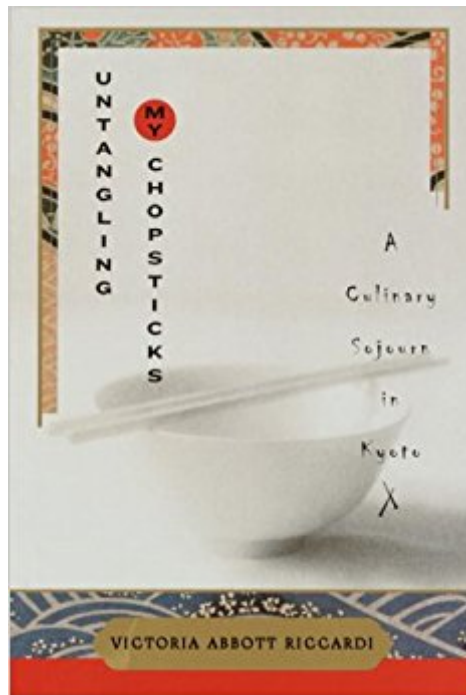




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# Untangling My Chopsticks: A Culinary Sojourn In Kyoto



## Synopsis

Two years out of college and with a degree from Le Cordon Bleu in Paris, Victoria Riccardi left a boyfriend, a rent-controlled New York City apartment, and a plum job in advertising to move to Kyoto to study kaiseki, the exquisitely refined form of cooking that accompanies the formal Japanese tea ceremony. She arrived in Kyoto, a city she had dreamed about but never seen, with two bags, an open-ended plane ticket, and the ability to speak only sushi-bar Japanese. She left a year later, having learned the language, the art of kaiseki, and what was truly important to her. Like flower arranging or calligraphy, kaiseki is an age-old Japanese art form. It began as a modest vegetarian meal that Buddhist monks ate in Kyoto's Zen temples and then developed into a highly symbolic Japanese ritual. Through special introductions and personal favors, Victoria was able to attend one of Kyoto's most prestigious tea schools, where this art has been preserved for generations and where she was taken under the wing of an American expatriate who became her kaiseki mentor. As a first-hand participant in kaiseki meals and tea ceremonies, she observed the highly choreographed rituals of this extraordinary culinary discipline, absorbing the beauty and subtlety of its myriad details and symbolic gestures. During her year in Kyoto, Victoria explored the mysterious and rarefied world of tea kaiseki, living a life inaccessible to most foreigners. She befriended a Japanese couple, teaching English at their home-based language school and eventually moving in with them. She spent countless hours with her kaiseki mentor and his partner cooking in their historic Japanese house. Eventually, she even struck up a friendship with a monk when she spent several nights at a secluded Buddhist temple. She also discovered the beguiling realm of modern-day Japanese food—the restaurants, specialty shops, and supermarkets. She participated in many fast-disappearing culinary customs, including making mochi (chewy rice cakes) by hand, a beloved family ritual barely surviving in a mechanized age. She celebrated the annual cleansing rites of New Year's, donning an elaborate kimono and obi for a thirty-four-course extravaganza. In her book, she includes twenty-five recipes for favorite dishes she encountered, such as Chicken and Egg Rice Bowl, Japanese Beef and Vegetable Hotpot, and Green-Tea Cooked Salmon Over Rice. *Untangling My Chopsticks* is a sumptuous journey into the tastes, traditions, and exotic undercurrents of Japan. It is also a coming-of-age tale steeped in history and ancient customs, a thoughtful meditation on life, love, and learning in another land.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In 1986, two years out of college and restless at her job with an ad agency, Riccardi left New York to spend a year in Kyoto, where she lived with a Japanese couple and attended an elite school devoted to the study of kaiseki, a highly ritualized form of cooking that accompanies the formal tea ceremony. From her adoptive "family" she learned about Japanese home cooking and Kyoto's food markets. At the kaiseki school, she was introduced to an art form in which everything is symbolic, from the food and utensils to the colors of the guests' kimonos. Immersion in Japanese cuisine taught her about the country's history, culture and art as well as its cooking, so that even a meal in an ordinary restaurant left her feeling that she had "visited a museum, heard a fascinating lecture, opened several gorgeously wrapped gifts, and consumed the essence of spring in Kyoto." In her delightful and unusual culinary memoir she includes 27 recipes. A few, such as summer somen with gingered eggplant, are for dishes she was served at a Zen temple. Some, including miso-pickled romaine stems wrapped with smoked salmon, and red and white miso soup with sea greens, are from kaiseki meals in which she participated. Others, such as chicken and rice egg bowl, "Japan's quintessential comfort food," are representative of everyday fare. Although many of the ingredients used in these recipes are unusual, Riccardi, who writes for such magazines as *Eating Well* and *Bon Appetit*, makes them sound worth searching for. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc.

"I relished every page." —Victoria Riccardi  
"Her prose reflects the same spirited, nuanced, intelligent style that she discovered on a pilgrimage to the heart of Kyoto—her tea kaiseki cuisine." —Frances Mayes, author of *Under the Tuscan Sun*  
"As Victoria

Riccardi goes in search of culinary enlightenment in this intimate and beautifully crafted memoir about living, cooking, and falling in love with Kyoto, the reader is seduced and transported by the scenes and flavors she paints with words. Riccardi writes with a sensuous eye for detail that brings alive the extraordinary beauty of Japan and the sumptuous pleasures of its table. —Lora Brody, author of *Growing Up on the Chocolate Diet* —“Victoria Riccardi writes from the heart. A personal story of determination and discovery, *Untangling My Chopsticks* offers a refreshing glimpse into the tastes, intrigues, and traditions of modern and ancient Japan. —Elizabeth Andoh, Japan correspondent, *Gourmet* magazine, and author of *At Home with Japanese Cooking* —“Victoria Abbott Riccardi —„s *Untangling My Chopsticks* folds back the screen on a city and its traditions just enough to satisfy our curiosity without diminishing the mysterious allure. Her friendships and experiences are recounted with delightful delicacy, and the kaiseki meal and tea ceremony come alive not only as cultural rites but also as delectable gastronomic and esthetic experiences. —Susan Herrmann Loomis, author of *On Rue Tatin*

A very nice read, as well as including recipes! If you like Japanese culture and/or love food, I recommend it : ). I also recommend getting the physical book as opposed to the kindle, simply because it is then more convenient to access the recipes. (Reading on the kindle was fine, no formatting problems, except for some words being split like so: mis alignment. Didn't really bother me though.).

Poignant, intelligent, insightful, delicious. A joy to read and an excellent insight to a culinary world you don't often hear about.

As I have in interest both in food and in Japan I was thrilled to discover this book. It turns out that Victoria and I were both in Japan at about the same time. She cooking in Kyoto and me studying photography outside of Tokyo. I fell in love with the colors and textures of this country and it's food... and this book captures it perfectly. A wonderful read... and do try some of the recipes! As a broke student in Tokyo I lived on Okonomiyak.

Writer delves deeply into the culinary culture of Kyoto kaiseki. For anyone interested in reading about the history and preparation of kaiseki this book will not disappoint. It's obviously lovingly written. A great pleasure to read.

All those with a real passion for Japanese food and culture (are these two concepts really separate?) will fall in love with this book. It's not yet another cooking book about Japan and its food, but the lively account of the year the author spent in Kyoto to learn 'tea kaiseki'. The author takes you there, and she makes you feel as if you were sharing the real experience with her. It is amazing to be able to read about the subtle nuances of Japanese cuisine, as they are experienced through the eyes, senses and culture of a curious, intelligent Western person. I couldn't recommend this more.

Very good. Enjoyable culinary visit to Kyoto, Japan. Easy and enjoyable read. Would recommend it to other readers of travel literature.

I didn't hate this book, but I didn't really like it that much either. I gave it two stars because its non-offensive and if you want to learn about Japanese culture and cuisine it is somewhat informative. (Though a cookbook would be better and then at least there would be pictures of the food.) However there just is not enough drama in the book and the descriptions of places are fairly flat. I had a difficult time imagining any of this - the locations, the people. I didn't dislike the author, but she didn't pull me in to the experience that much either. I felt like she purposefully distanced herself, like she felt she was above it all. I read the book and sent it back for a refund because honestly, there was no one I could think of to give it to to read - it just wasn't engaging enough. I'm glad everything worked out for the author though. Like Frances Mayes (of the Tuscany books) who ends up with a great husband, living in San Francisco and Tuscany and having a tremendously fabulous life, I'm glad that no one who takes these "sojourns" in foreign countries ever comes up a loser like the rest of us.

loved this book - I think I was in Japan at the same time she was (mid '80s) and it brought back so many memories. I thought I knew a lot about Japanese cuisine, but I found myself post-it marking several pages; it's a joyful and informative book. (I think it is mis-titled though, the subtitle is better, just an opinion)

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