

# Yakumi : Spice Complimenting Japanese Food

By Nakako MATSUMOTO

Photos: Consumer Co-operative Kobe

## About Spices

Spices add flavor, fragrance and color to food and cuisine with their strong aromas, pungent savors and colors. Some types of spices also act as preservatives. The hunting tribes who lived on meat made a great deal of effort to preserve it by salting, drying, smoking and other means. Spice was a necessity to remove the smell of meat of wild animals and birds and to prevent salted meat from going bad. Toward the end of the 15th century, Christopher Columbus set sail from Spain, and in the 16th century, Ferdinand Magellan became the first person to sail around the world. In both cases, the major objective of the voyage was to obtain pepper from India, Sumatra and Java; cinnamon from Sri Lanka; cloves from the Moluccas (the Spice Islands) or nutmeg from the Banda Islands. The first encounter between Japan and Europe was not unrelated to spice, either. Having opened the Age of Exploration, spice occupied an important place in world history. However, I need not write in detail how spices are used in America and Europe. Here, I will write about Japanese spices.

## Japanese Spices

Japanese people did not eat much animal meat as the country was blessed with abundant fresh food and also because Buddhism, adverse to eating animal meat, was introduced. As a result, spices used often in Japan were those that went well with fish, such as *karashi* (Japanese mustard), *wasabi* (green Japanese horseradish), ginger, red pepper and *sansho* (Japanese pepper).

The Japanese did not use many varieties of spices. Following the Meiji Restoration (1868), the government adopted an astoundingly rapid Westernization policy, aiming at attaining Western levels as quickly as possible. In



Shiso and daikon

Ginger and negi



Sansho

Myoga

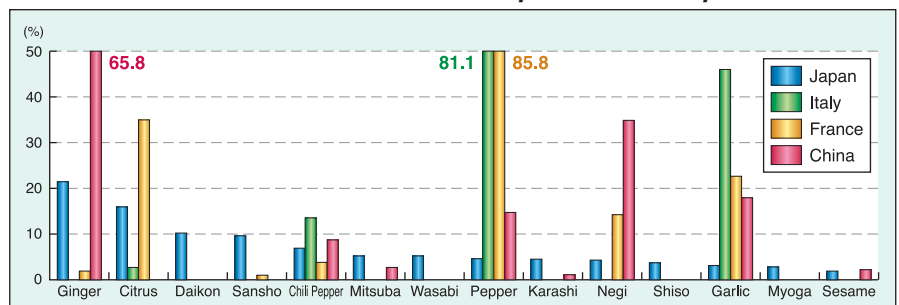
agriculture, the government's policy emphasized the introduction of Western seeds and seedlings, and farming techniques. For spices, the Japanese government introduced seeds and seedlings of bell peppers, parsley, mustard, sage, chervil, thyme, coriander, watercress, horseradish and sweet basil. In those days, however, these spices had nothing to do with the diet of Japanese people. They were grown but did not sell well. Since they brought little profit to farmers, there arose a fierce movement against them and the government was forced to withdraw its policy. With the

country's opening to the outside world and the introduction of Western culture and customs, the Japanese began to eat beef, but only if it was cooked in Japanese style and seasoned with soy sauce. Since they did not accept beef as a Western dish, they did not use Western spices.

As Japan achieved high economic growth in the 1950s and 1960s, the Japanese rapidly picked up the custom of eating "Western" foods, such as meat, eggs and milk. The knowledge of spices came along with them. Women dreamed of buying a set of spices, and having a spice rack became a fad. It was only then that the Japanese became familiar with the names of the spices that had been introduced earlier in the Meiji period (1868-1912). They also acquired a taste for these spices through meals in restaurants.

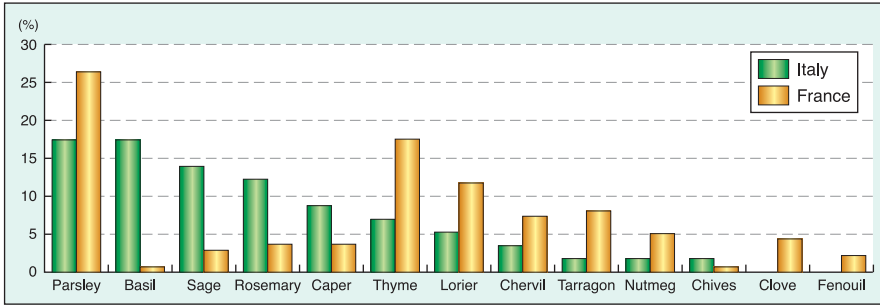
The spice most liked and used in Japan since its introduction in the Meiji era is curry powder made by mixing several spices. It has its origin in India, but in the 18th century, it began to be produced commercially after being adapted to the palate of English people. It was brought to Japan in the early Meiji period. Over the next 100 years, it developed into Japanese-style curry. Today, "curry rice" is the most popular school-lunch dish among elementary school children.

Chart 1 The frequency of references to spices in Japanese, Italian, French & Chinese cookbooks published in Japan



Source : Data compiled by author

Chart 2 Spices referred to only in Italian & French cookbooks



Note : Of spices mentioned in both cookbooks, the 13 most frequently cited spices are listed (except for garlic and pepper).

Source : Data compiled by author

### Types of Spices

Before describing how Japanese spices are used, let me first touch upon the types of spices used in Japan. Chart 1 shows the frequency of references to different spices in Japanese, Italian, French and Chinese cookbooks published in Japan for the general public. Chart 2 shows the spices that appeared exclusively in Italian and French cookbooks. Needless to say, European cuisine uses a wealth of spices.

More importantly, however, these charts show that the kinds of spices used in Japan and Europe are completely different. For that matter, spices used in Italy and France cannot be called similar, either. Of the spices brought to Japan from Europe, the spice that is used most often in Japan is pepper. Even so, the extent to which it is used in Japan stands no comparison with the heavy consumption in Italian or French cooking. Frequently used in addition to ginger, *wasabi*, *karashi*, red pepper and other spices are vegetables with pungent tastes or strong fragrances, such as *daikon* (Japanese radish), *negi* (Japanese leek), *shiso* (Japanese basil) and *mitsuba* (honeywort, see the extreme left photo in the title portion). These are all called *yakumi* (condiments). They are different from Western spices as most of them are used in fresh form while Western spices are often used in dry condition.

While Western spices are used during the cooking process, Japanese spices are often used as final condiments or table spices. In Japan, spices and spicy vegetables are served with food arranged on a plate or in a bowl to complement the taste and fragrance of the dish to whet the appetite. For example, tiny pieces of chopped Japanese leek are added to soy-

bean paste soup seconds before it is removed from heat, and *shichimi* (seven-taste) red pepper is sprinkled in it at the table. When *soba* (buckwheat noodle) is served, tiny strips of dried seaweed are sprinkled on the noodle while its sauce is served with chopped Japanese leek, grated *wasabi* and grated Japanese radish.



Soba with yakumi

The Japanese *yakumi* not only adds flavor and fragrance to the dish, but it is also expected to represent the season and please the eyes. It is an integral part of food for guests and of food served in traditional Japanese restaurants. Constituting typical *yakumi* are leaves of *sansho* trees and peels of *yuzu* (citrus junos).



Yuzu

Young *sansho* leaves (from spring through summer) and finely sliced *yuzu* peels (from autumn through winter) are arranged in a tiny cone shape at the center of a dish on a plate or in a bowl (see the middle left photo in the title portion). In early spring, when young buds appear on trees, *sansho* leaves are called *kinome* (leaf buds) and when the buds grow into leaves, they are called *ha-sansho* (leaf *sansho*); a different name for the same thing in a different season. In Japanese cook-

ing, spices play a role in enhancing the “sensory tastiness” of food (tastiness one savors through the senses). In Western cooking, spices were used in a different manner, originally for practical purposes such as removing the smell of or preserving food. With technology for distribution and processing developed, however, spices have come to be used mainly to enhance flavor, and it appears that herbs are often used now to decorate dishes.

### Getting Used to Spices Not Easy

As a saying goes, “Add spices to unappetizing food.” Spices are effective if used skillfully. However, when it is misused, food becomes extremely unappetizing. The combination of food ingredients or dishes with spices has developed over many years after much trial and error. In Japan, some combinations have taken root as the “just right” matches. They include those of *natto* (fermented soybeans) with *karashi*, *sashimi* (sliced raw fish) with *wasabi*, cooked mackerel with ginger, and *yu-dofu* (simmered bean curd blocks) with ginger and Japanese leek.

I have tried to use spices in making Japanese-style sweets. Since Japanese love vanilla ice cream and *bavarois* (Bavarian cream), I put vanilla in shaved ice and *kanten* (agar) jelly and tried them. While vanilla in ice cream and *bavarois* (both of which are made with milk) got top marks, shaved ice and *kanten* jelly with vanilla were disasters. It must have taken an accumulation of experiences to find out that milk and vanilla go well together. As Western dishes such as salads, hamburgers and stews have become a part of ordinary Japanese diet, most Japanese families now use mustard, pepper and *lorier* (bay leaves) as a matter of course. However, as long as the Japanese continue to eat mostly Japanese dishes, they are unlikely to use spices to the extent they are used in the West. Hence, many of the spices on the rack will remain a mere kitchen ornament for a long time to come. JS

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