

Chapter 11



Restaurants in the World Serving Japanese Food

As I mentioned in the Preface, while I travel in foreign countries, I make it a rule to visit the restaurants which serve the local food to us. I seldom take Japanese food served in Japanese restaurants. I, however, visited many Japanese restaurants in many towns during long stay in the USA when I hold receptions for people there or when they give me welcome parties.

11.1 The first time I visited the USA was during the Vietnam War

It was a small town named Bethesda in Maryland State that I stayed at when I visited the USA in 1970. As I already touched it, there is an institute named NIH (National Institutes of Health) in the town, which is composed of 20 institutes and seven research centers, where the bioscience concerned in medicine, health, hygiene and so on is being studied.

Dr. Nirenberg was studying in the same institute where I worked. He shared a Nobel Prize in Physiology and Medicine in 1968 with Dr. Khorana and Dr. Holley for “breaking the genetic code” and described how it operates in protein synthesis. He had proved that three letters of RNA, UUU (Uracil-Uracil-Uracil), are codes of certain amino acid called Phenylalanine. This led to the discoveries of codons determined to 20 amino acids. The kinds of amino acid in proteins are defined by three letters of bases on RNA, which are called ‘codons’. You will understand why the codons are RNA, not DNA, after you look at Figure 2.8. When I started my study there, the doctor had begun to study the neurons of brains after he finished the study of *Escherichia coli*. NIH is an institute where more than 6,000 researchers are studying actively holding heated discussions.

I was young at that time, about 30 years of age, and I seldom longed for Japanese food during two years' stay there. However, I sometimes bought some Japanese food at a Korean store in Washington DC near Maryland State. The Vietnam War was being fought at that time and I sometimes joined the demonstration rallies in the weekend together with young American people and hippies crying out against the war. I wrote, "American Armies, Get out from Okinawa" on my placard. At that time, Okinawa was a US military front base and received wounded and returned soldiers from Vietnam. This is an old story of 40 years ago, but the situations of Okinawa have not been changed. About 30 years after the ceasefire of the Vietnam War, I visited a part of long underground tunnels (total 250 km) constructed by Viet Cong guerillas in Ho Chi Minh city (former name Saigon). I noticed that the signs of the war destruction had not disappeared and at the same time I recalled our rallies for the anti-Vietnam War at Washington DC.

11.2 Traditional auspicious foods for special days

After the first visit in 1970, I worked for the institutes for one year again in 1981, but I don't remember I visited Japanese restaurants. Meanwhile, I remember the following happening clearly. One morning, I was given the surprise blessing with a happy birthday song at our laboratory of the Institute. It was really surprising for me since my birthday is one month later. A laboratory colleague must have mixed up my birthday. We had a happening to celebrate the Pearl Harbor Memorial Day with the birthday cake for me. Actually my birthday is January 7.

By the way, Japanese people usually celebrate happy occasions like a family's birthday by serving a dish of red-bean rice, '*sekihan*' (赤飯) and sea-bream, '*tai*'.

Sekihan is cooked by steaming red bean, *azuki* (*Vigna angularis*), and glutinous rice, *mochi-gome*. The Japanese have long considered red to be a lucky color because of its association with the color of the fire and the sun (Fig. 11.1).



Fig. 11.1 Offerings on the altar table at the Inari shrine fest.

A lot of Inari shrines are seen throughout Japan. Some are kept in individual homes as seen at Mr. Saeki's home, Ohtake, Hiroshima (left picture). Right pictures; offerings of sea bream (left), *sekihan* (middle), *mochi* (right) are given to please fox messengers. (Photos provided by Mr. I. Saeki, Ohtake, Hiroshima, Japan.)

Speaking of glutinous rice, Japanese people usually recall rice cake, *mochi*, a preserved food, and *zoni*. *Zoni* (雑煮) is a Japanese soup containing *mochi*, vegetables, seafood and other additions. We eat this food on New Year's Day as traditional and auspicious foods. We can trace back the root of *zoni* to Muromachi era (1336~1573), when many battles were fought by *samurai*, warriors. *Zoni* is thought to have been a simple and nutritious meal that was cooked in a short time during field battles and to have given much energy for *samurai*. The preparation of *zoni* varies both by households and regions. For example, in Tokyo and many areas including Hiroshima, *zoni* consists of clear soup with umami extracted from dried bonito and/or *kombu*, and soy sauce. In the Kansai areas including Kyoto, Osaka and Wakayama, *zoni* is generally cooked with a stock of white *miso* (Fig. 11.2). On New Year's Day, we also eat herring roes, 'kazunoko'; black beans, 'kuro-mame'; *konbu*; *tai*; etc. Japanese people often say that these foods are of good omen and bring good luck to us

when we take them on New Year's Day. For example, *kazunoko* is said to bring babies and *kuro-mame* is said to keep us in good health.



Fig. 11.2 Zoni; left, Hiroshima area; right, Kyoto area.

(Photos quoted from Konishi Shuzo. Co. Ltd., Itami, Hyogo, Japan.)

11.3 Japanese food education brought about safe functional foods

I stayed in San Francisco for three years. There were some Japanese supermarkets which served Japanese foods, so I was able to take Japanese food almost every day. It is said that there are over 3,000 Japanese restaurants in California State. A professor of UC Davis introduced me a good Japanese restaurant in Davis located less than two hour-drive from San Francisco. The owner of the restaurant was much pleased when I visited there together with four or five Japanese friends. There are five Japanese restaurants in this small college town. The owner said, "If a lot of Japanese people visit my restaurant, it means that ours is a good one". When we visited a Japanese restaurant in Sacramento, Japanese *sake* named *Haiku* produced there was served for us (Fig. 11.3). By the way, *haiku* is a Japanese short poetic form. It usually contains a word that implies the season. Matsuo Basho was one of the most famous *haiku* poets, who lived in Edo era (1603~1868).



Fig. 11.3 Japanese restaurants in the world.

Left picture shows a Japanese restaurant at Sacramento, CA, USA (left, author; middle, Prof. R. Rodriguez of UC Davis; right, Prof. A. Shinmyo of Nara Institute of Science & Technology). Right picture shows a Japanese restaurant at Lima, Peru. Local produced *sake* ('Haiku' by Gekkeikan-shuzo Co., Sacramento, CA, USA) and imported *sake* ('Suishin' by Suishin-Yamane Honten Co., Mihara, Hiroshima, Japan) are served on the left and right tables, respectively.

It is well known that UC has ten campuses in California State, like UCLA in Los Angeles, UCSD in San Diego, UCB in Berkley, and each of the schools has a large campus as large as that of Osaka University I worked for and is giving a characteristic education. UC Davis has an institute of wine research. The reason may be that there are vineyards, Sonoma and Napa Valley well known for California wine.

In Japan, Osaka University, Hiroshima University, and Yamanashi University have the Department of Brewing or Fermentation Technology in the Faculty of Engineering. The background is that Osaka (Kansai area) and Hiroshima which are famous as places of *sake* production and Yamanashi, famous as a place of wine brewing. In Japan, almost all national universities and some private universities have Food Science courses in the Faculty of Agriculture and have brought up the competent persons who learn food science, fermentation and nutrition. It could be said that this kind of education enabled us to have one of the best fermented foods in the world and to develop safe functional Japanese foods.

11.4 Japanese restaurants where Japanese cooks are not seen

Honestly speaking, Japanese food I take in many Japanese restaurants in overseas countries isn't to my taste. I am afraid that not only I but also many Japanese feel like that. But Japanese food served in a Japanese ambassador's official residence or a consulate where I happened to be invited was very delicious. The reason is simple, that is, all the cooks there are from Japan. Recently, a lot of Japanese food materials and sea foods are imported from Japan and delicious Japanese foods are also cooked by using food materials grown in the local area. I was surprised at an expensive mushroom called *matsutake* served for us when I was invited to the Japanese ambassador's residence in Mexico. Nowadays, we can often see *matsutake* gathered in the North America on the shelves of supermarkets in San Francisco (Fig. 11.4).



Fig. 11.4 Matsutake mushrooms are sold at supermarket, San Francisco, CA, USA.

Except in Japanese restaurants in the USA, I have tasted Japanese food in Japanese restaurants in Mexico City, Sao Paulo in Brazil, Lima in Peru, Lodz in Poland, Helsinki in Finland, Vienna in Austria, Cairo in Egypt, Bangkok in Thailand, Jakarta in Indonesia and Dalian in China. Japanese foods served in restaurants except ones in Mexico City, Sao Paulo, Lima and Dalian was not to

my taste though they were nice-looking. I think it was because Japanese foods served for me there was not cooked by Japanese cooks. The cooks in the local area might have arranged it into foods liked by people living near the restaurants. But recently, good Japanese restaurants are gradually increasing. Japanese foods served in a restaurant in Jakarta where I ate the other day were as delicious as those served in the best class restaurant in Japan. Many people were waiting in a line in front of the restaurant.

11.5 Today's lunch is *Bento*, a box lunch

Recently, I visited Indonesia for research guidance. I was spoken to by a staff at lunch time. "Dr. Murooka, today's lunch is *Bento*." Lunch in a lunch box was delivered to our office. Although this warm *bento* called "*Hokka Hokka Bento*" is well known in Japan, I ate it for the first time in Jakarta (Fig. 11.5). I found several *bento* selling stores in Jakarta. People standing in a line on Figure 11.6 are people who are waiting for *bento* in Paris. A *bento* costs over 10 Euros but it is very popular among them because it is artistic and healthy. These stores will increase in Europa and the USA from now on.

Traditionally Japanese people enjoy outdoor picnics, especially cherry blossoms (*ohana-mi*) in spring time and viewing reddish maple leaves (*momiji-gari*) in autumn with *bento* boxes (Fig. 11.7).

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Fig. 11.5 A delivered bento at Jakarta, Indonesia.



Fig. 11.6 A bento restaurant in Paris.

Customers are waiting at lunch time (left) and a sample of *bento* (right).



Fig. 11.7 Bento for picnic.

Traditionally Japanese people enjoy an outdoor picnic, especially cherry blossom viewing (*ohana-mi*) in spring time (left picture) and reddish maple-viewing (*momiji-gari*) in autumn with box lunch (*bento*) and sake (right pictures). (Left photo provided by Mr. M. Nagai.)

11.6 Summary

Japanese people usually celebrate happy occasions like a family's birthday by serving a dish of red-bean rice, '*sekihan*' and sea-bream, '*tai*' as traditional and auspicious foods. *Sekihan* is cooked by steaming red bean, *azuki*, and glutinous rice, *mochi-gome*. Japanese people like rice cake, *mochi*, a preserved food. On New Year' Day, Japanese people take *zoni* which is a soup containing *mochi*, vegetables, seafood and other additions.

Overseas Japanese restaurants in local areas arrange Japanese food into foods liked by people living near the restaurants. However, non-Japanese people also

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like real taste of Japanese food. Japanese *bento* comes from a lunch box which they bring at seasonal outdoor picnics. It looks beautiful, artistic and healthy, so *bento* stores will increase in the world.