outside Tokyo. Like other nabes, this one may be cooked in the kitchen at home and served at the table. For a source for hard-to-find ingredients, see page 94.

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|---|--|
| 2 1/2 tsp. instant dashi flakes   | 1 medium yellow onion, peeled, halved lengthwise, sliced crosswise, and blanched |
| 1 lb. thinly sliced pork belly  | 10 oz. firm tofu, cut into 2" cubes  |
| 3 tbsp. sake  | 8 shiitake mushrooms, stemmed, caps halved                                       |
| 2 tbsp. mirin (sweet rice wine)   | 2 oz. enoki mushrooms, trimmed   |
| 3 tbsp. red miso  | 1 2.8-oz. package <i>abura-age</i> (deep-fried tofu), cut into 1 1/2" pieces     |
| 3 tbsp. white miso  | 1/4 head napa cabbage, cored and cut into large pieces                           |
| 1 medium carrot, trimmed, peeled, sliced crosswise on the bias, and blanched    | 1/2 bunch nira (flat Chinese chives)   |
| 2" piece daikon, peeled, halved lengthwise, sliced crosswise, and blanched      | 4 cups steamed Japanese short-grain rice or 1 lb. udon noodles (optional)        |
| 1 medium waxy potato, peeled, halved lengthwise, sliced crosswise, and blanched | 2 eggs, lightly beaten (optional)  |

1. Bring 10 cups cold water to a boil in a wide medium pot over high heat. Add dashi flakes, reduce heat to medium, and simmer, stirring until flakes completely dissolve, about 1 minute. Add pork, sake, and mirin to dashi and simmer, skimming any foam that rises to surface, until pork is tender, 15–30 minutes. Dissolve red and white misos in 1 cup broth from pot in a small bowl, then stir back into pot.

2. At the table, set pot of pork with broth on a portable stove (see page 90) in center of table and bring to a simmer over medium heat. Add carrots, daikon, potatoes, onions, firm tofu, mushrooms, fried tofu, cabbage, and chives, in that order, and simmer until vegetables are just soft, about 5 minutes. The hot pot is now ready to be eaten "self-serve" style in medium bowls.

3. Once all the pork, vegetables, and tofu have been eaten, use a small sieve to pick out scraps. Bring remaining broth in pot back to a simmer, then add rice or noodles, if using, and stir in eggs, if using. Simmer until broth is absorbed by rice, about 5 minutes, or until noodles are cooked through, 6–8 minutes. Divide between bowls.



SENIOR WRESTLER KOTONOWAKA SERVING RICE TO HIS SON, MASAKATSU, ABOVE LEFT. ABOVE RIGHT, BUTA CHANKO-NABE MISO-AJI (SUMO-STYLE PORK AND MISO HOT POT). FACING PAGE, WRESTLERS FEASTING ON CHANKO-NABE.