

# Food for Thought

By Ayako Sono

The Japanese life-style has undergone many changes since the end of World War II, not least of which is the change in diet.

When I was young, back before the war, my mother always prepared what would now be considered traditional Japanese meals. Fish and shellfish were our primary animal protein, chicken, pork, and beef appearing on the menu only once or twice a week. I don't remember ever eating mutton or lamb.

Though we ate very little meat, there was an abundant variety of seafood. Fish soups and pot-au-feu simmering in the middle of the dining table were favorite foods, as were clams and other kinds of shellfish prepared either alone or boiled with rice in a savory broth. We did not make much use of the bony parts or entrails of animals, but when it came to fish we would use everything down to the last scrap. The bones, head, and other parts were used to make soup stock, and we ate fish eggs and glands as great delicacies. Even the puffer with its poisonous liver was transformed into a dish of rare delicacy.

Raw vegetables were not a part of our diet. The one exception was the finely chopped cabbage with Worcestershire sauce that was always served as an accompaniment to breaded and deep-fried pork cutlets. This we considered a Western-style dish. Japanese first learned the importance of raw vegetables as a source of vitamins during the Occupation years. It is interesting to note, however, that the pendulum of custom is now swinging back and the Chinese idea that vegetables eaten raw chill the body and should therefore be cooked before eating is once again coming back into fashion.

In my day, vegetables were either boiled or pickled in rice bran. Pickling eggplants and cucumbers so that they would have just the right flavor and not discolor was always a challenge to our mothers. In the hot summer months, the pickling process took very little time, and vegetables left in the rice bran too long quickly turned sour. A good housewife was one who would get up in the middle

of the night to pickle her vegetables so that they would be just right for breakfast the next morning.

Rural Japanese have always eaten a lot of vegetables. *Natto* (fermented soybeans), *tofu*, and *okara*, a dish made of strained *tofu* lees, were inexpensive yet rich sources of protein. Seaweed was another common food eaten almost daily, and we were told that seaweed would give our hair luster. *Hijiki*, a kind of brown algae, could be gathered anywhere along the coast, dried, and preserved until being reconstituted and boiled for eating later. In the mountains, mushrooms, nuts, and fruits further supplemented the rural diet.

The highest praise that could be given to Japanese food was to say it had an unobtrusively delicate flavor. In our traditional diet, we consumed very little fat or oil. The point was to bring out the flavors of the individual ingredients, not drown them out, which makes it a wonder that we enjoy such very different foods, such as French cooking, as much as we do.

Tableware was almost as important as food in the traditional Japanese meal. When a large household decided to hold a banquet, it was not uncommon to call in an antique dealer to help in selecting just the right dishes—a practice as much of the common people as of the nobility. The antique dealer would be familiar with the many dishes and utensils the family would have in their storehouse, but at times he would urge that new dishes be bought to set off a particular food. This, of course, would only be natural, since the dealer made most of his living by selling things from his own stock, but he still had to be very careful about his recommendations since he knew he would be held responsible if the master of the house thought that the tableware was inappropriate to the food being served.

A major difference between Japanese and Western-style utensils is that while Western dishes are usually made into sets with different-sized variations on the same pattern, no two Japanese dishes

have the same pattern. In tableware, the Japanese aesthetic is for contrast and variety rather than the uniformity and orderliness prized in the West. It is also customary to consider the season and climatic conditions when selecting dishes. Traditional tableware was pottery and lacquer, but there were always dishes whose seasonal motifs meant that they could only be used at a particular time of year. The variety of tableware this custom necessitated meant that even the most lowly farming household was very likely to have its own storehouse with shelves of dishes.

Such attention to detail is gradually fading among today's young Japanese, who are just as likely to be satisfied with simple plastic utensils. Still, there remain plenty of conservative people like myself who take great pleasure from setting a table with varied, beautiful dishes.

The same variety was also sought in food, and eating the same food day after day used to be considered a sign of poverty. Neither herders nor farmers, the Japanese of old were more fishing folk than anything else. A herding people would, if they kept sheep, for example, rely heavily on mutton and lamb; and a farming people would most likely be limited in their diet to the grain or other crop they cultivated.

The traditional Japanese diet is attracting considerable attention today for its balanced nutrition, but this was the standard fare when I was young. Our ancestors ate whatever they could find, whether from mountain, field, or sea. It is very satisfying to know that this traditional diet is now serving as a model for health-minded nutritionists worldwide. In this day and age, when half the world is plagued by the ill effects of gluttony and the other half is starving, it seems fitting that more and more people are discovering, or in the case of today's young Japanese rediscovering, the value of the simple but sensible dietary habits of earlier generations of Japanese. ●

(This is the fourth of five parts.)

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