

# Is the Japanese Diet a Melting Pot?

## Japan as Seen in Food Culture

By Nakako MATSUMOTO

### Present Status of the Japanese Diet

In Tokyo, you can find restaurants serving food from all around the world, including American hamburger chains and restaurants serving Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, French, Italian, German and other foods, along with Japanese restaurants serving *sushi* and *soba* (buckwheat noodles). You can also find *more-heia* (Jew's marrow), a leafy everyday vegetable from Egypt and other Arab nations, and salad made with cactus leaves. There are also restaurants whose specialties are fusion cuisine, known as "stateless" cooking in Japan. This situation may make some people wonder what the Japanese eat every day. However, this seemingly chaotic condition may be broken down as follows. 1) Traditional Japanese meals served at *ryotei* (formal Japanese-food restaurants); 2) meals taken at home, which include Western- and Chinese-style dishes as well as Japanese dishes; and 3) foreign cuisine enjoyed outside homes. Before the Japanese dietary habit settled into this pattern, the Meiji Restoration of 1868 and high economic growth after World War II served as engines of major changes in the Japanese eating habit.

The popularly held image of Japanese food is that it is cooked with fresh ingre-

dients of the season and is served exquisitely in plates or bowls that in themselves are works of arts. Particularly for meals served during the tea ceremony (*kaiseki ryori*), careful attention is paid so that they represent the season. It is said that the exquisite beauty of Japanese cuisine, which is even called 'food to eat with eyes,' comes from the esthetics of noblemen of the Heian period (794-1185), who cherished nature in their everyday lives. In addition to the healthful quality of Japanese food, the beautiful way in which it is presented has recently captured the hearts of foreign chefs and is reportedly influencing the way in which food is presented in other countries. The best example of the traditional Japanese cuisine is meals served at *ryotei*.

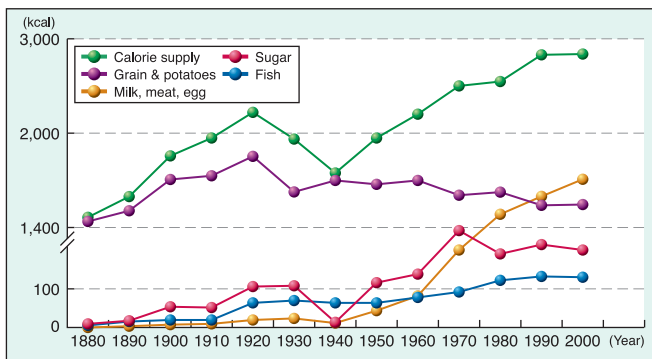
The most striking characteristic of the traditional Japanese diet is that it does not use animal meat, such as beef and pork. The aversion to animal meat comes not only from the influence of Buddhism, but also from the Japanese primitive belief that everything under the sun has a spirit and that eating animal meat would sully our body. Before every meal, the Japanese put their palms together and say, "*Itadaki-masu*" (Let me take this food). This manner expresses the Japanese sense of gratitude for receiving for sustenance the lives of living creatures, including those of plants.

its long seclusion from the rest of the world, the abstinence from animal meat that continued for more than 1,000 years came to an end. The Japanese, believing that eating beef was what "civilized" people did, came to eat beef, seasoning it with soy sauce. However, the Japanese of the time could not afford to eat animal meat in their everyday lives. The wave of westernization, which was called the "opening to civilization," also changed the format of official banquets. The elegant Japanese banquet style was discarded and a French style was adopted. Since then, it has been a custom for banquets at the Imperial Palace to toast with champagne, with guests never entertained with Japanese food or *sake*.

Japan's rapid economic growth after World War II dramatically changed the humble traditional Japanese diet. As shown in *Chart 1*, the consumption of milk, eggs and animal meat has increased dramatically since Japan's fast economic growth, and the foods the Japanese consume have changed markedly. This is why it is said that the Japanese diet has been westernized. Indeed, Western ingredients have been introduced, but at home, most Japanese cook these ingredients in a Japanese style.

*Chart 2* shows the top 20 dishes Japanese consumers cited in response to a questionnaire conducted by the *Yomiuri Shimbun* in 2008. To the question about dishes they would like to eat at home, respondents cited curried rice, *niku-jaga* (beef and potatoes cooked in soy sauce), *miso* (soybean paste) soup, *sashimi* (sliced raw fish), etc. Out of the top 20 dishes, 17 were Japanese dishes. Although it is said that the Japanese diet has been westernized, the sort of home-cooking liked by Japanese is overwhelmingly Japanese dishes. Curried rice, the top favorite, was introduced to Japan during the Meiji period (1868-1912), but it was rearranged to suit the Japanese taste bud in the following 100 years. As a dish eaten with steamed rice, it is now

Chart 1 Calorie supply per person/day



Source : Compiled by author from "Report on National Health and Nutrition Survey," Health, Labor & Welfare Ministry

### Characteristics of the Japanese Diet

It was the Meiji Restoration that broke the conventional Japanese dietary habit of eating no animal meat. When it became inevitable for Japan to accept Western civilization after

## Chart 2 Top 20 preferred dishes

Photos: Consumer Co-operative Kobe



Source : Yomiuri Shinbun Newspaper dated March 4, 2008

a part of Japanese food. *Niku-jaga*, made with beef and potatoes (both introduced to Japan during the Meiji period), is seasoned with soy sauce. By any standard, it is now an authentic Japanese dish. *Miso* soup has a history dating back 700 years, and *sashimi* is one of the oldest Japanese dishes. Thus, a combination of steamed rice, *miso* soup, fish and vegetable dishes, which the Japanese have eaten for centuries, still constitutes the basic type of meal in Japanese homes, while numerous foreign foods and dishes are eaten and enjoyed occasionally.

Let us make up a menu that consists of the dishes shown in *Chart 2*. We get, for example, a meal with steamed rice, *miso* soup with bean curds, a piece of broiled salmon, *niku-jaga* and lightly salted vegetable pickles. Recently, raw vegetable salads with soy sauce-flavor dressing have increasingly been replacing pickles, however.

### Changing Eating Manners

Not only what the Japanese eat but also their eating manners have changed dramatically. Before World War II, except for children on school excursions and some other cases, the Japanese, including toddlers, never ate on commuter trains or buses or on the street. Today, however, it is not uncommon for young people to eat their boxed lunches on the steps of railway stations or on sidewalks. The image of Audrey Hepburn eating an ice cream cone while sauntering on the streets of Rome in the Hollywood movie, "*Roman Holiday*" (1953), could be one of the factors that prompted this change. It was also around that time that Japan's first ham-

burger shop opened in Tokyo's posh Ginza district.

It is customary in Japan to celebrate the New Year with sips of *toso* (*sake* spiked with medicinal herbs) to wish for good health during the new year. Before World War II, in my family, *toso* was served to my father first, then to my younger brother, mother and me in this order. In the first New Year after World War II, when men and women began to enjoy equal rights, my father pronounced, "I have given it a good thought, but from this year let's drink *toso* starting with the oldest member of the family, then to the next oldest, and so on." Since then, the order of serving rice has also changed from the practice of "males first, females last" to one which starts with the oldest person first and the youngest person last. Every so often, I miss not a few of the old Japanese traditions that have been lost, but I remember fondly the days when the Japanese, having been liberated from the oppressive air of war years and old traditions, came to enjoy their freedom.

The adoption of foreign dishes in everyday life has also changed tableware. A family meal, consisting of steamed rice, corn soup, fried oysters and pickled vegetables, is no longer uncommon. Accordingly, some families put chopsticks, spoons and forks on the table. But it is too much bother to change from chopsticks to Western cutlery and back, and this situation is not likely to last. Also, in Japan, each family member has his or her own rice bowl, and people do not use another person's rice bowl even in the same family. The diffusion of automatic dish washers, however, has resulted in the tendency to buy identical

rice bowls for everyone. The shapes of tableware also have become less diverse. Experiments have shown that serving Western soup in a Japanese lacquer soup bowl or serving a hamburger on a plate often used for broiled fish makes the food look unappetizing. How will the use of tableware and cutlery in Japan (where Japanese, Chinese and Western tableware and cutlery are now in use) be simplified in the future? Because it has undergone such a dramatic change, the Japanese food culture is still fluid. It will be some time before the Japanese find foods, tableware and manners that they can be really comfortable with and choose to keep them.

Global warming and frequent droughts in many parts of the world are threatening the harvests of wheat and soybeans. The soaring prices of bread and *natto* (fermented soybeans), which is a part of everyday diet, have made us aware that we cannot remain complacent about our food supply. The young Japanese, who are used to having more than enough to eat and do not know a food shortage, now show interest in the Japanese self-sufficiency ratio in food. Now it is possible to bake tasty bread of rice flour. Perhaps, the Japanese food culture may change again rapidly, returning from wheat to rice and from meat to fish. It will be interesting to watch its future course.

J.S

*Nakako Matsumoto is professor emerita, Kagawa Nutrition University, where she taught from 1966 to 2006. She specializes in food acceptability and her principal themes of research have been the history of food in Japan and Japanese food preferences.*