



**The Beauty
of *Wamei***

What's a *Wamei*?

Wamei (pronounced like “wah-may”) are, quite simply, Japanese “common names” for mushrooms, as opposed to the internationally-recognized scientific names (binomial nomenclature). For example, *matsutake*, *enoki*, *maitake*, and *shiitake* are all *wamei*. Many mushrooms have common names in English, as well: oyster mushrooms, chanterelles, morels, white button mushrooms, etc.

Mushroom Mame-Chishiki

Although Japanese common names (*wamei*) are relatively standardized, a given mushroom may have different names in different regions or time periods. According to the Dictionary of Mushroom Etymology and Dialects, *Tricholoma matsutake* (*matsutake*) has 49 different alternative names, including *matsu-dake* (various regions), *matsu-kinoko* (Akita prefecture), and *zuruma* (Aomori prefecture).

Japanese mushroom hunters are all somewhat familiar with the biological system of binomial nomenclature, but use of scientific names isn't very widespread outside of academic communities. In general, the *wamei* system of common names is preferred for daily usage, in part because of the difficulty of pronouncing scientific names in Japanese and the instability of scientific names due to continuing research efforts.

In the English-language system of common names, a given mushroom may have multiple common names, or the same common name may refer to multiple mushrooms. The Japanese system used to be similarly confusing; however, in 2008, the Mycological Society of Japan established a process for standardizing *wamei*, such that one *wamei* always corresponds to one distinct species of mushroom. Thanks to their efforts, Japanese *wamei* are more reliable than their international counterparts, and are widespread in their use in Japanese mushroom communities.

Writing *Wamei*

In Japanese, *wamei* are usually written in *katakana*, and this applies not only to mushroom *wamei*, but across the entire biological spectrum. Bird names, insect names, plant names, lichen names, etc. are all typically written in *katakana*. However, there are exceptions. Very common *wamei*-ones which the average person knows—will often be written in hiragana or kanji. So you may see a common mushroom names like maitake written in kanji (舞茸), but a less common mushroom like *anzutake* (chanterelles) will almost always be written in *katakana* (アンズタケ).

Building *Wamei*

Wamei are most often compound words, consisting of a combination of prefixes which depict characteristics of the mushroom along with (usually) the suffix *take* (tah-kay), which means “mushroom.”

I analyzed a large list of all of the *wamei* currently in use, not counting regional dialects and outdated names, to discover which semantic components popped up the most in mushroom names. Here are the top twenty results from this analysis, which I carried out across 5,562 different mushroom names.

Component	% of Mushrooms	Meaning	Example
take	75.76%	Mushroom. Often used at the end of mushroom names.	<i>Hira-take</i> : Flat Mushroom (<i>Pleurotus ostreatus</i>)
hime	9.36%	Princess. Used for small, beautiful, often very colorful mushrooms.	<i>Hime-kaba-iro-take</i> : Princess Reddish-yellow Mushroom (<i>Xeromphalina campanella</i>)
kasa gasa	9.08%	Cap; parasol.	<i>Otome-no-kasa</i> : Maiden's Parasol (<i>Cuphophyllus virgineus</i>)
cha	8.14%	Tea. Often refers to brown-colored mushrooms or cup fungi	<i>Uroko-cha-hira-take</i> : Scaled Tea Flat Mushroom (<i>Crepidotus calolepis</i>)
iro	7.83%	Color. Usually paired with a specific color or the word <i>gawari</i> , meaning "changing."	<i>Sora-iro-take</i> : Sky-colored Mushroom (<i>Entoloma virescens</i>)
shiro	6.59%	White.	<i>Shiro-oni-take</i> : White Oni Mushroom (<i>Amanita virgineoides</i>)
beni	5.86%	Crimson.	<i>Beni-tengu-take</i> : Crimson Tengu Mushroom (<i>Amanita muscaria</i>)
shimeji	5.50%	Shimeji. Describes a class of mushrooms of a certain appearance (not necessarily related taxonomically). See "What's a Shimeji?" for more information.	<i>Sakura-shimeji</i> : Cherry Blossom Shimeji (<i>Hygrophorus russula</i>)
ura	5.21%	Underside. Often paired with colors.	<i>Kusa-ura-beni-take</i> : Grass Underside Crimson Mushroom (<i>Entoloma rhodopolium</i>)

Component	% of Mushrooms	Meaning	Example
modoki	5.08%	Lookalike. Usually appended to the names of existing mushrooms to suggest mushrooms that look similar.	<i>Nara-take-modoki</i> : Oak Mushroom Lookalike (<i>Armillaria tabescens</i>)
ō	4.40%	Giant.	<i>Ō-koshō-iguchi</i> : Giant Pepper Bolete (<i>Chalciporus piperatoides</i>)
yama	4.19%	Mountain. Often refers to mushrooms that are found in mountainous regions or deep forests.	<i>Yama-bushi-take</i> : Mountain Hermit Mushroom (<i>Hericium erinaceus</i>)
kuro	4.17%	Black.	<i>Kuro-rappa-take</i> : Black Trumpet Mushroom (<i>Craterellus cornucopioides</i>)
usu	4.11%	Thin (of fruiting bodies) or light (or colors).	<i>Usu-take</i> : Thin Mushroom (<i>Turbinellus floccosus</i>)
aka	3.60%	Red.	<i>Aka-momi-take</i> : Red Fir Mushroom (<i>Lactarius laeticolor</i>)
ashi	3.37%	Foot. Often paired with color words to describe the color of the base of a mushroom's stem.	<i>Name-ashi-take</i> : Slimy Foot Mushroom (<i>Mycena epipterygia</i>)
iguchi	3.31%	Bolete (literally "boar's mouth").	<i>Yama-iguchi</i> : Mountain Bolete (<i>Leccinum scabrum</i>)
tsubu	3.04%	Grain. Often used to describe mushrooms with fine granules on part of the fruiting body.	<i>Tsubu-no-e-ura-beni-iguchi</i> : Grain Stem Underside Crimson Bolete (<i>Boletus granulopunctatus</i>)
hatsu	2.95%	First. Usually refers to milkcaps which resemble <i>Lactarius lividatus</i> , or <i>hatsutake</i> (literally, "first mushroom").	<i>Kuro-hatsu</i> : Black First (<i>Russula nigricans</i>)

Wamei for Taxonomy

In Japanese, most commonly known species of mushrooms have *wamei* assigned to them, but there are also *wamei* for the various ranks of taxonomic classification: genus, family, order, class, division, kingdom, and domain. These names are generally chosen based on a “representative mushroom” for each rank.¹

For example, *anzu-take* (*Cantharellus anzutake*) is the quintessential Japanese chanterelle, and it thus came to be the representative mushroom for the mushroom’s genus *Cantharellus*. Thus, the *wamei* referring to *Cantharellus* is *anzu-take-zoku*, where “zoku” means “genus.” For similar reasons, the family, *Cantharellaceae*, is called *anzu-take-ka*, where “ka” means “family.”

The full list of primary ranks for anzu-take are as follows:

Rank Type	Name	Wamei	Literal Translation
Species	<i>C. anzutake</i>	アンズタケ <i>anzu-take</i>	“Apricot mushroom”
Genus	<i>Cantharellus</i>	アンズタケ属 <i>anzu-take-zoku</i>	“Anzu-take Genus”
Family	<i>Cantharellaceae</i>	アンズタケ科 <i>anzu-take-ka</i>	“Anzu-take Family”
Order	<i>Cantharellales</i>	アンズタケ目 <i>anzu-take-moku</i>	“Anzu-take Order”

¹ Note that the “representative *wamei* species” for a genus can differ from the taxonomic “type species” for that genus. For example, the Japanese name for the *Amanita* genus, *tengu-take-zoku*, derives from the *wamei* for *Amanita pantherina* (the “panther cap”). However, the type species for the *Amanita* genus is *Amanita muscaria* (the “fly agaric”).

Rank Type	Name	Wamei	Literal Translation
Class	<i>Agaricomycetes</i>	ハラタケ綱 <i>haratake-mō</i>	“Hara-take Class” (<i>Hara-take</i> refers specifically to <i>Agaricus campestris</i> , or broadly to agaric mushrooms)
Division	<i>Basidiomycota</i>	担子菌門 <i>tanshikin-mon</i>	“Basidium Fungus Division” (the kanji for “basidium” could also be translated as “holder,” referring to the fact that basidia hold spores)
Kingdom	<i>Fungi</i>	菌界 <i>kin-kai</i>	“Fungus Kingdom”
Domain	<i>Eukaryota</i>	真核生物 <i>shinkaku-seibutsu</i>	“True Nucleus Creatures”

Secondary ranks such as sub-species, sub-genus, etc. often have assigned *wamei* as well.

What’s a Shimeji?

One thing that I’ve been asked a few times is what a “shimeji” actually refers to. This word comes up a lot when discussing Japanese mushrooms, so I thought it would be helpful to define it here.

From the Japanese for “damp soil” (shimeji, 湿地). An alternative etymology states that shimeji originally meant “taking over the ground” (shimeji, 占地).

Pronunciation

shee-meh-jee

Definition

1. An abbreviated name for the edible mushroom *buna-shimeji* (*Hypsizygus tessellatus*).
2. An abbreviated name for the edible mushroom *hon-shimeji* (*Lyophyllum shimeji*).
3. Any one of hundreds of species of mushrooms with “shimeji” as part of their Japanese common name. Although many shimeji are in related taxonomic groups, in fact, there are shimeji throughout the gilled mushrooms, including both edible and poisonous mushrooms. They are loosely connected by their appearance; shimeji are often—but not always—stout mushrooms of medium size, ringless, sporting thick stems and thick caps with diameters only a bit more than their stems. The word “tricholomatoid” is somewhat close to meaning the same thing in English. Some examples of shimeji species are:
 - *Murasaki-shimeji* (“purple shimeji”): *Lepista nuda*, a.k.a. “blewit”
 - *Kaki-shimeji* (“oyster shimeji”): *Tricholoma ustale*, a.k.a. “the burnt knight” (toxic!)
 - *Hatake-shimeji* (“field shimeji”): *Lyophyllum decastes*, a.k.a. “fried chicken mushroom”

Mushroom Mame-Chishiki

A large percentage of Japanese mushroom names end in *-take*, but occasionally you will see this written and pronounced as *-dake*, especially for certain mushrooms: e.g., *tamago-dake*, *enokidake*, etc. This isn't a mistake. It's an alternative variant which is common in certain regional dialects.

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- *Sakura-shimeji* (“cherry blossom shimeji”): *Hygrophorus russula*, a.k.a. “pinkmottle woodwax”

As well as a few taxonomic groupings:

- *Shimeji-ka* (“shimeji family”): *Lyophyllaceae*
- *Ki-shimeji-ka* (“yellow shimeji family”): *Tricholomataceae*
- *Ippon-shimeji-ka* (“solitary shimeji family”): *Entolomataceae*

The next section includes several mushrooms with “shimeji” in their names. As you read through them, see if you can develop a mental image for what is or isn’t a “shimeji.”

Selected Mushroom *Wamei* and Their Meanings

Below, I have listed the *wamei* for several hundred mushrooms along with their literal translations. For many, where it is not obvious from their appearance or growth environment, I have added additional information about the probable etymology of the name.

The mushrooms listed below are only a very small selection (about 10%) of all of the Japanese mushrooms with *wamei*. They don’t necessarily reflect the most common mushrooms; some of them are quite rare. I’ve tried to pick the ones that have the most interesting *wamei*, while also trying to include some of the most well-known mushrooms in which readers might be interested.

I would have loved to include photos of all of the mushrooms in the list, but space constraints and image copyrights made that difficult. For maximum enjoyment, I recommend searching for images of any of the mushrooms that sound interesting and comparing them to the names.

Scientific Name	Wamei	Literal Translation
<i>Abundisporus fuscopurpureus</i>	クロブドウタケ <i>kuro-budō-take</i>	Black Grape Mushroom
<i>Agaricus bisporus</i>	ツクリタケ <i>tsukuri-take</i>	Cultivated Mushroom. Often simply referred to by the Japanese pronunciation of "mushroom": <i>masshuruumu</i> (マッシュルーム).
<i>Agaricus campestris</i>	ハラタケ <i>hara-take</i>	Field Mushroom
<i>Agrocybe farinacea</i>	ツバナシフミヅキタケ <i>tsuba-nashi-fumizuki-take</i>	Ringless July Mushroom
<i>Agrocybe praecox</i>	フミヅキタケ <i>fumizuki-take</i>	July Mushroom
<i>Albatrellus confluens</i>	ニンギョウタケ <i>ningyō-take</i>	Doll Mushroom. From the resemblance of the white, wavy fruiting body to a doll's sleeves fluttering as it dances.
<i>Albatrellus dispansus</i>	コウモリタケ <i>kōmori-take</i>	Bat Mushroom. From the mushroom's resemblance to a roost of bats, or to the wings of multiple bats in flight.
<i>Aleuria aurantia</i>	ヒロロチャワンタケ <i>hiiro-chawan-take</i>	Scarlet Teacup Mushroom
<i>Aleurina imaii</i>	オリーブサラタケ <i>oribu-sara-take</i>	Olive Dish Mushroom
<i>Alloclavaria purpurea</i>	ムラサキナギナタタケ <i>murasaki-naginata-take</i>	Purple Naginata Mushroom. See <i>Clavulinopsis fusiformis</i> .
<i>Amanita caesareoides</i>	タマゴタケ <i>tamago-take</i>	Egg Mushroom. From the egg-like appearance of the cap within the volva in young specimens.

Scientific Name	Wamei	Literal Translation
<i>Amanita excelsa</i>	ヘビキノコ <i>hebi-kinoko</i>	Snake Mushroom. From the resemblance of its cap and stem to snake scales; alternatively, from an association between toxic mushrooms and poisonous snakes.
<i>Amanita ibotengutake</i>	イボテングタケ <i>ibo-tengu-take</i>	Warted Tengu Mushroom
<i>Amanita muscaria</i>	ベニテングタケ <i>beni-tengu-take</i>	Crimson Tengu Mushroom
<i>Amanita orientigemmata</i>	ウスキテングタケ <i>usu-ki-tengu-take</i>	Light Yellow Tengu Mushroom
<i>Amanita pantherina</i>	テングタケ <i>tengu-take</i>	Tengu Mushroom. See “All About <i>Amanita ibotengutake</i> ” in the Essays section for more information.
<i>Amanita phalloides</i>	タマゴテングタケ <i>tamago-tengu-take</i>	Egg Tengu Mushroom
<i>Amanita vaginata</i>	ツルタケ <i>tsuru-take</i>	Crane Mushroom. From the long, thin stem, resembling a crane’s legs.
<i>Amanita virgineoides</i>	シロオニタケ <i>shiro-oni-take</i>	White Oni Mushroom. From the resemblance of the spiky volval remnants on the cap’s surface to an oni’s horns, or to the spiked club that the demons carry.
<i>Amanita virosa</i>	ドクツルタケ <i>doku-tsuru-take</i>	Poison Crane Mushroom. See <i>Amanita vaginata</i> .
<i>Ampulloclitocybe clavipes</i>	ホテイシメジ <i>hotei-shimeji</i>	Fat Buddha (Budai) Shimeji. From the resemblance of the mushroom’s plump base to Fat Buddha’s belly.
<i>Antrodia heteromorpha</i>	ヒメシロアミタケ <i>hime-shiro-ami-take</i>	Princess White Net Mushroom
<i>Armillaria mellea</i> subsp. <i>nipponica</i>	ナラタケ <i>nara-take</i>	Oak Mushroom