
Food culture

The conventional meal of Japan comprises four types of food: rice, the staple diet; *okazu*, secondary components like fish or vegetables; soup called *shiru*; and *tsukemono*, vegetables pickled in salt or rice bran. The traditional practice in Japan is for all food to be served on individual plates and bowls at individual, low tables. Unlike typical meals in the West today, where dishes are served chronologically, in Japan it has been common for all dishes to be placed together on a serving tray at the beginning of the meal.

This chapter first deals with rice as a significant part of Japanese cultural life and fish as the most important *okazu*, the two key components of Japan's food culture for both pre-modern and modern Japan. Changing patterns of food culture in and after the Meiji period are then examined,¹ with the concomitant transformation of the dining table. Finally, the chapter presents a model that shows the way in which the Japanese today mix different styles of food, and concludes by discussing issues faced by contemporary Japanese food culture.

Rice as symbolic food

Rice constitutes the staple diet for the Japanese, both as essential food and as an important symbol of cultural life. Japan's rice is the so-called *Japonica* type short grain which is normally eaten on its own without seasoning or flavouring. The Japanese have long regarded rice as central to their meal culture and all other food as a secondary component of their diet. In the Japanese language, to eat rice (*meshi o kuu*) means to have a meal (*shokuji o suru*).

Before the establishment of the modern nation state, feudal lords collected tax in rice, not in money. Japan's feudal economy was thus built upon the production of rice. Japanese village life follows the calendar of rice cultivation, with village festivals organised according to this cycle. Villagers pray for a rich harvest at spring festivals at the time of planting seedlings into paddy fields. At summer festivals, farming communities pray for the protection of rice against harmful insects and typhoons that hit Japan late in the season, while autumn festivals are harvest celebrations.

In Japan, as well as in countries in South-East Asia, rice has been regarded as a sacred grain in which the divine spirit dwells. During festival periods, people in the lower classes, who had to 'extend' their everyday rice by mixing it with barley, foxtail millet and Japanese millet, ate pure white rice with no additives, festive meals made from glutinous rice and also drank *sake* made from rice. The belief underlying this practice was that these rice products would empower their consumers with the sacred energy of rice.

Mochi, made from glutinous rice steamed and pounded in a mortar, has special significance for many Japanese, who believe that it gives much physical power to the eater. While dietetics and physiology can scientifically corroborate this belief, it is based upon the folk notion that *mochi* as condensed rice imbues the eater with supernatural energy provided by the sacred spirit that dwells in rice. This is why the Japanese celebrate New Year's Day, the most important holiday on the nation's calendar, by eating *zōni* soup that contains *mochi*.

Sake is also made from rice. The method of brewing *sake* was initially brought to Japan from the Chinese continent and the Korean peninsula. Japan has developed its own technology, producing *sake* of 20 per cent alcoholic content, the highest level among brewed liquors without distillation. *Sake* is an indispensable part of Shinto festivals in which all gods are supposed to enjoy drinking the beverage. Festival participants offer *sake* to Shinto shrines, which they later drink together in an act that cements community solidarity.

Conventionally, people enjoy *sake* in *tokkuri* (a small ceramic flask-shaped bottle) after it is warmed in hot water and served in *choku*, a small ceramic cup. However, since the 1980s, *ginjōshu*, high-quality fruity *sake* brewed at low temperatures, has been marketed successfully in a chilled form to be enjoyed like white wine.

Fish – sashimi, sushi and whale meat

Although the typical Buddhist believer did not eat animal products on specific Buddhist events, funerals, or anniversaries of the death of a family member, they were able to eat fish and shellfish on other days without any feelings of guilt. As a result, fish came to be perceived as the greatest delicacy in traditional Japanese cooking, resulting in a large range of fish-based dishes. Although various techniques were developed in Japan for the preparation of fish dishes, in comparison to China and Korea where meat was eaten, cooking methods featuring a range of spices and using oils and fats did not develop in Japan.

The philosophy behind Japanese food culture appears to be a paradoxical belief that no cooking is the best kind of cooking. This manifests itself in the treatment of fish in Japanese gastronomy. If fish are fresh enough, they ought to be sliced raw and served as sashimi. If they are not sufficiently fresh, the second best preparation is to grill them and sprinkle them with salt. Only when fish lose freshness would they be cooked with such flavourings as shōyu or miso as a last resort. The thinking here is that the extensive use of cookery and processing methods is vulgar; the natural initial flavours of ingredients should be retained and eaten in the form as close as possible to nature.

Sashimi, carefully sliced raw fish meat to be eaten with wasabi and soy sauce, reflects this value orientation most sharply. Most Japanese consider sashimi the simplest and therefore the most refined food. High-quality Japanese cuisine almost invariably includes sashimi.

Sushi² is often wrongly thought to be an extension of this idea, because it is served as a small amount of rice shaped by hand and topped with sashimi. In fact, sushi originated from the culture of fermenting fish meat in pre-modern Japan and differed markedly from what we recognise as sushi today. The idea started with the knowledge that fish preserved with salt and mixed with cooked rice can be stored for a long period of time because rice undergoes lactic acid fermentation which raises its acidity level and thereby prevents bacteria from propagating. Rice grains used this way break down and become pasty and are normally inedible. Removed from rice, the preserved fish tastes sour and smells like strong cheese. This was the type of sushi available before the Edo period. Similar food exists in paddy regions in South-East Asia, an observation that gives some credence to the theory that sushi had initially developed in the upper and middle reaches of the Mekong Delta area in ancient times as a method of preserving

freshwater fish meat and was brought to Japan with the paddy field method of rice cultivation. While this type of sushi was eaten in China for some time, unprocessed food gradually disappeared from the Chinese table, with only some ethnic minority groups in south-western China still retaining the practice today.

From around the 15th century, the Japanese began to develop their own style of sushi, based on a new technique that enabled them to begin eating it three or four days after preparation and to consume it within one or two months. The short fermentation method made it possible for both fish and rice to be eaten at the same time and therefore for sushi to serve as a snack.

Towards the end of the 17th century during the Edo period, *haya zushi* (quick sushi) became available, with both rice and fish being flavoured with vinegar. This method opened the way for the diversification of sushi, which now included mixing vinegared rice with flavoured and cooked vegetables. Around the same time, *nori maki*, which used paper-like dried seaweed to wrap rice, became popular.

The so-called *nigiri zushi*, which is served at sushi restaurants today, acquired popularity in the 1820s in Edo (present-day Tokyo) and became the standard version, comprising a small ball of vinegared rice shaped by hand by a professional sushi chef with a slice of fish and a bit of *wasabi* to be eaten with a few drops of soy sauce. From around this time, *nigiri zushi* ceased to be made in the home altogether and began to be served at sushi restaurants where chefs were supposed to make various kinds of sushi on the spot at the request of customers. Thus, the sushi that originated as long-term preserved food transformed itself into a kind of 'fast food' in Japan, which has recently been popularised around the world.

While the *nigiri zushi* type is in national and international vogue, it should be emphasised that there is much regional variation of sushi within Japan. *Funa zushi*, for example, the noted product in Shiga Prefecture, is made from carp caught in Lake Biwa and subjected to lactic acid fermentation based upon the ancient method of sushi production. At community festivals and functions, various types of sushi are served in different localities.

The consumption of mammals such as whale and dolphin was not prohibited in Japan by the Buddhist establishment as these were viewed as *large fish*. Whale was not only consumed; oil was extracted from the whale's blubber and sprayed onto the surface of rice paddies to prevent pests. After the whale oil was extracted, the remaining fatty layer was dried and used as a preserved food. Whale meat, in particular, has been ranked as one of the top

ingredients for fish dishes and is often served on festive occasions. As early as 1832, a specialist book that detailed various methods of preparing whale meat was published. The book, titled *Kujiraniku ryōrikata* (Ways of preparing whale meat), classified the body of a whale into 70 parts, including its internal organs, and provided ideal preparation details for each part.

While recognising the importance of preserving animal resources, a majority of the Japanese find it difficult to comprehend the argument,³ frequently advanced in Western countries, that whales should be given *special* protection because their intelligence level is close to that of human beings. The animistic perspective long embedded into the Japanese psyche regards *every* being, including plants and minerals, as having a life of its own. This worldview has been combined with the Buddhist thinking that human and animal lives are on equal footing: human beings live depending upon the lives of other beings. In the endless cycle of some animal beings eating others, some lives are maintained at the expense of others. Based on this belief system, whaling communities in various areas of Japan erected towers for the repose of whales' souls and held ceremonies to honour their memories.

Transformation of food culture: some guideposts

Lifting of the ban on meat consumption and the rise of *sukiyaki* – early Meiji years

Though there are many common features in food and cooking techniques among the three countries, the decisive difference between traditional Japanese cooking and that of China and Korea is that meat was absent from the Japanese diet until relatively recently. One exception to this rule are the islands at the southernmost tip of Japan that formed the Ryūkyū Kingdom, which had claimed its independence from 'mainland' Japan before it was annexed during the Meiji period. The Ryūkyū Kingdom was not influenced by Buddhism and therefore eating meat was not prohibited. As a result of exchange with China, the people of Ryūkyū farmed pigs and goat for meat and developed a unique style of cooking distinct from traditional Japanese techniques. Similarly, the Ainu, indigenous to Hokkaidō in the north, were also not converted to Buddhism and hunted game such as deer and bear.

By the 10th century, both Buddhism and Shintoism began to view meat-eating as contaminating. In feudal Japan, those involved in slaughtering mammals or the production of leather goods began to be socially isolated

and classified as an outcaste group that suffered discrimination (see chapter 10). It was not until the latter half of the 18th century that shops selling wild mammals and poultry made their appearance in cities, creating opportunities for members of the urban population to eat meat,⁴ though this did not affect the majority of the Japanese, who lived in rural areas.

In order to realise the national goal of modernisation immediately after the Meiji Restoration of 1868, there was a need to cultivate healthy workers and soldiers. Many intellectuals at the time claimed that the reason behind the small and weak physical build of the Japanese people was the lack of meat and milk in their diet. In 1872 it was reported in newspapers that the Emperor Meiji consumed beef, and in turn, Japanese people were encouraged to do the same. In the same year, the government permitted priests – who previously had to shave their heads – to grow their hair, marry and consume meat. Under these new conditions, the consumption of meat was increasingly perceived as something that ‘civilised’, modern people did, and those who rejected this notion were viewed as conservative nationalists.

The general populace first tried meat at restaurants called *gyūnabeya* where *gyūnabe*, a prototype of *sukiyaki*, was served. *Gyūnabe* was a dish in which beef, spring onions and tofu were simmered in familiar seasonings such as miso, soy sauce, and *mirin* (sweet *sake*), and was eaten with chopsticks. During the Meiji years, this dish was considerably cheaper than the beef meals served at Western style restaurants in Japan.⁵

As *gyūnabe* is based on traditional cooking methods, it eventually made its appearance in private homes. In more conservative households the beef would be prepared outside, or the *kamidana* (household shrine) or *butsudan* (Buddhist altar) would be covered in paper to prevent the smell of the beef from contaminating the gods and Buddha enshrined inside. By the beginning of the 20th century, *gyūnabe* was consumed throughout Japan, while being perceived as a family meal to be served on special occasions.

In the cities of Osaka, Kobe and Kyoto in the Kansai region, *gyūnabe* began to be referred to as *sukiyaki*. The dish still featured sliced beef cooked with spring onions and tofu, but now also included ingredients such as vegetables or *ito konnyaku* (thin devil’s tongue noodles), simmered in soy sauce and sugar and served with beaten raw egg. The term *sukiyaki* also became established in Tokyo during the 1920s and the dish became extremely popular around the nation at this time. In Japanese butcher shops, beef and pork is normally sold sliced, rather than in large pieces, because *sukiyaki* is still regarded as the most commonly prepared meat dish.

Spread of Japanese Western-style dishes – the turn of the 19th century

Other meat dishes featuring traditional Japanese food preparation methods included *nikujaga*, a *shōyu*-flavoured, stew-like dish of simmered sliced beef and potatoes, and *yamatoni*, or beef and ginger simmered in soy sauce. The origins of *nikujaga* lie in a dish that was served in the navy, later becoming popularised as a family dish. Enormous quantities of tinned *yamatoni* were used as a portable military meal during the Sino-Japanese War (1894–95) and the Russo-Japanese War (1904–05), and the dish was popularised by soldiers throughout Japan after their discharge. *Yamatoni* remained the most popular tinned food in Japan until around 1950.

As there were few varieties of meat dishes that could be prepared using traditional Japanese cooking techniques, many Western preparation techniques were adopted in order to prepare the new ingredients. The meat dishes of China and Korea which featured seasonings similar to miso and soy sauce, and which were also eaten with chopsticks, would have been more familiar to Japanese at the time. However, in the late 19th century, a time when society was being modernised based on the Western model, Western-style dishes were perceived as ‘civilised’ cooking. The colonisation of Korea and the Japanese victory that ended the Sino-Japanese War generated a growing tendency to view China and Korea with disdain. As a result, instead of attempting to learn from Chinese and Korean cooking, Japanese people adopted Western-style cooking methods to create meat-based dishes.

Although French-style cooking was served in the dining rooms of hotels and early Western-style restaurants that were patronised by the elite, the Western-style cooking adopted by the general populace was largely influenced by Anglo-Saxon cooking. English was primarily used to convey Western civilisation to the Japanese people, and many of the missionaries, university lecturers, engineers, and merchants who went to Japan were English and American. Most of the books on Western-style cooking were translated into Japanese at missionary schools, while the Western-style cookbooks published during the Meiji period were predominantly translations from English.

By the late 1880s, chefs who had learned Western-style cooking at hotels and restaurants began establishing Western-style restaurants called *yōshokuya* that were targeted at the general populace.⁶ *Yōshoku* means ‘the food of the West’: it did not refer to a specific style of Western cooking, such as French or German, but something more nebulous. Main dishes

often used meat products, and many Japanese at the time viewed this style of cooking as something that used a lot of oil and fats, such as butter. The ingredients of these dishes were replaced with those that were easily sourced in Japan, and Japanese food preparation techniques and taste preferences were partially applied, resulting in a Japanised style of Western cooking. The alcohol served with the meal was either Japanese *sake* or beer. Wine was not yet available. Beer, which had recently begun to be produced in Japan, was more expensive than *sake* in those days, and was the most popular choice. Few customers ate bread with their meal, instead it was common for rice to be ordered as an accompaniment. Nonetheless, the meals served at *yōshokuya* were eaten with knives, forks and spoons.

The main items on the menu of a typical *yōshokuya* were: rice curry, *hayashi* rice (hashed beef served with rice), omelet, beef steak (called *bifteki*), pork cutlet (now called *tonkatsu*), croquettes featuring mashed potato (called *korokke*), and *ebi* fry (deep fried prawns). In lieu of accompanying sauces, bottled Worcestershire sauce was poured over each dish. Japanese have a habit of using soy sauce on all dishes, and so when they encountered Worcestershire sauce they quickly embraced it as a Western-style soy sauce. The unique Japanese-style Worcestershire sauce that is based on soy sauce to suit the Japanese palate made its appearance at the beginning of the 20th century, and soon became an essential item to accompany dishes originating in the West.

Urban middle class and *chabudai* culture – early 20th century

Although Japanese living in large cities occasionally visited *yōshokuya* and Chinese restaurants, foreign meals were not prepared in the home. Cooking schools aimed at daughters of the upper and middle classes began to make their appearance from the end of the 19th century, and from around 1910 large numbers of these schools emerged in the cities, with cooking classes held throughout Japan. By the 1920s, large numbers of articles in women's magazines featured Western and Chinese-style dishes that could be prepared at home, and by the 1930s cooking was a topic that featured frequently in radio programs and newspapers. The media thus played an important role in popularising the concept of nutrition based on modern science and foreign cooking.

By 1919 Japan's industrial production exceeded its agricultural production and Japan was transformed from an agricultural to an industrial nation. It was around this time that the middle classes began to grow, and this sector became the driving force behind the modernisation of food in the

home. This was prior to the mechanisation of agriculture, and agricultural households required labour from many family members in order to be largely self-sufficient in terms of food. The middle class families in the cities, in contrast, were nuclear families comprising husband, wife and children, who obtained all their consumer goods through the monetary economy. These families purchased beef, pork, chicken, Worcestershire sauce and tomato ketchup, and prepared 'Japanised' Western meals or Chinese meals in the home. These people also, by incorporating dishes that originated overseas, developed the prototype of Japanese home cooking today.

In these middle class families the use of traditional, individual low dining tables called *zen* was eliminated, and instead the family would sit around a communal table called a *chabudai* on *tatami* mats and eat as a family. In the conventional kitchen the housewife would crouch on an earthen floor or sit on a wooden floor to cook, but in the cities the middle class families, with the growing introduction of running water and gas, began to use sinks and cooking benches designed to allow people to prepare meals standing up.

However, it is important not to over-emphasise the prevalence of this new lifestyle. Half of the population of Japan in the 1930s were farmers, and for many farming families rice was only eaten during festivals and at events. At all other times barley and millet were used to 'extend' rice, and this was served with soup made with home-made miso accompanied by home-made vegetable pickles and a simmered vegetable dish. The diet of many Japanese at the time remained unchanged from the Edo Period. There was very little consumption of meat, and according to the statistics of 1934–38, only 6.1 grams of meat was consumed per person per day. If this was converted to *sukiyaki* meat, the most frequently eaten meat dish, it would equate to eating the dish only once per month. Incidentally, according to the 'demand and supply tables of food' compiled for 2007 by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fishery, 76.1 grams of meat is now consumed per person per day in Japan.

Wartime and postwar devastation and food shortage – 1930s to 1960s

The Great Depression that began with the collapse of Wall Street in 1929 spilled over to Japan in the following year, and Japan experienced the greatest economic slump since its modernisation. This had an enormous effect on the middle classes in the cities and the new style of eating that had been cultivated had to be abandoned.

War raged between China and Japan for 15 years, triggered by the Manchurian Incident of 1931. The Pacific War began in 1941. The living standard of the Japanese fell under the economic policies that prioritised the military until Japan's defeat in 1945. The outbreak of the Pacific War resulted in the conscription of farm workers, leading to a fall in agricultural productivity, while food importation ceased. A serious food shortage followed, with rice and grains being rationed from 1941, after which all food, seasonings, vegetables, and even fuel could not be purchased without a ration card. As the war situation deteriorated, the food that could be rationed became increasingly scarce and people could no longer rely wholly on rations to survive. People living in cities began to grow vegetables in every available vacant block of land, turning these plots into fields of sweet potatoes, consumed instead of rice to avoid starvation.

As a result of the slogan 'luxury is the enemy' under the war-time state-controlled economy, hedonistic eating behaviour was perceived as immoral. *Bentō* boxes containing only cooked rice mixed with barley, in the middle of which was a single bright red, extremely sour pickled plum called *hinomaru bentō* (the circle of red in the middle of the white barley inside an oblong bento box symbolised the national flag, or *hinomaru*), were recommended for school students and workers. Although this was a nutritionally inadequate meal, the government's promotion of it is testament to the fact that they prioritised nationalism and the war effort over the health of the Japanese people.

The food shortage that followed Japan's defeat meant that the focus was more on restoring food quantity rather than quality, the catch-phrase at the time being 'increase food production'. It was only around 1950, when the Japanese economy began to grow as a result of the effects of the Korean War, that people no longer faced the fear of starvation, and it was not until 1955 that rice production levels recovered to prewar yields.

Return to a richer diet – post-1960s

During the 1960s Japan entered a period of high economic growth. Increase in income resulted in a richer diet both in quantity and quality, and a greater choice of food types was available to consumers. When this happened, people did not return to eating traditional Japanese meals and instead, there was a shift to a new style of eating.

In 1962 the annual consumption of rice per person reached a record 117 kilograms, but rice consumption gradually fell to 61.5 kg in 2004. It is often argued that this was because people began to eat bread on a regular basis,

but this is not strictly accurate. In order to maintain the health of school children during the food shortage following Japan's defeat in the War, lunch consisting of bread and milk began to be provided at school in many regions of Japan. Although this resulted in the popularisation of bread in Japan, it does not necessarily mean that Japanese preferred bread to rice. Because of the increase in the number of dishes served for lunch and dinner the focus of the meal shifted to the side dishes, and so people began to fill their stomachs with other food and thus ate less rice at each meal.

Changes in the dining table

Not only did food culture undergo changes over the last century, but the table that was used by the family at mealtimes, and the atmosphere in which the meal was eaten, also transformed. Instead of the traditional individual *zen* (low dining table), a type of table known as *chabudai*, mentioned earlier, made its appearance. *Chabudai* is a small table seating five to six people, with four short legs that can be folded inwards.⁷ With the use of *zen* tables, once the meal was finished, each would be stored in a cupboard in the kitchen. In the case of the *chabudai*, the legs would be folded and the table placed on its side in a corner of the room, so that after the meal the same room could be used for another purpose.

From 1925, more families began eating from *chabudai* rather than from trays, after which the *chabudai* was adopted by the majority of Japanese families and became part of the national culture. In 1971, however, eating at the dining table rather than the *chabudai* emerged as the preferred style and has been adopted by the majority of Japanese families since.⁸

Concrete apartment buildings began to be constructed in Japanese cities from the end of the 1950s. As discussed in chapter 15, it was in this type of residence that a room dedicated to eating meals made its appearance, and as a result, Japanese people began sitting in chairs around a communal table to eat.

During the years that the *chabudai* was popular in Japan, intellectuals who opposed the patriarchal system and who advocated the democratisation of the family welcomed this new style of eating. It was widely claimed that the family sitting around the same table and eating the same food meant that the family could express themselves equally, regardless of gender or age, and enjoy each other's company as they ate. According to the results of our survey,⁹ however, this ideal was not realised during the years that people ate from *chabudai*. The patriarch controlled the meal, it was considered bad

manners to eat while conversing and it was believed that silence should be maintained at mealtimes. The atmosphere that surrounded mealtimes in the *chabudai* era was therefore little different from when *zen* tables were used.

The introduction of the dining table into Japanese family life, however, was accompanied by democratisation of the family and a change in the atmosphere at mealtimes. After the Second World War, there was a rejection of the male domination that had been established during the feudal system of the Edo Period, as well as of the traditional family system with its emphasis on patriarchal authority. Within this social context the era of the dining table was ushered in.

Few families today prohibit conversation during meals, and it is the wife and children who determine the topic of conversation at the meal table – there are few examples in which the father plays the main role at mealtimes. Much of the conversation centres on the news or entertainment media, testament to the fact that many families watch television while eating, and that television programs are a key source of conversation at the meal table.¹⁰

When Japanese ate using *chabudai*, the entire family generally ate breakfast and dinner together. Few families today eat breakfast together on weekdays, as family members eat separately depending on when they are commuting to school or work. Although dinner time is an opportunity for the entire family to get together, the father often goes out for dinner and drinks after work with his colleagues, while members of the younger generation who enjoy the benefits of more spending-money increasingly eat out with friends. It is therefore quite normal for at least one member of the family to be absent during a meal, and there are concerns that this trend is weakening family ties.

In contrast to the meals served on *chabudai*, which consisted primarily of rice, soup and one or two side dishes, it has become normal for modern meals to feature at least three side dishes, with Japanese *sake* or beer also being served for those who like to drink. In family meals in the past, multiple dishes and alcohol only appeared during special events such as festivals. Modern Japanese are now enjoying, on a daily basis, festive food in the absence of the gods.

The way in which meals were served has also undergone a change. When meals were served on trays or *chabudai*, all food was served on individual plates for each person. Today, however, only rice and soup are served in individual bowls and the side dishes are served in communal plates or bowls and placed in the centre of the table.

Food compatibility model

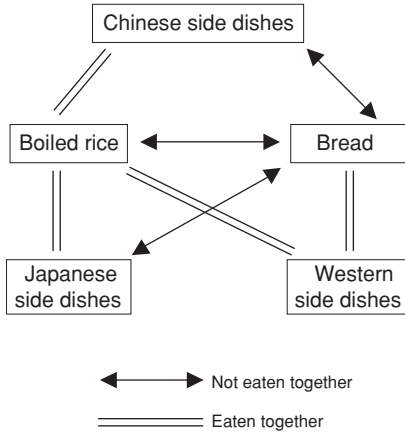


Figure 16.1 Compatibility between main and side dishes.

One of the questions related to eating habits asked of respondents in a national survey¹¹ of 3600 people held in 2005 was, ‘What kind of cooking do you like?’ The top 20 responses included curry rice, grilled meat (Korean barbecue), hamburger, salad, spaghetti and pasta, ramen noodles, fried chicken, dumplings such as *gyōza* and *shūmai*, *tonkatsu* and sweet and sour pork. Along with Japanese dishes such as sushi, sashimi, *sukiyaki* and tempura, 10 types of dishes that originated overseas were mentioned.

To what extent do Japanese today mix ‘Japanese style’, ‘Western style’ and ‘Chinese style’ meals? Figure 16.1, which attempts to answer this question based on a survey,¹² shows the way in which most Japanese find some types of food compatible and others incompatible in the same meal.

As Figure 16.1 shows, the Japanese can be divided into those for whom rice represents the staple food in a meal and those for whom bread fills this role. Rice and bread are thus ‘in opposition’. Like Chinese and South-East Asians, Japanese believe that a normal meal should include two categories of food – the staple food and side dishes – as well as the strong perception that there should be only one type of staple food in each meal. Eating two types of staple foods in the one meal is perceived as ‘strange’. Noodles are also thought to be a staple food and therefore traditionally noodles and rice were never eaten together. Although imported noodles like spaghetti are becoming increasingly popular, they are never served with rice.

Bread is only served as a staple food with the accompaniments of a Western-style meal and is never served with Japanese- or Chinese-style side dishes. Although bread is frequently eaten at breakfast, it is accompanied by salad, ham and eggs, cheese, butter, and jam, while the drink served at breakfast is either coffee, tea, or fruit juice – recognised by Japanese as Western-style drinks – and milk. Japanese tea, however, is never served with such a meal.

Even the side dishes accompanying bread at lunch and dinner are restricted to those originating in the West such as beef steak or salad. Only Western-style meals feature bread. This is therefore a ‘closed system’ that does not allow the inclusion of Japanese- or Chinese-style side dishes.

The only exception to this rule is curried rice. Japanese curry was not imported directly from India but was introduced as a Western-style meal. However, Japanese curry rice underwent a transformation from Western-style curry to a uniquely Japanese dish that became a national dish. It is not so much a Western-style dish but should be seen more as a new type of Japanese dish, with Japanese people eating curry today on average once per week.

It is normal for Japanese tea to be served at the end of the meal when rice is the staple food. The accompaniments can be a combination of Japanese-, Western-, and Chinese-style dishes. Beef steak and salad are served as accompaniments to rice, while stir-fried Chinese-style dishes and sweet and sour pork are also served in this way. It is not unusual for three dishes, each with different origins – Japanese, Western and Chinese – such as miso soup, omelette, and *shūmai* to be served as accompaniments in a meal featuring rice.

A meal featuring only Chinese-style cooking would rarely appear at the family table. According to the results of our survey, there was only one example of a family which ate out at a Chinese restaurant. Although two or three Chinese dishes may be served at a family meal, this would be accompanied by Japanese pickles or miso soup, with Japanese tea being served at the end of the meal. There is therefore no consistency in terms of place of origin in the style of dishes served. Dishes originating in China eaten with chopsticks, and which are similarly eaten with rice as the staple, are served together with Japanese dishes. Even Korean-style barbecued meat and the Korean pickles (*kimchi*), which have been ‘Japanised’, are now eaten frequently in Japanese homes and have achieved the same position as the Chinese-style accompaniments shown in Figure 16.1.

Thus we can see that dishes served in Japanese homes today do not represent a haphazard combination of internationalised, or Westernised, or Sinosised dishes, but a clear structure of 'eligible' combinations based on the choice of staple food. Bread is always accompanied by Western-style dishes. In other meals, it is essential that the dishes are linked in some way with rice in order for an imported dish to be accepted into the everyday diet of Japanese families. Therefore imported dishes that go well with rice have been adopted, with the cooking technique and seasoning altered over time. In this way, foreign dishes have been Japanised to become established as part of the family meal.

Decline in meal preparation at home

Restaurants serving Japanese food first became fashionable in the US towards the end of the 1970s and there is now a Japanese restaurant boom in cities around the world. There were 800 Japanese restaurants in New York and 300 Japanese restaurants in Moscow in 2006. Japanese food has also come to be perceived as healthy. Sushi, made with rice and raw fish, is the most popular dish served in Japanese restaurants overseas, and the general perception is that Japanese enjoy the longest life expectancy in the world because they eat large quantities of rice and fish.

However, traditional Japanese food cannot be described as healthy, lacking animal protein as well as oils and fats. Until the 1960s, the government conducted promotional campaigns encouraging Japanese to eat more meat and dishes cooked with oils and fats. As Japanese society became wealthier as a result of the rapidly-growing economy, meat dishes, which at the time were more expensive than fish, came to be eaten everyday, so that the Japanese diet came to be supplemented with animal proteins that had been lacking from the diet until that time, resulting in improved nutrition for Japanese people. Other than excessive salt intake and a slight shortage of calcium in the Japanese diet, the Japanese nutritional balance was close to ideal by the end of the 70s. As a result, Japan achieved the status of having the world's highest life expectancy. Today, however, many Japanese have grown accustomed to American-style fast foods that contain excessive meat and fats. Like other developed nations, Japan is also facing the growing problem of adult-onset diseases resulting from over-eating, and as a result, there is a high possibility that it will lose its status as the nation with the world's highest life expectancy.

Despite the increase in the amount of meat consumed, there has also been an increase in fish consumption. Japan has the sixth largest ocean mass in the world, with its territorial waters amounting to twelve times that of its land mass. However, only half of the seafood consumed by Japanese is fished in Japan's domestic waters and Japan's fish self-sufficiency rate is only 56 per cent, according to the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fishery's 2007 'demand and supply tables of food'. Although only 50 per cent of tuna, popular as sashimi or in sushi, is imported, Japan is being increasingly attacked by international environmental protection groups which claim that the world's tuna resources are in danger of being depleted as the fish is supplied to the tables of Japanese families.

The food and restaurant industries have grown with the Japanese economy. Japan's food industry ranks fourth, in monetary terms, of all the Japanese industries, after the electrical appliances, motor vehicle, and oil industries, while the restaurant industry ranks sixth, after the steel industry.

A groundbreaking moment in the Japanese food industry was the invention of 'chicken ramen' in 1958. Simply adding hot water and waiting three minutes produced Chinese-style noodles in chicken soup. This product was followed by many different variations, and instant noodles soon achieved the status of an international product. The Japanese food industry continues to direct its efforts into developing foods that require little preparation in the kitchen, such as miso soup and other soups that only require the addition of hot water, as well as curry and Chinese food that only needs heating while contained in a metallic envelope. The popularity of these products throughout Japan means uniformity in taste, flavour, and preference, and the tastes and flavours unique to home cooking or the distinctive features of regional cooking are in danger of being lost.

The popularity of eating out is also significant. Today one can find, as well as restaurants serving Japanised foreign dishes, Western-style, Chinese-style, Korean-style, and American fast food restaurants where one can eat Japanised foreign dishes even in small regional towns. And in cities, one can also find restaurants serving genuine Chinese, French, and Italian meals prepared by foreign chefs or chefs who studied cooking overseas, as well as restaurants specialising in ethnic foods such as South Asian, and Central and South American food.

The first fast food outlet capitalised with American funds opened in Japan in 1970, followed by the rapid development of chain restaurants. By the late 1970s, restaurant chains known as 'family restaurants' where families

could eat out at affordable prices began to appear, and people began eating out frequently, which resulted in a decline in home cooking.

The food industry represents society's kitchen, while the restaurant industry can be described as society's meal table, and Japanese today are enjoying quality meals as a result of the development of the social kitchen and dining table. Meanwhile, there is a growing sense of anxiety that the social kitchen and the social dining table are eroding the Japanese family's kitchen and its meal table. One of the major issues facing food culture in the future is how to best achieve a favourable balance between meals in the home on one hand and meals in 'society', or meals outside the home, on the other. This is perhaps an issue that not only applies to Japan but to all developed nations in the world today.

Notes

1. For a full analysis of the relationship between Japanese modernisation and food, see Ishige (2001a; 2001b) and Cwiertka (2005).
2. The term 'sushi' derives from the Japanese word *sui*, which means sour.
3. See note 11 of the Overview of this volume.
4. Ishige (2007: 80–92).
5. In 1877, there were 558 *gyūnabeya* restaurants and shops selling beef in Tokyo. See Okada (2000).
6. By around 1900 there were around 1500 to 1600 *yōshokuya* in Tokyo. See Itō Kinen Zaidan (1990: 249–50).
7. Ishige (2005: 92–108).
8. Ishige (2005: 183–9).
9. Ishige (1991: 69).
10. Ishige (2001a: 178–219).
11. NHK Hōsō Bunka Kenkyūsho Yoron Chōsa-bu (NHK Broadcasting Culture Research Institute, Public Opinion Department) (2008).
12. A team of investigators based at the National Museum of Ethnology, led by the present author, conducted this survey in 1975, with a sample of 50 households. Despite the limited sample size and the fact that the survey was held 35 years ago, the pattern that it showed should still apply to people today because no new conditions have emerged to alter it since then.

Further reading

- Bestor, Theodore C (2004), *Tsukiji: The Fish Market at the Center of the World*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Cwiertka, Katarzyna J (2006), *Modern Japanese Cuisine: Food, Power and National Identity*, London: Reaktion Books.
- Ishige, Naomichi (2001), *The History and Culture of Japanese Food*, London: Kegan Paul International.