

Rice & the Japanese

By *Matsumoto Nakako*

Photos: Consumer Co-operative Kobe (right / middle right / left)
Photos: Central Union of Agricultural Co-operatives, Japan (middle left / center)

Types of Rice & Their Characteristics

Rice was first introduced to the Japanese archipelago around 10 B.C. Since then, cooked rice has been the staple food of the Japanese for more than 2,000 years. Rice, along with wheat and maize, make up the three most-heavily consumed grains in the world. There are two types of rice: Japonica rice, which is short-grained and glutinous, and Indica rice, which is long-grained and not so glutinous. The former is produced in Japan, northern China and the State of California in the United States, while the latter is produced in South Asia, southern China, Europe and other parts of the world. However, 90% of the production of both types of rice is in the tropical and temperate zones of Asia, where rice is the staple food.

The Japonica species can be divided into non-glutinous and glutinous types. The Japanese eat the former in their everyday diet, and the latter on festive occasions, when rice is cooked with red *azuki* beans to make "red rice." It is believed that they cook "red rice" because in ancient times, such rice was used in rituals and this gave rise to the custom of coloring rice red on festive occasions. Glutinous rice, which is called "*mochi-gome*" (rice-cake rice) in Japanese, is steamed and pounded in a wooden mortar to make rice cakes. The Japanese traditionally use rice cakes to celebrate the New Year.

In terms of nutrition, rice protein is superior to wheat protein. When rice is cooked, its water content is as high as 65%, which is almost twice as high as that of bread. In terms of taste, a characteristic of rice is that it does not require animal protein or fat to accompany it and that it is tasty if it is accompanied with a little bit of a salty side dish, such as pickled vegetables. Moreover, since water content accounts for more than 50% of rice, there is no worry that eating rice will make one fat, even if eaten to one's heart's content. Because of this healthful feature, rice dishes,

including *sushi*, have been widely accepted around the world.

Today, the Japanese consume an average of 300 grams of rice a day. Up to the 1930s, the average daily rice consumption was 600 grams. It is well known that as the economy grows, choice of food shifts from carbohydrates (grains, potatoes, etc.) to proteins (eggs, meat, etc.). In Japan also, people ate very little fish and other food rich in protein before the country began its high economic growth in the 1960s. They took necessary calories and proteins mainly from rice. The pattern of their diet then was rice, *miso* (soybean paste) soup and pickled vegetables for breakfast and these plus a fish dish for supper.

The side dish was there to make rice tastier so that one could eat more of it.



Tastiness of Rice

It is fortunate for the Japanese that they have made rice their staple food as it is excellent in terms of both nutrition and taste. However, growing rice is back-breaking labor. In addition, it has often happened that just when rice was ready for harvesting, typhoons would hit and destroy the crop overnight. Japanese philosopher Watsuji Tetsuro pointed out that their experience with rice growing formed a national characteristic of the Japanese: "very industrious but quick to forget (their misfortunes)."

Rice has doubtless been the staple food for many Japanese. However, since the Japanese archipelago is mountainous, it is impossible in some regions to grow rice as it requires a great deal of water. In these regions, the staple food was barley or wheat. For the Japanese, however, there was no comparison between the tastiness of rice and that of barley or wheat. It is said that in mountain villages, where people were unable to eat rice, the family or

friends of a person on his/her death bed would put rice grains in a bamboo tube and shake them at the ear of the dying person so that he/she could hear the sound of rice. It was only around the time of the Tokyo Olympics (1964) that all Japanese were able to eat rice without worrying about their finances.

Today, as rice consumption has declined, some people worry that the Japanese may be abandoning their rice-based diet. But a drop in consumption does not mean the Japanese like rice less. It simply means that in this age of satiation, in which people eat dairy products, meat, bread and sweets in addition to rice, they do not have as much room to eat rice as they used to. During my research on emergency provisions to prepare for earthquakes, a group of young people and I spent two whole days only on hardtack (dry biscuits) and water. When this experiment was over, I asked the young people what they wanted to eat then. Without an exception, they replied that they wanted rice. This shows that even among the young people whose diet includes a great deal of Western dishes, there is a very strong preference for rice. Thus, it is very unlikely that the Japanese will drop their taste for rice even in the future.

How to Cook Rice

In Japan, rice is also referred as "*gin-shari*." *Shari* means fragments of a bone of Buddha, while *gin* means silver. Even today, the Japanese want tasty rice. Hence, they are very particular about their rice and purchase different brands of rice or rice grown in certain regions depending on their preferences.

To cook rice, first it has to be washed and then soaked in cold water for some 30 minutes. It should be cooked on low heat at the beginning and when it begins to boil, it should be brought to a rolling boil. When the water is about to be absorbed more or less completely, the heat should be reduced to a very low level so that the

rice will not be scorched. Japanese mothers teach this process by saying, "Start on low heat, turn the heat up high at the middle and don't remove the lid even if the baby cries (from hunger)." During the 40 minutes or so of cooking rice, it is absolutely forbidden to remove the lid from the pot. Since it is not possible to see the inside of the pot, it is extremely difficult to cook rice properly. In the past, Japanese mothers had to get up one hour ahead of their families to cook rice for breakfast. Today, most families use automatic electric rice-cookers. These cookers are designed to follow the traditional cooking method. Now, not a few people readily pay a great deal of money on an expensive rice-cooker when a new model hits the market.

Usually, a meal consists of plain cooked rice with a number of side dishes. Sometimes, however, rice is put in a large bowl with various toppings. These dishes include "tekkadon" (tekkā meaning red-hot iron and don – short for donburi – a large bowl)(see the top left photo in the previous page), which is rice topped with slices of raw tuna (sashimi), and "tendon," rice topped with tempura (see the photo, top middle left). On other occasions, rice is cooked with in-season vegetables, fish, etc. to enjoy seasonal tastes, or cooked in a Chinese or Western style. By adopting Western-style dishes, the Japanese enjoy rice in numerous ways.

Rice Dishes

1. Onigiri (rice balls)

Put a little bit of *ume-boshi* (pickled Japanese plums), grilled salted salmon, etc. in the center of about a



Photo: Consumer Co-operative Kobe

cup of cooked rice, and hold and press the rice lightly in both hands into a ball. Wrap it in a sheet of dried *nori* (laver seaweed). Rice balls, convenient to carry anywhere, are a Japanese favorite.

2. Rice with raw eggs

Stir together raw eggs and add a little bit of soy sauce. Pour the eggs generously onto piping-hot rice. The slippery texture of the raw eggs is very tasty.

3. Sushi

Mix rice-vinegar (to which a little salt is added) with piping-hot rice to make *sushi* rice, which is used for many types of *sushi*.

Hand-rolled sushi

Scoop some *sushi* rice in one hand, press lightly, put a dab of grated *wasabi* (Japanese horseradish) on the rice and top it with a piece of raw fish, etc. This is the type of *sushi* most-favored by most Japanese.



Photo: Central Union of Agricultural Co-operatives, Japan

Rolled sushi

Spread *sushi* rice on a sheet of dried *nori* leaving some space on the far end. Put horizontally at the center of the rice long pieces of Japanese omelet and cooked wild honewort, *shiitake* mushrooms, etc. and roll the whole thing into a cylinder. Cut it into sections 2-3cm in thickness. This *sushi* is good also for children.



Photo: Consumer Co-operative Kobe

Chirashi-zushi (mixed sushi)

Mix cooked carrots, snow-peas, *shiitake* mushrooms, Japanese omelet, etc., all cut into small strips, with *sushi* rice and decorate the top with these ingredients and pieces of raw tuna, raw abalone, etc. This is a beautiful dish to look at, and good to eat, too.



Photo: Consumer Co-operative Kobe

4. Takikomi-gohan (rice cooked with chicken, vegetables, etc.)

Chicken, vegetables and other ingredients are seasoned and cooked with rice. There are seasonal favorites, such as bamboo-shoot rice in spring, chestnut rice in autumn and other rice dishes with season's vegetables.



Photo: Central Union of Agricultural Co-operatives, Japan

5. Fried rice

Fry cooked rice in a little oil together with finely scrambled eggs, small pieces of ham, leek, etc. This is a Chinese dish that has become a Japanese favorite and is eaten quite often.



Photo: Consumer Co-operative Kobe

6. Pilaf

A Turkish dish in which rice is sauteed in butter, mixed with ham, shrimps, onions, etc. (all in small pieces) and then cooked in liquid. The use of Indica rice is becoming popular for this dish.



Photo: Consumer Co-operative Kobe

7. Curried rice

Stewed meat and vegetables seasoned with "curry powder" are put on cooked rice and eaten together. This was originally an Indian dish, but reached Japan via Britain. The Japanese love this dish.



Photo: Consumer Co-operative Kobe

8. Chicken rice

Sauteed cooked rice in butter, mix it with sauteed chicken, onions, etc. (cut into small pieces) and season it with tomato ketchup. This is a Western-style dish of Japanese origin. Having eaten it since childhood, all Japanese like this dish. Sometimes, chicken rice is wrapped in eggs cooked to form a thin crepe.



Photo: Consumer Co-operative Kobe

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