JAL’S SEASONAL LUNCH DELIGHTS WITH WHIMSY AND FLAVOUR

News /

By John Walton

It’s not often that I’m surprised by a business class meal. Yet flying between Kyoto on a two and a half hour flight one afternoon this autumn, Japan Airlines managed to both surprise and delight me with a beautifully presented meal that tasted as good as it looked.

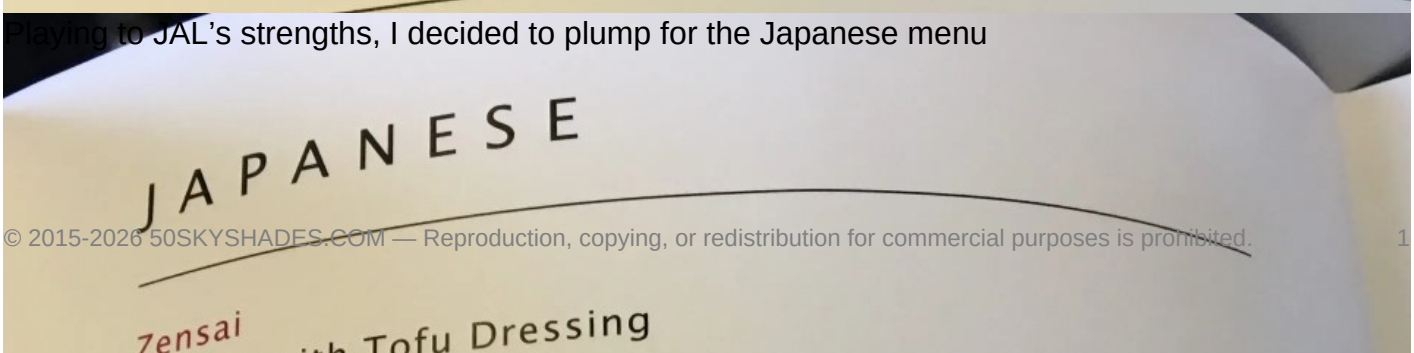
JAL’s Boeing 737-800 regional business class is markedly more spacious than most recliners, although the downside is an inflight entertainment system that isn’t exactly loaded with a plethora of international content suitable for a short flight.

So I turned to the menu for entertainment.

The Western dish looked significantly less exciting, in fairness

Both a Japanese and Western option were on offer for my flight, and after a quick glance I discarded the Western menu in favour of the Japanese one. Interestingly, the other three passengers in the cabin, all Japanese-speakers, chose Western, and it looked and smelled good.

Playing to JAL’s strengths, I decided to plump for the Japanese menu



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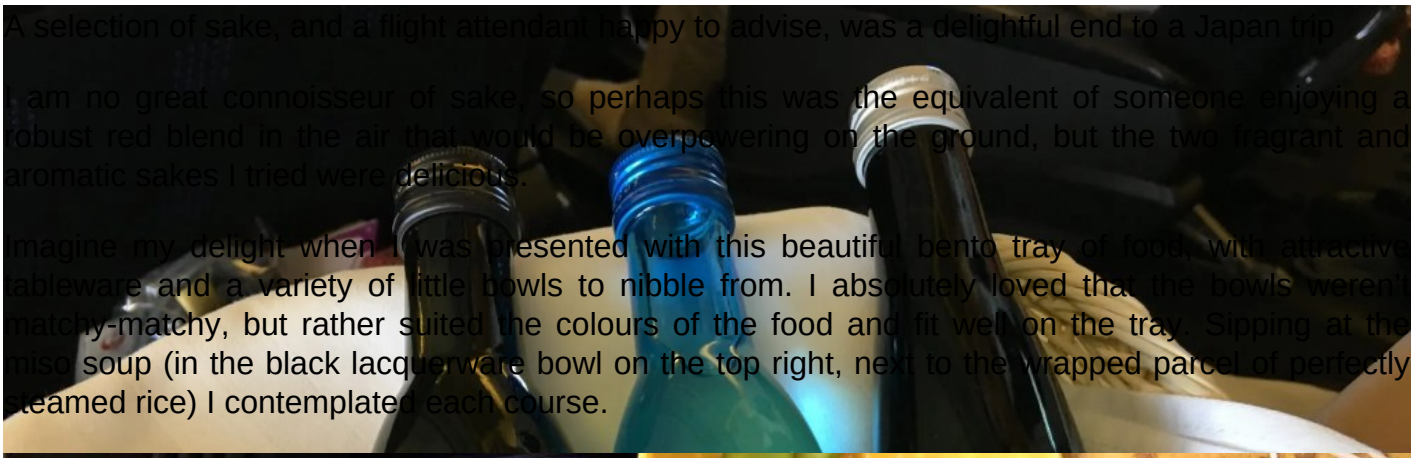
But the Japanese menu sounded too good to pass up. A four-plus course meal to while away the time to Shanghai? Sold.

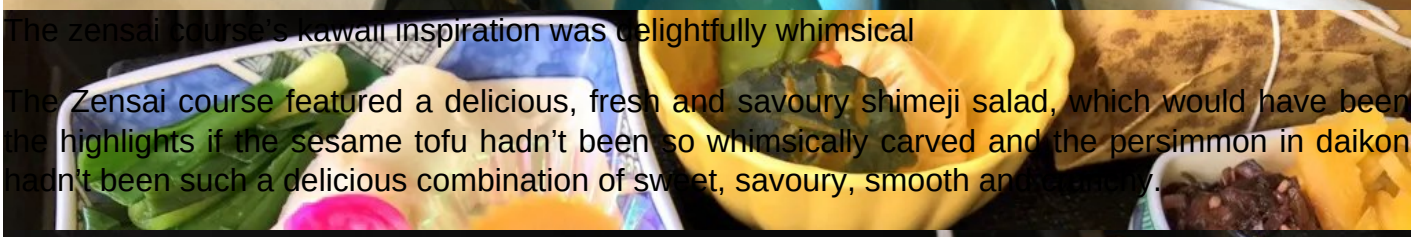
After a quick glance at the unimpressive wine selection, I decided on sake, and the lead flight attendant (who was serving the cabin) was kind enough to present the bottles to me, explain the provenance of each one, and make some recommendations.



A selection of sake, and a flight attendant happy to advise, was a delightful end to a Japan trip

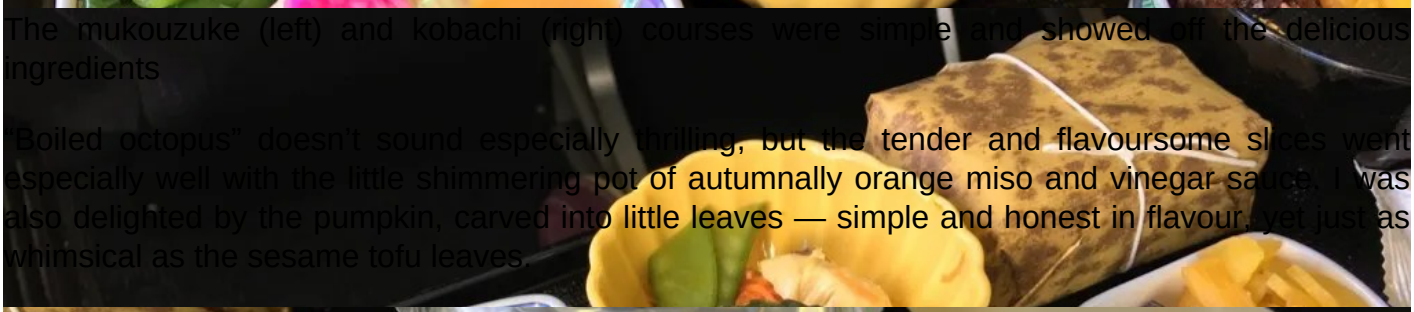
I am no great connoisseur of sake, so perhaps this was the equivalent of someone enjoying a robust red blend in the air that would be overpowering on the ground, but the two fragrant and aromatic sakes I tried were delicious.

Imagine my delight when I was presented with this beautiful bento tray of food, with attractive tableware and a variety of little bowls to nibble from. I absolutely loved that the bowls weren't matchy-matchy, but rather suited the colours of the food and fit well on the tray. Sipping at the miso soup (in the black lacquerware bowl on the top right, next to the wrapped parcel of perfectly steamed rice) I contemplated each course.



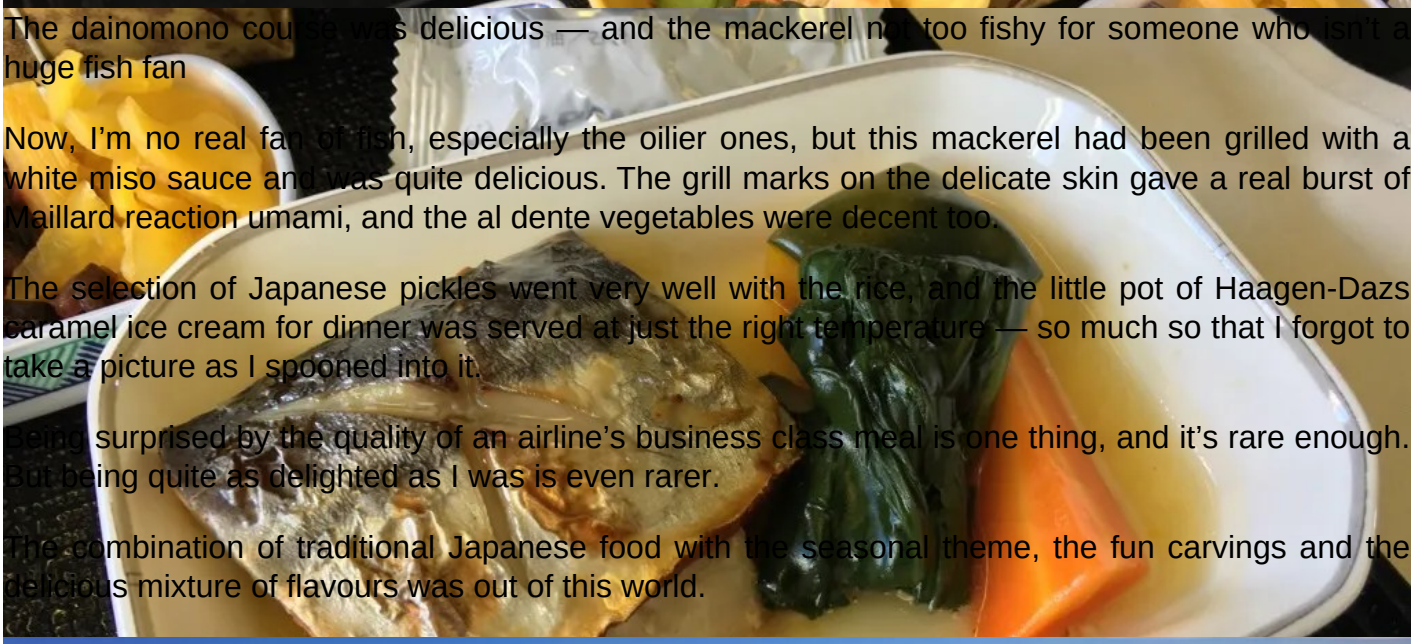
The zensai course's kawaii inspiration was delightfully whimsical

The Zensai course featured a delicious, fresh and savoury shimeji salad, which would have been the highlights if the sesame tofu hadn't been so whimsically carved and the persimmon in daikon hadn't been such a delicious combination of sweet, savoury, smooth and crunchy.



The mukouzuke (left) and kobachi (right) courses were simple and showed off the delicious ingredients

"Boiled octopus" doesn't sound especially thrilling, but the tender and flavoursome slices went especially well with the little shimmering pot of autumnally orange miso and vinegar sauce. I was also delighted by the pumpkin, carved into little leaves — simple and honest in flavour, yet just as whimsical as the sesame tofu leaves.



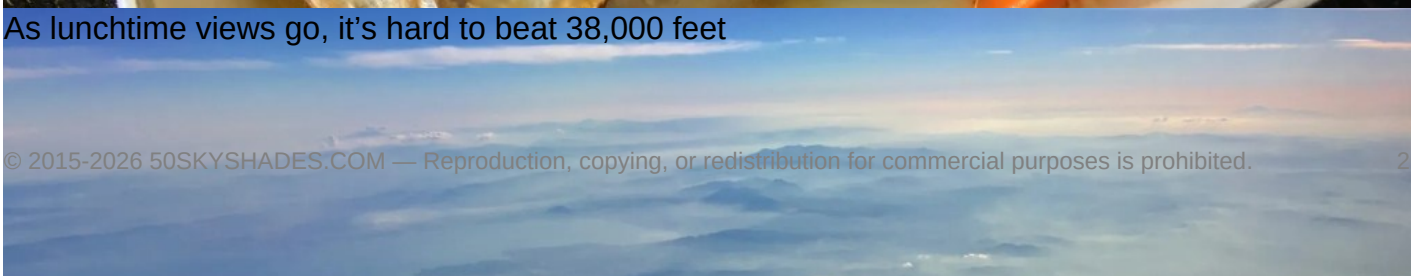
The dainomono course was delicious — and the mackerel not too fishy for someone who isn't a huge fish fan

Now, I'm no real fan of fish, especially the oilier ones, but this mackerel had been grilled with a white miso sauce and was quite delicious. The grill marks on the delicate skin gave a real burst of Maillard reaction umami, and the al dente vegetables were decent too.

The selection of Japanese pickles went very well with the rice, and the little pot of Haagen-Dazs caramel ice cream for dinner was served at just the right temperature — so much so that I forgot to take a picture as I spooned into it.

Being surprised by the quality of an airline's business class meal is one thing, and it's rare enough. But being quite as delighted as I was is even rarer.

The combination of traditional Japanese food with the seasonal theme, the fun carvings and the delicious mixture of flavours was out of this world.



As lunchtime views go, it's hard to beat 38,000 feet

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