Group 3 Japanese Food and Culture

Summary

Japanese cuisine is a major aspect of Japanese culture. Developing over many centuries, Japanese cuisine reflects its geography and interactions with nearby countries - while rice and sake were borrowed from surrounding cultures, Japanese people also used the vast supply of seafood around them to shape their culture and food identity. Within Japan, food plays a large role in traditional celebrations and customs, and in connecting past traditions with the present. Food such as Mochi, a Japanese rice cake made of pounded and steamed glutinous rice, is one example of how food holds symbolic meaning to the people of Japan. Many holidays, such as The New Year, are steeped with special processes involving food. Japanese culture also relies on its cuisine to create social norms and customs – in Japan, a person is judged not only on what they eat, but also on how their food looks and in what process they eat it. In particular, the contents of a bento box, the Japanese version of a lunch box, are strictly judged based on appearance and preparation, and is thought to indicate the type of household that a mother runs.

Japanese cuisine, as it became more popular in the rest of the world, also had a large effect on other cultures. The globalization of sushi, for example, created new cultural norms and industries in countries such as America. The globalization of sushi has also greatly impacted environments and economies outside of Japan. The fishing industry in particular has had to undergo many changes since the increased popularity of Japanese cuisine, and global fish stocks are in danger of being depleted dramatically.

In this wiki space, our group further expands on these aspects of Japanese culture, and demonstrates the huge impact that cuisine has had both within and outside the borders of Japan.

History of Japanese Cuisine

Japanese cuisine has a long history of its traditions and customs. Before discussing traditional Japanese foods, dishes and etiquette, it is essential to at least slightly cover the history of Japanese cuisine. Throughout history, Japanese cuisine has consistently featured three main foods - rice, sake, and fish. The incorporation of each of these foods into Japanese cuisine was influenced by both nearby lands and geographical features within Japan.

According to The History and Culture of Japanese Food (Kegan 2001: 22), rice did not originate in Japan. In fact, it was traced by Chinese scholars, who later asserted that it was first originated in China, and then brought to Japan. (Kegan 2001: 21). There are many theories how rice cultivation was transmitted from Yangtze delta area in China to southern Korea and Japan. However, all of these theories state that rice was brought from southern Korea and was then grown in Japan. (Kegan 2001: 22).

Japanese people particularly preferred Japonica rice type, which after cooking has a sticky texture. There were three methods of rice cooking in Japan, which were used in different periods of Japanese history. In the later part of the seventeenth century, it was considered tastier to consume white, well-polished, rice, which lacked of vitamin B1. Overall, most traditional supplementary foods of the Japanese diet provided very little of it. This caused several diseases known as ‘the Edo sickness.’ (Kegan 2001: 31). It became clear that rice had been “the staple food,” and was quantitatively the most important food of the Japanese diet. (Ohruki-Tierny 1993: 4).

The specific cultivars of Japanese Rice (Oryza sativa L.) that are strictly used for the brewing of sake represent a unique and traditional group. Analysis of variance tests showed that sake-brewing cultivars originated monophyletically in the western regions of Japan (Hashimoto 2004: ). According to Chinese historical chronicles, liquor was from chewed rice during seventh century in northern Asia from where it traveled to southern end of Kyushu, in Japan, in the early eighth century (Kegan 2001: 33). Alcohol was being brewed with spores, koji, in China around the time that rice cultivation was brought to Japan. It is only natural to conclude that brewed sake, which stands with the staple of boiled rice as one of the main forms of processed rice, was introduced to Japan along with wet rice cultivation. (Kegan 2001: 33). Chinese liquor is often made from combination of two or more grains. In Korea drinks with rice are made with wheat koji. Thus completely pure rice liquor, made from rice using rice koji is made only in Japan. Eventually, about 15 types of sake were made at the Japanese court in the tenth century [Kato 1987][Kegan 2001: 34].

Along with rice cooking and alcohol brewing, Japanese cuisine also featured many fish fermentation techniques. As well as brewing alcohol, Japan applied their own customs of fermented foods. For example, a Japanese fermented fish product, katsubushi, is processed by repeated fermentation steps using molds belonging to the genus Aspergillus (Hasseltine 1983: 12). Another variation of fermented fish, known in Japan as narezushi, is also believed to be originated in Mekong River basin of Indochina and thence to have transmitted to China, from where it was introduced to Japan (Ishige 1993: ). Narezushi is made by packing salted fish and boiled rice in sealed jar for a long period which forms as the rice ferments, moreover, in narezushi fish can be kept for a year or more. (Kegan 2001: 42). From various Japanese records dating from early eight century, it is known that narezushi was made much more often with freshwater fish than with marine fish. It seems fair to conclude that narezushi carries rather strong traces of rice-field fishery (Kegan 2001: 42).

Traditional-Celebration Food

Japanese cuisine plays a significant part in maintaining Japan's traditions and customs, and often functions as culinary symbolism in Japanese culture. Symbolization of food and drinks become more evident especially during traditional holidays and ceremonies as Japanese prepare their traditional dishes for the special feast. There are numbers of traditional holidays and festivals in Japan, however, the New Year is what is considered to be the most important and the most “Japanese” holiday observed today. (Loveday:1998) The New Year has been celebrated in Japan for more than thousand years while keeping its own unique customs. The special dishes served during the festival are prepared by housewives and they are filled with symbolism and traditions. During the first few days of the New Year, family and relatives gather and share the special feasts which usually consist of Osechi, Nanakusa-gayu, and mochi.

Osechi consists of various kinds of dishes that are placed in the special box called jubako and stacked in layers. Each dish has its own meanings, for example, "dried young sardines (gomame), dried herring roe (kazunoko) and black beans (kuromame) are one of the most common compositions of Osechi, and all of whose names suggest prosperity and health.” (Loveday:1998: 117) Particular dishes are prepared prior to the New Year’s day by housewives and it is usually eaten during the first three days of New Year. (Loveday: 1998)

It is also Japanese tradition to eat the seven-herb gruel (nanakusa gayu) on January seventh. According to Loveday, “It is told that on the seventh day of the first moon early emperors would descend a hill with their courtiers and collect the seven herbs of spring which were prophylactic and, when cooked with rice into gruel, freed the family from ills during the entire year.” (1998:118) Today, this is still widely practiced in Japanese household and seen as “a part of a purifying feast of earlier times as a preparation for kami (god).” (Loveday 1998:117)
Mochi is a Japanese rice cake made of pounded and steamed glutinous rice. Even though it may be eaten on non-festive occasions in modern times, “rice cake still has a ceremonious meaning for the Japanese during the New Year celebration”. (Casal;1967: 13) Today, rice cake is made mainly for decoration (eventually eaten), however, it was originally made for the offering to “the deities to seek their blessings to renew the agricultural cycle, in particular and the cosmic order in general”. (Ohnuki-tierney1993:36) This specific rice cake is called kagami mochi (mirror rice cake) and it often comes in the shape of “two large round rice cakes, one on top of the other, the top one being slightly smaller than the lower one.” (Loveday 1998:117) As the name ‘mirror’ suggests, it is believed to symbolize the going and coming years.

![Figure 1: Great Creations of Bento Food Art](http://pichaus.com/food-art-obento-box 2009: Fig. 1)

**Culture and Status of the Japanese Obento**

The bento is a staple of Japanese culture that is often associated with much of the culture of Japan. A small boxed lunch that is composed of rice and some assortment of meat and often vegetables, the bento is a staple of Japanese cuisine and is characterized by its principles of artistic beauty and precision.

Anne Allison, an anthropologist who spent time observing in Japan in the mid 1990s, illustrated the social importance of the Japanese bento box. While living in Japan, she enrolled her son in a traditional nursery school and therefore gained much experience in constructing these intricate lunches. In traditional Japanese cultures, the bento is an important aspect of a child’s schooling and introduction to Japanese society. A child must be able to finish a bento box in its entirety by the end of the lunch period. In order to ensure that her son is able to complete his bento quickly and cleanly, Japanese mothers make the lunches with only foods that their child likes, and in small, bite-sized, easily eaten pieces (Allison 1991:200). The way that a bento is created largely reflects upon the mother. In Japanese society where cleanliness and precision are emphasized, it is important that the Japanese woman prepares food in a manner that is not only aesthetically pleasing, but nutritionally sound. (Tipton 2009) The method and manner in which she constructed her child’s bento was reflective of the type of household she ran.
The bento evolved from what was a staple in preschool lunches to being a primary commodity in Japanese society. Beginning in 1939, much of Japan was war torn by WWII and forced to ration food due to shortage of supplies. The bento gained popularity during this time because of the formation of the “Rising Sun Lunch Box” or *hinomaru bento*. This consisted of a pickled plum nestled in a bed of white rice, resembled the Rising Sun flag and gave promise of better times (Reilly 2010:12). This illustration of hope and freedom helped the Japanese people endure a very long and difficult time in their history. It became a common lunch of Japanese school children nationwide. The bento progressed further from inspirational food to typical commodity of commercial society. The *ekiben*, or more literally translated as “station box lunch” (Reilly 2010:10), became a common food sold by vendors in train stations. The bento box became popular because it was a small, portable means of nutrition for those in transit. As globalization begins to effect food worldwide, the Japanese bentos adapted to the introduction of “Western” culture by involving foods like hamburgers (Ceccarini 2010:6). The bento has been able to adapt to many changes in society, including the increasing industrialization of food (Bestor 2006). Bentos are made more efficiently in factories similar to sushi, but still have not failed to maintain its elements of precision and beauty. With each change, the bento will adapt, but will not compromise its fundamentals. That is what has kept it so central to Japanese society.

Globalization of Sushi

While Japanese people have been eating sushi for centuries, Americans have only very recently begun to incorporate sushi into their diets. In the past century, Sushi has grown from being virtually unknown to being an everyday staple to many Americans. Until the mid 1900’s, Sushi was considered to be a taboo topic to Americans. In an early excerpt from *The Ladies Home Journal*, for example, Sushi is explained to be “purposely omitted” from any discussion in fear of disgusting readers (Bestor 2005: 14). Americans started to become more interested in Sushi in the 1950’s. However, at this time, magazines and recipes only offered very Americanized versions of sushi, such as cooked seafood served on toast. It wasn’t until the 1970’s, when magazines like *The New York Times* began reporting on the opening of exclusive sushi bars, that Japanese-style sushi was viewed as a desirable alternative to American foods. Today, sushi is available everywhere, from college campuses to hotdog stands at baseball games. (Bestor 2001: 83)
This sudden increase in Sushi over the past three decades is due to Japan’s emergence as “a powerful economic presence,” (Kasulis 1995: 229) and, in turn, an increase in relations between Japanese and American businessmen. As Kasulis explains, More Japanese businessmen began to travel and temporarily live in America, which supported sushi businesses in American cities even when the American public weren’t yet accustomed to sushi. In addition, American businessmen would always be treated to dinner by their hosts as part of Japanese business etiquette, which lead to Americans slowly developing a taste for Japanese cuisine.

During Japan’s sudden success as an industrialized country, many Americans started to view the country, and its people, as a superpower. In particular, Americans valued the high level of health that Japanese people seemed to have – Japanese males, for instance, lived to be about a decade older than American males. (Kasulis 1995: 229) At the time, Americans were becoming increasingly concerned with their diet – many of the baby boomers were entering the age to be concerned about high cholesterol and heart problems. Although they were accustomed to eating “power lunches,” (Kasulis 1995: 230) which consisted of raw egg and beef, many working Americans instead started to buy sushi for lunch. As more Americans started eating sushi for health reasons and acquired a taste for sushi, restaurants were able to create a “market niche” (Kasulis 1995: 230) and stay in America.

Since accepting Sushi into its culture, America has become a large aspect of the industry as well. Not only do many of their fisheries supply Japan with their Tuna, but America has also become the largest producer of Surimi, a fish paste used to make fish cakes and imitation crab in Japan. This has lead to “new definitions of quality.” (Mansfield 2003: 2) and technology in both America and Japan one day.

As Kasulis (1995:228) suggests, in order for a country to incorporate influences from other countries into their own culture, or “freely accept foreign ideas,” an idea must support people’s demands and needs and be attractive to the public. Sushi has proved to be both attractive to the American public and meet their needs and tastes – Americans have fully accepted Japanese cuisine into their culture, and have since combined with their own, whether it be by entering the sushi industry, or by incorporating Japanese cuisine with American recipes.

Japanese Cuisine’s Impact on Fishing Industry

Japanese cuisine has affected many cultures outside of its borders, specifically with the globalization of sushi and sashimi. However, in the past 50 years, these cultures have also had an increasingly important influence on Japanese cuisine. The rules and regulations enacted by the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tuna, (ICCAT) which govern the farming and harvest of Atlantic Bluefin Tuna, are only one example of how global cultures have had an influence on Japan’s food and culture.

Atlantic Bluefin have been in high demand since the 1960’s. Currently, they are one of the most expensive fish on the market – the record price for one fish is $200,000. (Bestor 2003, 84)

Marine scientists estimate that because of recent fervor over the tuna in the Tsukiji wholesale market, Atlantic Bluefin populations have been depleted by up to 90 percent worldwide. (Goldberg, 21) This destruction of the wild fish population has resulted in strict guidelines and quotas set by the ICCAT. These guidelines strongly influence change in the Japanese concept of ownership and views on aquaculture.

The common view in the United States and other countries such as Canada and Britain of the sea is that wild fish is a common resource that must be shared with everyone who wishes to use it. Before international regulation, the Japanese concept of ownership did not differentiate between land ownership and sea ownership, and Japanese communities controlled clearly defined plots of sea. These communities owned all the rights to fish and profit from these plots, just as they had the rights to harvest from their lands. Under ICCAT ruling, Atlantic Bluefin harvest is restricted to a yearly quota, and is no longer free for harvesting. (Durrenburger 1987: 516) In some over-fished areas, fishermen are allowed to take only one Atlantic Bluefin each day to reduce environmental impact. (Bestor 2001: 87).

The drastic decrease of wild Atlantic Bluefin has also lead to an increase in fish farming, and reliance on bred fish over naturally caught fish. Japanese markets initially resisted the harvesting of farmed tuna based on the belief that it was of an inferior quality. (Bestor 2001: 87) However, because of a growing global and local demand for sushi, fish farms and fish ranches in the Atlantic and in the Mediterranean Sea monitored by trained Japanese overseers are becoming more common. (Bestor 2001: 89).

Although the Japanese culture is changing and adapting to sharing the sea and using alternate forms of Atlantic Bluefin harvesting, Japanese cuisine has not suffered from the changes. Sushi, once thought to be unpalatable, is now a widely accepted food source and a staple of Japanese culture.

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