

# FLAVORS OF JAPAN: A Gastronomic Discovery

## “Japanese Food Culture Festival in NY”

By Nishimoto Keiichi

In the second week of March 2007, the first-ever Japanese food festival was held in New York, the world's information transmission base. The festival, organized by the Japanese Food Culture Festival Committee, was carried out as an event unprecedented in scale and rich in novelty and variety. It ended in great success, having captured the attention of many people, not only restaurant chefs, cooking schools, food distributors and the like, but also the media, public figures and general consumers. It also yielded impressive results in a business sense.

In this article I introduce the objectives we had in holding the festival and then outline each of its programs.

### ■ Aiming for Japanese Food to Be Mainstream Cuisine

The popularity of Japanese cuisine in the United States has changed greatly over the last 40 years. Since the “sushi boom” that took place against the backdrop of the health boom that began in the mid-1970s, the number of Japanese restaurants has increased – from about 1,000 nationwide in the 1980s to 3,000 in 1990 and more than 9,000 in 2005. But not only are there more Japanese restaurants, interest in Japanese food has begun to show signs of diversification, with words like *hamachi*, *wasabi* and *yuzu* entering the gastronomic lexicon and top American chefs enthusiastically putting Japanese ingredients to use in their dishes.

The festival presented an ideal opportunity to spread Japanese culinary culture while at the same time dispelling the *sushi* / *sashimi* stereotype of Japanese food and promoting its acceptance as mainstream cuisine, the equal of Chinese and Italian food. Our goals were also in sync with Japan's policy objective of seeing exports of Japanese agricultural and fishery products rise by three times the current level to reach ¥1 trillion by 2013.

### ■ Comprehensive, Integrated Event Jointly Managed As Trial

What is needed for Japanese food to become mainstream cuisine? Firstly, information in the United States regarding Japanese food culture is still lacking in terms of both quality and quantity. Secondly, efforts to popularize Japanese food culture have tended to be carried out in an uncoordinated and piecemeal fashion, so they could not be expected to have had a great impact.

We thus focused on the following three points in holding the festival.

Firstly, the festival was conceived as a comprehensive and integrated event, to an extent unseen before. In the second week of March, a week-long series of colorful programs, including an exhibition, a symposium, a food festa, and a restaurant week, were held across New York. By holding

these in a comprehensive and integrated manner, we succeeded in generating a big impact that would not have been possible by a single event.

Furthermore, to implement these programs, an executive committee of people drawn from both the private and public sectors, including JETRO, was set up, and by adopting a comprehensive and integrated “all-Japan” system, we were able to realize an all-encompassing management.

Secondly, each program was infused with novelty and rarity. At the exhibition, a large-scale Japan Pavilion with 38 booths was set up, which was the first of its kind (*Photo 1*). At the symposium and the food festa, three chefs were brought over from famed traditional-style restaurants of Kyoto that serve *kaiseki* cuisine, and they were joined by some of New York's own iron chefs and genius chefs. The restaurant week program was likewise a first.

Thirdly, through the event, we were able to achieve both the qualitative and quantitative dispersal of information. From the standpoint of diversification of interest in Japanese food, the exhibition was an opportunity to gather together many premium foodstuffs and food products unfamiliar to Americans. And the food festa, with its demonstrations by top Japanese and American chefs of traditional Japanese cooking techniques and ways of fusing them with local ones, facilitated the transmission of a large amount of high-quality information, including cultural background, to people from the world of business and the media, as well as general consumers.

Next, I briefly outline each program.

Photo 1

Photo: JETRO N.Y.



The Japan Pavilion, comprising 25 food and product vendors from Japan, was part of the “International Restaurant & Foodservice Show of New York” held at the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center.



## Big Japan Pavilion Set Up at International Food Show

As the core program of the festival, the Japan Pavilion, comprising 25 food and product vendors from Japan, was set up as part of the “International Restaurant & Foodservice Show of New York” held at the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center on March 4-6. Under a standardized, vivid red decorative scheme, a variety of food items were on display, garnering the interest of American visitors and the media. Among them were *wagyu* (Japanese beef), *miso* (bean paste), organic sweet strawberries, green tea, rice and *sake*, as well as some food items making their US debut such as premium *kombu* (kelp) and black vinegar. Also displayed were food-related items such as cutlery and lacquerware. Not only were 4,000 business meetings held over a three-day period in which 1,000 deals were clinched, but many results were borne that were unrelated to talking business. For example, one exhibitor who deals in *tofu* (soybean curd) had this to say: “When we heeded visitors’ opinions and altered the way we prepared our samples for tasting, such as by topping them with maple syrup, the number of people sampling our *tofu* increased. Instead of pressing people to eat things in the way the Japanese prefer them, we are able to get a real feel for the need to tailor our product to local tastes.”

## Symposium, Food Festa Showcase Japanese Food Culture’s Charm

On March 5, a Japanese Food Culture Symposium geared toward general visitors was held along with an invitation-only dinner event, namely the food festa. It was the only time during the festival period that all four main programs took place on the same day.

The symposium, held at the Japan Society, attracted 260 visitors and featured a keynote presentation by Kikkoman Corp. Chairman Mogi Yuzaburo and a panel discussion among iron chef Morimoto Masaharu, French master chef Daniel Boulud, and Japanese cuisine researcher Elizabeth Andoh. There was lively discussion about the charm of Japanese food culture, the history of popularization of Japanese food in the United States, the Japanese restaurant situation, and the outlook for the future – with some intriguing episodes introduced by the panelists.

That same evening, the “Japanese Food Festa” dinner event was held at a ballroom of the Marriott Marquis Hotel, with 458 invited guests in attendance, among them food industry people such as chefs and cooking schools as well as media people, prominent figures and celebrities. As the highlight of the program, star chefs from Japan and the United States demonstrated how they prepare sumptuous dishes using Japanese ingredients, which attendees were then able to sample. On the Japanese side, three owner-chefs of the famed Tankuma restaurants of Kyoto participated, introducing their superb cooking techniques and the spirit of *omotenashi* (a Japanese service concept that embraces hospitality, meticulous attention to detail and use of top-quality ingredients prepared with skill and integrity, while catering to individual preferences). On the US side, David Bouley, the genius French cuisine chef of New York, took to the stage to show his original creations made through

Photo 2

Photo: JETRO N.Y.



Genius French cuisine chef David Bouley of New York shows his original creations made through fusion with Japanese ingredients.

fusion with Japanese ingredients, which greatly elucidated their potential for use in cooking in the United States (Photo 2).

Invited guests have these kinds of things to say:

- \* “Traditional *kaiseki* chefs’ way of thinking about ingredients is different from that of American cooks, and we were able to witness this with our own eyes so it was very educational for us.”
- \* “As an American cuisine chef myself, Bouley’s introduction of *yuba* (sheets of dried *tofu*) and how to use it was refreshing, and I learned a lot.”
- \* “While it was a chance to learn about Japanese ingredients, it was also an occasion to hold extremely high-quality exchanges of view among those in the industry. If there’s another opportunity like this, I definitely want to participate.”

## 1st “Japanese Restaurant Week” in N.Y.

The Japanese Restaurant Week was held during the period of March 4-10 with a view to getting general consumers to gain an appreciation of Japanese food to the fullest possible extent. Media attention was high, with local TV and magazines giving it coverage since this program was the first event of its kind, with participation from 39 of New York’s Japanese restaurants. For the most part, positive responses were received from the participating restaurants, such as:

- \* “We were flooded with reservations.”
- \* “Our new customers increased.”
- \* “We definitely want this to be held again next year.”

The curtain finally closed on the week-long festival in which food industry people, media people and general consumers from different levels of society were able to get a feel for the depth and the new charm of Japanese food.

Finally, to keep alive the flame lit by this festival, JETRO wishes to continue to work closely with all those concerned with a view to enriching US consumers, contributing to the health advancement of Americans, and contributing to the promotion of understanding between Japan and the United States. **JS**

*Nishimoto Keiichi is Executive Director, JETRO New York.*