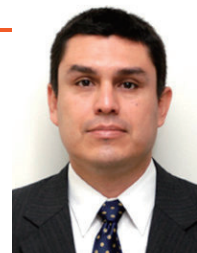


# Beyond the Table:

## Resemblance of Dishes in Japanese & Peruvian Cuisines

By Ricardo A. DIAZ



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Do you know which Japanese dishes are the most famous? This is a question I recently found in my Kanji textbook. The immediate answers coming to my mind were sushi and tempura, but in fact, the correct answers were *ramen* and curry. This was surprising to me since sushi is an emblematic Japanese food overseas, but was confirmed in reality by the remarkable quantity of *ramen* shops that can be seen in Tokyo and other Japanese cities.

Like in Japan, in Peru food is a national pride and occupies a preferential place in our daily conversations and social life. Making comparisons between Japanese and Peruvian food is one of my favorite occupations, trying to find both differences and similarities.

One of the most frequent questions I used to be asked here in Japan is *Have you got used to Japanese food?* I say *Yes* immediately. Sometimes you visit places where “rice with chicken” is literally just rice with chicken. That is when you really miss good food. The mastery of good cooks lies precisely in that they combine rice and chicken with other ingredients like beans, chili sauce and spices creating continuity for the eyes and the taste, and giving a sense of integrity and harmony, which is itself an art. Peruvian “rice with chicken,” for instance, emerges in this way with its own personality, a good example of how the whole becomes much more than the sum of its parts. A Japanese *washoku* (Japanese-style menu), in its turn, achieves this integrality as a wonderful assembly of dishes containing the fish or main plate, rice, *miso* soup, *yasai* (vegetables), and pickles.

I think that these two very traditional dishes reflect the particular values of each cuisine and culture: while in Japan, craftsmanship and exquisiteness are emphasized, Peruvian cuisine accents the natural diversity and mixture.

Whatever differences there might be between them, the

resemblances start to appear when the cuisines are looked at with a broader perspective. The first similarity I found between Japanese and Peruvian dishes refers to *sashimi* and *cebiche*. Both of them are made of raw fish, although *sashimi* is accompanied by soy sauce and wasabi, while *cebiche* goes with lemon juice (marinated raw fish) and chili. They are both relatively easy to prepare, famous in coastal areas and suitable to combine with a drink in the company of friends. Moreover, both *sashimi* and *cebiche* inspire passionate conversations regarding the selection and combination of ingredients, preparation and presentation techniques, best occasions on which to partake of them, and so on.

Peruvian *caldo de gallina* (hen soup) also resembles Japanese *ramen*. In both cases, soup, bones and other ingredients are boiled for hours so that the soup can get the mixed flavor. Then it is served with noodles in a bowl and adorned with scallions (spring onion). Late at night, after having some beers, my Japanese friend asked me to go with him to a *ramen* shop, telling me that to do this is common in Japan. This was a surprise for me because in Peru we used to do the same. It seems that both *caldo de gallina* and *ramen* help to the calm the stomach and repair the body – and the spirit – just before going to bed.

Furthermore, it is interesting to know that people looking for a *ramen* restaurant do not necessarily search for a fancy and tidy one, but often prefer an old and shabby shop. Also in Peru, we frequently prefer the more traditional restaurants where generally the cook is also the owner and the dishes are served in their original local versions without much sophistication.

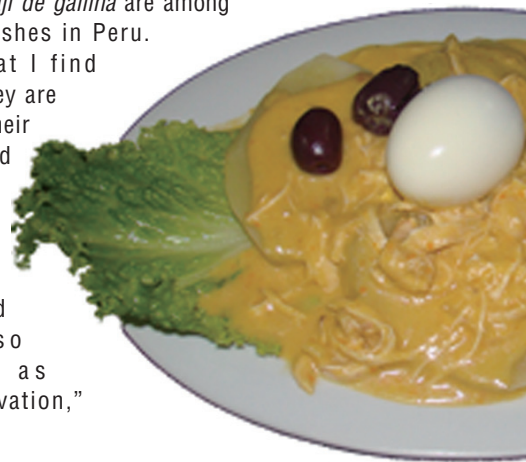
Finally, *aji de gallina* (chicken and chili) from Peru appears to me like the equivalent of *curry* in Japan. These two dishes are among the favorite ones for children, including my six-year-old daughter. Although having different origins and preparation techniques, both of them feature a heavy cream that, combined with rice, becomes easy to eat and carries a high calorie content. They can also be seasoned to become spicy in order to appeal to, and challenge, the adults’ taste.

Needless to say, like *sashimi*, *ramen* and *curry* in Japan, *cebiche*, *caldo de gallina* and *aji de gallina* are among the most famous dishes in Peru.

Nevertheless, what I find interesting is that they are similar not only in their preparation and appearance but also in their social and cultural meanings. Indeed, they carry not only nutrients and calories but also messages such as “friendship,” “renovation,”



Eating with my family (Christmas Eve). Ricardo, the author, is front left.





Home-made soup with Peruvian white corn



Photos: Author

Caldo de Gallina (Hen soup)

(Source: Web page of the City of Cajamarca <http://www.municaj.gob.pe>)

“home,” and “fun.” In fact, it is frequently said that the nutritional function of the food has been overtaken by its social function.

Food is influenced by environmental and social factors. It responds to the availability of ingredients, climate, and calorific needs, as well as to our psychological and social circumstances. The Russian writer Dostoyevsky concludes his novel *The Brothers Karamazov* by saying that having good memories from childhood and home constitutes the best education, since children will carry those memories with them and the memories will keep them from great evils in their adult life. Indeed, the experience of eating represents a good opportunity to bring back those memories again, and of course, to strengthen bonds with family and friends and create new good memories for the future.

A simple way we use to value food and eating is the rule of the three Bs: in Spanish *bueno*, *barato* and *bonito* (in English: good, inexpensive and pretty). In fact, food has to respond to the needs of the eater (nutritional and psychological), must be available and affordable, and at the same time, has to provide a sense of harmony. Some dishes, like the ones I presented above, last for years or even generations. They can have regional or temporal modifications but in general, they stay. They keep well the three Bs. Other dishes become ephemeral and are modified or forgotten, while new ones are incorporated in our tables.

We can say then that food is always under construction. Its destiny rests not only in the properties of the food itself, but comes as a result of everyday decisions made by eaters and cooks, who are always searching for new possibilities.

However, our daily decisions on food are heavily influenced by factors such as the value we put on the time for eating, our need of eating in the company of others, the roles and wisdom we acknowledge in cooks and food producers, the authorized

opinion of public leaders, and our perception of food reflecting our identity, culture and common life.

If eaters and cooks lose this important reference and influence, they are left at the mercy of conspicuous marketing and current trends converging in the commoditization of food and its functions, as well as the overload of our free time with information processing at the expense of human interaction or calm reflection, reducing in this way the role of food and eliminating the experience of eating.

Living in both Japan and Peru provides an opportunity to notice how food and cuisine are part of a broader social capital that includes the importance of family and the value of interpersonal bonds, the role of public leaders within a society, and the consideration of food and resources as part of regional and national identities. This type of consciousness is currently growing in Peru with an increased awareness of the richness of its cuisine, and it is also being revaluated in Japan after the big earthquake in the Tohoku area under the name of *kizuna*, which represents the spiritual union towards reconstruction. Preserving this capital will in the long term determine not only our physical condition and health but also our sense of enjoyment of life, relationship with nature, and mutual coexistence.

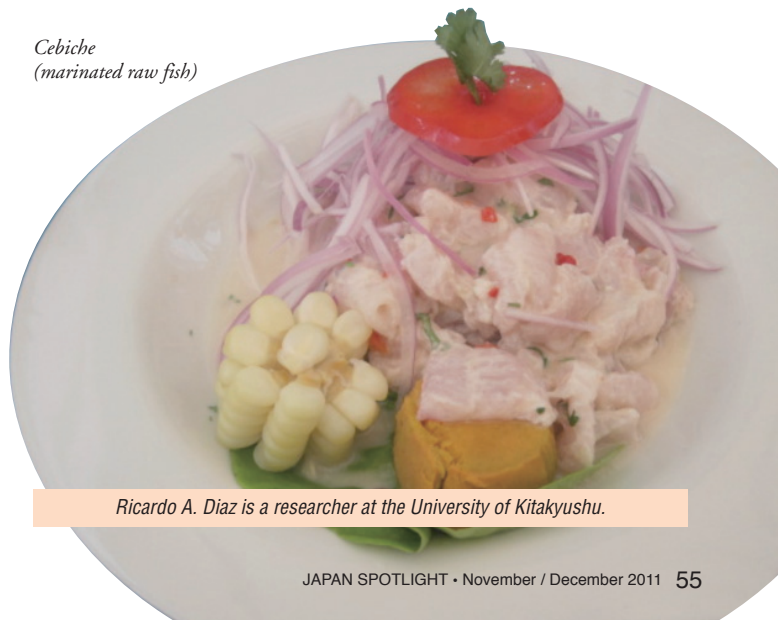
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Photo: Author

My wife Hiroko with a Pachamanca (traditional Andean food)

Cebiche (marinated raw fish)



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Aji de Gallina (Chicken and chili)

(Source: Web page of the City of Cajamarca <http://www.municaj.gob.pe>)