



729 WEST 16TH ST. UNIT B-4, COSTA MESA, CA. 92627
Tel: (949) 574-0202 Fax: (949) 574-0217
www.galeoscafe.com Email: info@galeoscafe.com



Contact:-
Galeos
Chef Andrei
Tel:-(949) 574 0202
Email :- Info@galeoscafe.com

HISTORY OF MISO

According to Japanese mythology, miso is a gift from the gods, bestowing health, longevity, and happiness. Even today, copious amounts of miso are consumed throughout Southeast Asia in the belief that it will insure a long and healthy life. Now, after 2,000 years of devotion and history, science is just beginning to unravel the mysteries of this divinely delicious and remarkably nutritious food.

Miso evolved from what may have been the world's first man-made culinary concoction, a sauce-like substance derived from fermenting fish or meat paste that had been preserved in salt and water, which further enhanced the flavor and aroma of the salt-pickled ingredients. This porridge like paste was then used as a condiment to flavor other foods. It is believed that a wide variety of fermented fish and meat sauces emerged independently in both China and Japan, sometime before the third century BC. However, miso, which is a fermented soybean paste, is assumed by scholars to have been an import from China to Japan.

Soybeans are native to China, and as early as 2853 BC, the Emperor of China included them among the five sacred plants. Though cultivated as a food crop since the 17th century BC, it wasn't until the establishment of trade routes in the first century AD that soybeans migrated from China to Japan. Scholars tend to believe that the formula for creating fermented soybean paste, the earliest form of miso, was developed in China in the fifth century, then brought to Japan in the 7th century by Buddhist monks, where it became a staple in the samurai diet. On the other hand, Japanese legend regarding the discovery miso, then called hishio, is a much more interesting story.

In the days when shogun ruled Japan and the samurai were an elite military force, warring clans would often keep villages at siege for months, or even years. Rather than attacking, an opposing force would sometimes isolate a village in order to starve the occupants into surrendering. In one particularly long siege, someone in the village noticed a horse eating fermented soybeans out of a barrel. Following suit, the villagers eventually prevailed and miso was born. Interestingly, a character used in the word hishio, an early word for miso, is horse. -more-

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Regardless of origin, Japan's almost mystical reverence of miso has made it a decidedly Japanese gift to the world, embodying centuries of careful nurturing. As early as 701 AD, there existed a Bureau for the Regulation of Production, Trade, and Taxation of Hishio and Miso, which was located in the Emperor's palace. And from the 1500s on, visiting Europeans began to write lengthy descriptions of miso in their memoirs. In fact, the first scientific study of miso was published by a German doctor, Oscar Kellner, in 1889.

In the 1960s, America began to take note of miso, and a flood of cookbooks featuring miso hit the market, including one written by the Women's College of Nutrition. However, it was during the 1970s, with the advent of the macrobiotic diet, that miso became a featured item in health food stores. This fermented soybean paste, most often made with soybeans, rice or barley, salt, water and koji, comes in over twenty-eight different varieties. Each variety, with its rich, hearty, often meat-like flavor, makes a wonderful all-purpose seasoning for soups, dips, sauces, gravies, dressings, and a world of other foods. Miso has continued to grow in popularity, not only because of its amazing flavor and versatility, but for the astounding health benefits that miso offers.

Miso's unique ingredients and double fermentation process appear to transform soybeans and grains into a potent medicine that is easily absorbed by the body. Containing a staggering array of nutrients, such as vitamins, minerals, enzymes, isoflavonoids and complete proteins, miso also contains unique elements that, in addition to lowering blood pressure and blood cholesterol, heal or inhibit such maladies as certain types of cancer, radiation sickness, and tobacco poisoning, just to name a few.

Since the sixties, there have been numerous scientific studies confirming the benefits of miso in radiation exposure. One of the earliest, done in 1972, discovered that miso contains dipicolonic acid, an alkaloid that chelates heavy metals, such as radioactive strontium. Another, published in 1989 at Hiroshima University's Atomic Radioactivity Medical Lab, was prompted by reports of European countries importing truckloads of miso after the accident at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant. Numerous other studies of miso have identified potent cancer fighting compounds that can cancel out the effects of large amounts of nicotine and other cancer-causing mutagens, and studies done at Okayama University Medical School found that miso is a powerful antioxidant, capable of protecting cell membranes from the ravages of aging.

As you can see, there is a compelling and growing body of work that would tend to support what the Japanese have known for the past two thousand years—that miso is, indeed, a gift from the gods.

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