

Interview with Setsuko Yuki, a famed food coordinator

Japanese Cuisine Changing World Food Culture

Interviewer: Yoshihiro KATAOKA



Setsuko Yuki

The world is avidly watching “Japanese cuisine.” This is what Setsuko Yuki feels every time, as a food coordinator who has successfully coordinated many popular TV cooking programs such as “*The Iron Chef*,” when she meets a foreign chef. Her feeling is growing stronger. “Our cuisine may give a new impact on the world’s food.” This expectation makes her heart leap as she busies herself on the front lines of the world’s cooking scenes. She eagerly discussed the power and possibilities of Japanese food culture in a recent interview with *Japan SPOTLIGHT*.



Japanese team at SAN SEBASTIAN GASTRONOMIKA in November 2009

Eating Raw Meat: A “Miracle”

You participated in the “San Sebastian Gastronomika” of the world’s foremost gastronomic society in Spain last November as the chairperson of an executive committee of the Japanese team.

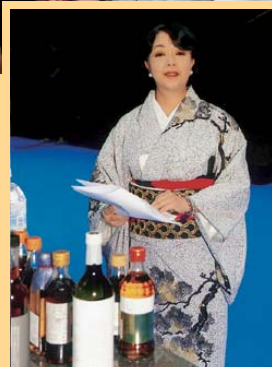
Yuki: It all came about because of the “TOKYO TASTE – The World Summit of Gastronomy 2009” that we held in Tokyo in February 2009, inviting chefs from around the world. At that summit, overseas participants were astounded to find authentic Japanese cuisine “completely different from what we see in Europe.” They invited us to the San Sebastian convention, saying, “We will set aside a Japan Day, so please come.” I participated with seven chefs from Japan and made presentations under such themes as “The secrets of *sushi*,” “Japanese *sake*” and “*Umami* and *dashi*” (flavor and stock).

Recently in Europe, there has been a negative campaign about Japanese cuisine, branding it “dangerous,” although this is hardly known in Japan. There is a difference between Japan and the West in the concept of “raw.” In the West, they serve fish no longer really fresh as “*sashimi*,” which gives rise to the fear that “it may be poisonous.” This is to say the essence of eating *sashimi* as raw food is not known there.

In an effort to make them understand proper Japanese food culture, we introduced how to prepare *sashimi* and the use of vinegar, including lectures on parasites and hygiene control. In Japan, we eat even hearts raw as meat. This is unthinkable in the West. But they are delicious. For Westerners, this is a miracle. Our booth exhibiting various Japanese foods brought by mail order from across Japan was extremely popular during the Spanish fair. There was an uninterrupted flow of people at the booth.



Yuki with Spain’s world-famous three-star chefs: Ferran Adria, Martin Berasategui and Pedro Subijana (from left)



Yuki making a presentation about Japanese cuisine

Asian Cuisine Embraces Nature

What are the characteristics of Japanese cuisine? Which elements of it are attracting the attention of foreign chefs?

Yuki: Japanese cuisine is a “culture of water,” while cuisine elsewhere belongs to a “culture of oil.” Symbolic of this may be *arai*, which washes away the oil of raw fish. Cooked Japanese rice was also very popular, but it takes Japanese water

to make it really tasty. So I tell them, “Japanese water and *sake* are fit enough to be seasonings.”



It seems incredible for foreign chefs that in Japan, food culture has been accumulated without interruption since the Asuka (592-710) and Nara (710-794) periods. *Kasutera* (sponge cake) and *tempura* (deep-fried food) originally were introduced from Europe, but they have been adapted to the Japanese style of cuisine and have firmly taken root.

In fact, many layers of food culture encompassing 1,400-1,500 years exist in this country. For the Japanese, it exists just like air, so we are not aware of its extraordinary splendor.

Since the olden days, Asia has a philosophy of not confronting but embracing, or following, nature and taking in food within its environs. By eating, we take in *ki (qi)* as a source of power. Its undercurrent is a combination of food we eat together and the *Zen* philosophy, both based on the theory of *Yin-Yang* (complementary opposites within a greater whole) and *Wu-Xing* (five elements). That is to say, food is not “feed,” but it is a culture with a great deal of spirituality.

Europeans have a strong interest also in this point. However, it is still perceived to be something mysterious and spiritual despite the fact that it is supported by fairly scientific evidence. It is true that there is strong resistance to it among Europeans, especially among the intellectuals. Unless we establish a firm theory of cuisine in Asia and bring it elsewhere, its essence cannot be accurately communicated.

Having said that, I must admit that the rural areas in Japan underwent rapid urbanization after World War II, and the traditional food culture passed on from generation to generation is fast disappearing. This is all the more reason that I wish to spread to the rest of the world the essence of Japanese cuisine now before it is too late.

Moment of Birth of New Art

You are working to spread Japanese cuisine abroad, financing it out of your own pocket. What makes you so devoted?

Yuki: In 2001, I went to “El Bulli” in Spain, which is said to be one of the world’s top restaurants, to enjoy dishes using froth. In Japanese cooking, froth is something we remove while we cook. The moment I put the food in my mouth, I intuitively felt, “Ah, the ‘dismantling and creation of cooking’ and ‘impressionism in food’ have begun. This chef needs Japanese cuisine.”

The birth of impressionist painting was inspired by Japanese



Yuki poses with Ferran Adria at his restaurant El Bulli in 2006

ukiyo-e. Chanel’s fashion was influenced by the two-dimensional cutting – or drafting as against draping – of Japanese *kimono*, and has developed into today’s mode. Similarly, I foresaw that the cultural accumulation of Japanese food would give energy to the creation of new cuisine.

In the 21st century, cooking will become a type of art. In fact, “El Bulli” was asked in 2007 to participate in “Documenta,” the world’s largest exhibition of modern art, held in Germany. This means that the art world has recognized that cooking is art and that chefs are artists. Chefs create a world with their concepts, and the service in restaurants plays the role of a curator, who contemplates how best to have the art appreciated by its clientele.

Japanese food is bound to have a major impact on the creation of a new form of art, which is cooking. We are witnessing a moment similar to the birth of impressionism in Western painting. I do not know where the new art of cooking is headed, but I am excited to be in the “midst” of the birth of a new art form.

Earth: Your Bread of Life

What is its implication to Japanese cuisine?

Yuki: This is an opportunity to appeal to the rest of the world for Japanese food ingredients and cuisine. When one of the world’s top chefs commented, “Japanese *yuzu (Citrus junos)* powder is good,” all the *yuzu* powder in Oita Prefecture (in western Japan) was sold out. Japanese foods are treasures. The world is waiting for them.



In April next year, an international exhibition will be held in Madrid to which Japan is invited. I want to capture this occasion to appeal for Japanese local foods such as *maguro* (tuna). Westerners respect a country with good food.

The Japanese are good at adopting various elements and fermenting them in a closed world. We forget ourselves in search of excellence in some very fine details, rather than worrying about whether or not the product will sell. Probably Japan has always been a country of *otaku* (geeks) in reality.

When they look at French food prepared by Japanese, Westerners say, “This is Japanese cuisine.” Although we do not know it, we probably have a unique sensibility which those other than Japanese absolutely cannot emulate. It’s just like Westerners are unable to imitate Japanese *manga*. This is a tremendous weapon. If we become aware of it, it will become a cultural charisma and can change the world’s cultural scene.

On the other hand, food is already on a global scale. At the World Summit of Gastronomy 2009, I was moved by the words of Jacques Puisais, an authority on wine, who said, “Hot wind from the Caribbean Sea helps grow Bordeaux wine.” Not only the soil of a winemaking region but also the air that comes across the ocean help grow supreme wine.

Today, food grown on the other side of the globe is delivered to us the following day. There is the term “local cuisine,” but now the “local” is “global.” If we can personally feel that Mother Earth supports our lives and that the globe itself is our taste, we will not be able to waste limited resources or pollute the seas or the air. In the distant future, tuna farming may begin on the moon, and we may be speaking on the phone from the moon, saying “After all, Earth-grown tuna tastes better.”

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