



konomiyaki

— A Long-Established Favorite in Japanese Cuisine

By Jei-Hee Hong



Author Jei-Hee Hong

What is *Okonomiyaki*?

Okonomiyaki is one of the most popular Japanese foods that people enjoy eating together. It is a Japanese pancake made of various ingredients. The name comes from the words *okonomi* — meaning “what you want” or “as you like” — and *yaki*, meaning “grilled”. Because it allowed people to change the ingredients according to their own taste, *okonomiyaki* became very popular all over Japan.

It is known that *okonomiyaki* is a derivative of *funoyaki* which was widely eaten in Japan in the Edo Period. Until then, people only thought of *okonomiyaki* as a side dish. However, after the 1923 Great Kanto Earthquake, people began to eat it as a main dish. As people suffered from a shortage of food, they needed something that required fewer ingredients, and *okonomiyaki* proved very suitable at that time. People started to eat it more often and it finally became the popular food that is eaten today.

It is not complicated to make *okonomiyaki*. The main ingredient is flour, which is mixed with a little bit of water before a lot of vegetables, such as cabbage, and an egg are added. Then other ingredients such as meat can be added to the batter depending on a person's preference — sliced pork is particularly popular. When all the ingredients have been mixed together, the batter is poured onto a

hot griddle, where it is grilled like a pancake, flipped once. An *okonomiyaki* sauce is then poured on top of the pancake, and mayonnaise, powdered seaweed and *katsuobushi* are added at the end. As it is simple to make, most restaurants are furnished with an iron grill, called a *teppan*, and let people make *okonomiyaki* by themselves. As it costs only around 800-1,000 yen per dish and is fun to make, *okonomiyaki* is particularly popular with young people.

Japanese people also often cook *okonomiyaki* at home. Usually when making food at home many ingredients and equipment are necessary, and this is why some foods are difficult to make. The ball-shaped *takoyaki*, for example, which contains pieces of octopus, is hard to cook at home as a special pan is needed. But for *okonomiyaki* a normal frying pan can be used, and it is also easy for people to get whatever ingredients they may want. This is the reason why many Japanese people have *okonomiyaki* parties at their home with their family and friends.

There are many varieties of *okonomiyaki*, according to the region. *Okonomiyaki* originated in the Kansai area of western Japan, where the Osaka variety is the one which most people are familiar with. Hiroshima-style *okonomiyaki*, on the other hand, is slightly different from the Osaka one: while all the ingredients may be the same, they are layered instead of being mixed altogether. The batter is grilled separately and the ingredients are put on top of the grilled batter. As

Photo: Author



Osaka-style *okonomiyaki* — cooked on a *teppan* grill with sauce, powdered seaweed and *katsuobushi* added on top.

Photo: Author



Ingredients for a “Mixed Tama” *okonomiyaki* dish — pork, prawns, squid and an egg.

this style is quite complicated to make, the restaurant staff usually do it for their customers.

Other Teppanyaki Dishes

In *okonomiyaki* restaurants people also often eat *monjayaki* and *yakisoba*. The former originated in Tsukishima in Tokyo and is a speciality of the Kanto area in the eastern part of Japan. The ingredients used for *monjayaki* are similar to those for *okonomiyaki*, but the batter is much more watery. The method of cooking *monjayaki* is slightly different as well. At first, all the ingredients except for the watery batter are grilled on a *teppan* and then arranged into a ring shape with a big hole in the middle. Then the watery batter is poured into the hole and when it becomes runny it is mixed with the grilled ingredients. *Monjayaki* can be eaten directly from the grill by using a special spatula.

Yakisoba is a noodle dish which originated in China, the name simply meaning “fried noodles”. This is also a dish that people can cook on a *teppan* by themselves. In restaurants, ingredients such as cabbage and meat are served with plain noodles. People normally fry the ingredients on the grill first and then add the noodles and a *yakisoba* sauce, stirring until the sauce is absorbed evenly. *Yakisoba* is much easier to make than *okonomiyaki* and *monjayaki* and does not take long to cook — two reasons for its enduring popularity.

Okonomiyaki & Buchimgae

Okonomiyaki can also be found in some other countries. In South Korea, for example, there are some restaurants that offer *okonomiyaki* which the staff grill in front of their customers. Korean people also often cook *okonomiyaki* at home for the same reasons as mentioned above — the wide variety of possible ingredients and the lack of need for special equipment.

Okonomiyaki is often compared with a Korean food called *buchimgae*, which is also a kind of pancake. The main ingredient of *buchimgae* is also flour, which is also mixed with water, egg and vegetables or meat. But for *buchimgae*, cabbage — the main vegetable needed for *okonomiyaki* — is not needed at all. The mixture of all the ingredients is grilled on a pan like *okonomiyaki*, and both foods are cooked in a similar shape, which is not exactly



Kimchi buchimgae (or Kimchi Jeon) — a Korean-style buchimgae pancake containing kimchi.

fixed but usually a round shape. However, there are several differences between *okonomiyaki* and *buchimgae*.

First, the sauces used for these two foods are different. *Okonomiyaki* uses a sauce which is slightly sweet and is pasted on top of the pancake, whereas there is no need to paste any sauce on top of *buchimgae*. Some people eat *buchimgae* with soy sauce but this is a personal choice. Moreover, the thickness of these two foods is different, with *okonomiyaki* normally being quite thick and *buchimgae* much thinner. The reason for making *buchimgae* as thin as possible is to make it crispy: the thinner the layer, the crispier it can be. Because of this difference the textures of the foods are different too — *buchimgae* being crispy and *okonomiyaki* soft. Perhaps these two foods say something about the characteristics of their countries.

As the world becomes more globalized, one country's food can be spread more easily and rapidly to other countries. *Okonomiyaki* is something that foreign visitors to Japan should try — a cheap and tasty example of everyday food. If it was promoted more widely overseas, it would help to give a more positive image of Japan to people around the world.

JS

Jei-Hee Hong is a 2nd-year GIGA student at the Faculty of Environment and Information Studies at Keio SFC. The GIGA Program in Japan allows students to study everything in English.