

ESSAY

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Japanese Cooking through Media

Which Japanese dish comes to your mind first? ‘Sushi’, isn’t it? We can see sushi everywhere in Poland and throughout the world. However, traditional Japanese sushi doesn’t contain any cheese or avocado. As for the sushi with banana and chocolate (I can confirm that this sushi is mainly for children because it is easy for them to eat), the taste is good to me, but it is not real Japanese sushi. I would say that is ‘global-taste sushi’. Each country has already customized ‘global-taste sushi’ to its own taste.

In the same way, in Japan, we have a lot of customized Japanese food from other countries, which has reached into every family. We can also find some foods which are very similar to Polish food in Japan.

In Poland and other European countries, the ‘cutlet’ is a typical food, known in Polish as ‘*kotlet*’. When the ‘*kotlet*’ arrived to Japan from France, it became ‘カツレツ (*katsuretsu*)’. Moreover, it was customized into ‘トンカツ (*ton-katsu*)’, which means pork-*kotlet*. A Japanese *katsu* has bigger breadcrumbs than Polish or European ones do, and the meat is thicker in Japan. It has also been developed into ‘カツ丼 (*katsu don*)’, which is *katsu* with rice, as well as ‘カツサンド (*katsu-sandwich*)’, which is a sandwich with *katsu* inside.

A popular dish in Poland is ‘*golqbk*’, which tastes almost the same as Japanese rolled-cabbage.

The Japanese-style rolled-cabbage has meat inside which has been boiled with soup stock. Japanese people often add ketchup to it. (Nowadays, Japanese people can prepare Polish-style rolled-cabbage ‘*golqbk*’ because canned boiled-tomato is sold everywhere in Japan.)

If you try them, it must taste strange to you because it has been prepared in the Japanese style. I can imagine your first impression of that rolled-cabbage with ketchup! It must be incredible!

These foods have already become popular as taste of home in Japan.

How did it become taste of home in Japan? The mass media played a big role. Magazines, TV, advertisement, the Internet and others, all contributed to spread the new foods into Japanese homes. Here are some examples of the role the media played.

In the Meiji era (1862–1912), recipe for foreign foods such as ‘オムライス (an omelet containing fried ketchup rice)’ or ‘シチュー (stew)’ in magazine were introduced in the magazines published for women, such as ‘女鑑 (*Onna Kagami*)’, ‘婦人倶楽部 (*Fujin*

Club)’ and ‘家庭雑誌 (*Katei Zasshi*)’. In this era, the standard menu for ordinary families was rice, soup and small pickled vegetables. Even in upper middle-class families, the standard menu was rice, soup, vegetables and small fish. In this era, literacy among women in Japan was quite low. That meant many women could not read the menus in the magazines. Even worse, few women could get magazines at the time. Those women who could read and obtain those magazines usually had good education thanks to their rich parents.

Also, the recipes themselves were not popular with most Japanese people.

‘コロッケ (*korokke*)’, from the French word *croquette*, is a popular Japanese food. Originally, it was served with white sauce, in the typical French style. It became a major family food as ‘potato *korokke*’ because potatoes was cheaper and more easily obtained than flour at the time. In 1917, the song ‘コロッケの唄 (*The korokke song*)’ was quite popular because the song was sung in a comedy play ‘ドッチャンダンネ (*Dokkyan Danne*)’ of ‘浅草三文オペラ (*the Asakusa Sanmon Opera Theater*)’ which was very popular in Japan at the time. The lyrics of the song go, “Today, we eat *korokke*. Tomorrow, we will eat *korokke*, too. We always eat *korokke*, after...”.¹ The song struck a chord with the public. Most people became *korokke* lovers. ‘*Korokke*’ was already counted as a Japanese food in the 1920s.

After the late 1920s, most Japanese people did not have opportunities to taste the food of other countries until 1945, in other words, the end of World War II. However, most Japanese families did not get such opportunities even until the 1960s.

The following three factors can be seen as the main reasons why food from other countries eventually spread to Japanese families.

Firstly, milk and meat became Japanese food after World War II, mainly because of the school lunch program. Secondly, the development of transportation and the increase in the number of supermarkets. Third, the spread of gas for cooking, the electric rice-cooker, and television to almost all Japanese families.

Television became a new media, replacing magazines, journals and radio. The first TV cooking program began in 1957. Its title was ‘今日の料理 (*Today’s Cooking*)’ and it is still being aired. It is still one of the most popular TV shows in Japan.

In the 1960s, the cooking programs’ recipes were prepared for 5 or 6 people, i.e. for a family usually consisting of father, mother, children and grandparents.

In the 1970s and 1980s, various types of TV cooking programs were broadcast, such as ‘The Graman Kerr Show’, which was imported by TV Tokyo from Canada International TV Ltd. in 1974, ‘キューピー 3分クッキング (*Kewpie 3-minute Cooking*)’ shown from 1963 to the present on Nihon TV, and ‘料理天国 (*Ryōri Tengoku*)’ from 1975 to 1992 on TBS.

During those two decades, TV watchers demanded quick cooking and recipes for seasonal traditional cuisine, such as traditional New Year food.

At that time, the typical recipe as broadcast was for 4 people, or the more ‘Western’ nuclear family.

TV commercials and advertisement helped to promote good sales for instant mix products. Two examples here are ‘バーモントカレー (*Vermont Curry*)’ and ‘マカロニグラタン (*Macaroni Gratin*)’. The ‘Vermont Curry’ is a solid soup mix for curry rice, and ‘Macaroni Gratin’ is a white sauce mix for gratin. Both products were produced by House Foods Ltd.

¹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aY66ixyTdZI> (accessed 30.06.2013).

Another popular product was ‘麻婆豆腐の素 (*Mapo Tofu Instant Mix*)’ by Marumiya Ltd. Since many women had jobs, people preferred quick cooking products such as the *Mapo Tofu Instant Mix*.

In the 1990s, a gourmet boom arose from comics such as ‘美味しんぼ (*Oishinbo*)’ which is published by Big Comic Splits, Shogakukan Inc., from 1983 to the present, and ‘クッキングパパ (Cooking Papa)’ which is published by Weekly Morning, Kodansha Ltd., from 1985 to the present. Also, gourmet magazines such as ‘*dancyu*’ and *PRESIDENT Inc.* started publishing in the 1990s, and they have been published continuously ever since.

In this decade, many mothers now work full-time and the nuclear family has become typical. There was no ‘cooking teacher’ like the grandmother in the family any more. Cooking in the family is not only a matter for the mother but also for the children, men and young unmarried women.

In the 1990s, more than 10 million people went abroad from Japan, and they could taste real local foods. Amateurs could learn the professional cooking methods of the local foods. This was reflected in programs such as ‘料理の鉄人 (Iron chef)’ from 1993 to 1999 on Fuji Television Network, or ‘Bistro SMAP’ from 1996 to the present on Fuji Television Network.

In the 2000s, TV cooking programs covered a diverse range of demands. For example, a TV program such as ‘今日の料理 ビギナーズ (Today’s cooking for beginners)’ on Japan Broadcasting Corporation (NHK) shows how to make soup stock without the instant soup which has been sold in supermarket. There are shows for people who want to know how to make soup from seaweed, ‘昆布’ and ‘鰹節 (*Katsuobushi*)’, how to cook soup stock. A second example, ‘男子ごはん (*Danshi Gohan*)’ on TV Tokyo, is a show about young people cooking with their friends. A third example, ‘コウケンテツが行く アジア旅ごはん (Asian Soul Food by Kō Kentetsu)’ shows a presenter visiting somewhere in the world to cook their soul food. Meanwhile, ‘すすめ! キッチン戦隊クックルン (Let’s go! COOKR’n)’ on Japan Broadcasting Corporation (NHK) is aimed at children, and intended to hook children’s interest in cooking.

In this decade, we have a new major media for cooking – the Internet! Now, we can get recipes on the internet at websites or on YouTube any time we want. Also, we can upload our own recipes onto the internet easily. It is fairly convenient. I can get recipes whenever I want. One website, Cookpad (<http://cookpad.com>), not only gives us recipes, but also information about discounts at our nearest supermarket. I use my iPad to see online recipes when I cook in my kitchen.

On the internet, we can see a new food culture. One example is ‘Chara-Ben’. The name comes from an abbreviation of the character *bento* (Japanese boxed lunch) which features food decorated to look like people, characters from popular media, animals and plants. Recently, some housewives started to post their artistic pictures of ‘Chara-Ben’ on their blogs. Many mothers copied it for their children’s lunch boxes as an expression of their warmth. The mothers thought about what kind of lunch box their children would want to eat. They might show off their own lunch boxes or their friends might check them out. Such amazing ideas for lunch boxes were already around in my childhood during the 1980s, such as the *Tako-san* Winner (a Vienna sausage shaped like an octopus) or *Usagi-san* (apple cut like rabbit). So Chara-Ben style ideas have developed for at least the last 30 years.

Now, one Japanese cooking TV show is very hot. It’s called ‘MOCO’s Kitchen’, and is broadcast on NTV. What’s new in this TV show?

‘MOCO’s Kitchen’ is on for only 3 minutes, from 7:55 to 7:58 in the morning. It is a busy time of time. There has never been a cooking program broadcast at this time before. It’s like a short movie. In this cooking program, there is no recipe and no quantities of salt or sugar, because we can see the recipe on website or cooking book that will be published later.

This surprising short morning cooking movie created an online sensation. A lot of comments were posted on Twitter at every TV showing. The audience shares their feelings against or for this cooking program. It seems like a living room conversation on Twitter. This TV program which lasts for only 3 minutes fits well with the Internet.

On the other hand, since this April, another TV cooking program has introduced Edo era (1603–1867) cooking on NHK. It is a movement going back to traditional Japanese foods. Many people believe that we will have food shortages in the near future. Besides that, there are other issues such as food safety and Japan’s dependence on imported foods. Therefore, the need to consider traditional food has arisen. The following questions are posed by this movement: What is Japanese food today? What should be selected as our future foods?

Film is another important medium for our cooking. A food specialist, who is attempting to spread the habit of making soup for children and elderly people, is highlighted in a documentary film entitled ‘天のしずく — 命のスープ (Drops of heaven)’, directed by Atsunori Kawamura (河邑厚徳). The film asks us the question, ‘What is food?’.

In conclusion, all the media are always looking for the current trends in foods. Since the emergence of the internet, the media have changed their roles. Before the internet, the media only gives information to people. However, the media have changed their position from being merely an ‘information provider’ to a position that gives to the people and also takes information from them.

Today in Japan, we have access to various types of foods. On the other hand, we have retained our traditional foods such as miso soup, *natto*, *soba*, etc. We have to consider new food questions because we must face problems concerning foods, agriculture, import and export, etc.

We need to find out what the best foods for our future are. The food ‘customization’ mentioned above can also be integrated into our new Japanese food of the future. Our daily meals can be considered through the media, and then the best foods and the cooking methods can be chosen from the vast amount of information presented to us through the media. Now, it is important to carefully consider which information is the most appropriate. Simultaneously, we can form new future food styles through the media, because each individual is already a participant in the media feedback.