



Japan



Tokyo 1964, Sapporo 1972, Nagano 1998

CULINARY CULTURE



Among the first questions visitors to Japan are likely to hear from their hosts are: “Can you use chopsticks?” “Do you like sushi?” and “Can you eat *natto*?” This is as true today as it was 20 years ago. And, according to many old hands who have lived here for 35 years or more, these were the questions people asked during the Tokyo Olympics as well. They are, of course, attempts by the Japanese to initiate a conversation but they also reveal the importance of food in the way Japanese perceive both themselves and the rest of the world.

Most Japanese hold tenaciously to the idea that their culture is somehow uniquely different from any other culture or society in the world — and that this is true of Japan’s dietary habits as well. The term they use is *shoku bunka* or “culinary culture”. And as both foreign residents of Japan and visitors have noted, there appears to be no other people so keenly attached to their native cuisine as the Japanese. This attachment is most evident in the area of sports. Japanese athletes, who travel overseas to competitions and training camps; regularly drag along one suitcase for their clothes and equipment and another — usually larger — packed full of ready-to-eat or easy-to-fix Japanese foods such as miso soup, Japanese pickles, noodles and rice.

Japan’s *shoku bunka*, of course, has been formed over the ages with abundant resources of fish and sea food nearby, a wide range of edible wild plants and a climate conducive to rice cultivation. It was influenced by the penetration of Chinese culture in the 7th to 9th centuries and the influx of Western civilization from the latter half of the 19th century. “Western” influences were

by William May

later reinforced during the occupation of Japan by the Allied Forces after World War II and later during the 1964 Tokyo Olympics.

When asked about gastronomy and the Olympics, one Japanese historian recalled the story of an athlete whose Olympic experience was apparently determined not by Japan’s food culture but by the food shortages that plagued Japan during the war and the early years of the occupation.

According to historian Isao Ito, the athlete had gone through the war as a child and knew the pain of not having enough to eat. Even after the war ended, these food shortages persisted in Japan as people struggled to feed their families in the early post-war years.

This athlete was a member of the Japanese delegation that went to Helsinki in 1952 and apparently was so overwhelmed by the quantity and quality of the food available in Helsinki that he stuffed himself and failed to pass the weigh-in for his competition.

Though attempts to verify the tale have been difficult, since no one can recall this particular incident. Isamu Shiraishi, the first weightlifter to represent Japan in the Olympics, seems the most likely to be the subject of the story since he traveled to Helsinki and was disqualified. However, as an Olympian-bound athlete, it seems that Shiraishi would have been provided with sufficient nourishment to train and thus would not have been so carried away by an abundance of food. In any case, the anecdote seems a fitting one for the annals of “Gastronomy and the Olympics”. There is something amusing about a hungry athlete who gave up his chance for Olympic

glory to eat the extra sandwich he could not have as a child.

During the occupation, the United States sent corn and wheat to Japan in an effort to alleviate the food shortages and instituted a school lunch programme to provide Japanese school children with milk and bread and to develop their taste of these “wonder foods”. One historian of Japanese popular culture reported that this attempt to reform the dietary habits of the Japanese went so far as to include a campaign that claimed rice was unhealthy and made a person drowsy and sluggish.

Ichiro Hatta, the father of Olympic wrestling in Japan, is not likely to have been influenced by this campaign, but he realized early that nutrition was important in developing strong wrestlers. He insisted that his trainees drink milk and eat plenty of meat and cheese. He also insisted that his wrestlers always eat the foods provided to them overseas while they were traveling to competitions and training sessions. Hatta’s motto was: “When in Rome, do as the Romans do”, and he did not want his wrestlers pining for Japanese food. It would certainly come as a surprise to Hatta to see today’s young Japanese athletes carting their favorite foods all over the world.

As Tokyo prepared to host the Games of the XVIII Olympiad, Japan and the Japanese people experienced tremendous changes as the city readied itself to welcome the world. New athletic facilities were built, Tokyo’s narrow streets were widened, more subways were constructed and the Olympic Village went up on the old US military housing site at Washington Heights in Shibuya Ward.

Three dining halls were created in the Village to feed the 7,000 athletes and officials from 94 countries who were ex-



pected to take part in the Games. Two of the dining halls — named “Fuji” and “Sakura” — were in the men’s quarters and had capacities of over 2,000 each, while the third was in the women’s quarters. The men’s dining halls were subdivided into six rooms and the delegations were assigned to a specific dining room according to their dietary customs.

The organizers of Tokyo Olympics later reported that “the dining halls were operated on the principle of serving the athletes and officials with the kind of food that best suited their dietary customs and yet contained sufficient calories and nutrition to adequately maintain their health and physical fitness”. No mention was made of any Japanese dishes on the menu, although *nori* (dried seaweed), *daikon* (Japanese radish), *bakusai* (Chinese cabbage), a long list of Japanese pickles, and 72,000 kilo-

grams of rice were included among the cooking materials procured for the Games.

Because of the size of the operation, the management of the dining halls was handed over to the Japan Hotel Association, which had among its members representatives from all of the leading hotels in Japan. “In order to operate international and sufficiently large-scale dining halls, extensive experience, knowledge and ability concerning food service were essential requirements”, the organizing committee reported. At that time, the number of Western restaurants in Japan was beginning to grow but the more highly regarded restaurants were still in the better urban hotels.

The duties of the food service staff seconded from the hotels included preparing and serving food and beverages, procurement and storage of supplies, the hiring and training of employees, and the acquisition of cooking utensils and tableware. During the actual operations, students from the travel clubs at different universities were drafted to do much of the table clearing and dish washing.

The standard menus contained at least 6,000 calories and the cafeteria offered a broad choice of foods. The regular me-

nus included “internationally accepted dishes” but special menus with dishes characteristic of specific countries were also prepared.

Nobuo Marakami, a member of the chef staff at the Imperial Hotel, was among the 300 cooks who assisted with the food service operations and was appointed head chef of the Village’s “Fuji” dining hall. He recalls beginning, in April 1962, 18 months before the start of the Games, to look into the dining and dietary habits of the different people who would be served at the Village.

“We called on the embassies of the different countries and spoke to the embassy chefs and the wives of the ambassadors. We even had members of the different embassies sample our cooking a number of times”, Murakami wrote in 1994.

Murakami also recalled that for the athletes from Muslim nations, the staff had to find a shop in Tokyo which prepared food according to Islamic religious practices. The food service staff eventually settled on a supplier and asked the butcher to sign a certificate ensuring that the meat was properly prepared, and this was hung in the dining room throughout the Games.

Murakami and the other planners also had to deal with the problems of prices. Hearing that the price of vegetables, meat and other foods was going to rise, they planned the purchase and storage of enough food for about 90 days, taking into account the time before and after the Olympics. Murakami said proudly that because of the accurate planning, only about 100 kilograms of sausage and ham were left after the Games’ food service was closed.

Some of the delegations brought their own cooks to the Games. These included three from France and two from India as well as chefs from Italy, Germany, Hungary and a dietitian from Poland. They either did the actual cooking for their delegations or supervised the cooking in the kitchens of the dining halls to which their delegations were assigned. Their meals were sometimes also

Dining pleasures in Sapporo.





Planning the menu.

served to the members of the other delegations sharing the same dining hall or dining room.

At the end of the Games, the Tokyo organizing committee proudly reported that it had expected some complaints regarding the menus, but “Actually, there were no complaints and the food ser-

Chop sticks



ved appeared to be generally favorably accepted among the athletes and officials”.

Beyond the Olympic Wage, visitors to Tokyo were trying their luck at wielding chopsticks and sampling raw fish and other Japanese delights. While the Japanese with their growing prosperity began dining out more at a greater variety of non-Japanese restaurants.

One effect of the Tokyo Olympics was a renewed confidence in Japanese foods as a source of energy for the country’s athletes. While Ichiro Hatta insisted upon a more Western diet for his wrestlers, the volleyball players of Hirofumi Daimatsu, known for their grueling eight-hour practice sessions, subsisted on *onigiri* rice balls which could be prepared beforehand and eaten quickly during breaks. According to the owner of a French-Italian restaurant in Tokyo, the winning of the gold by the Japanese women’s volleyball team before a nation-wide audience helped spur increased sales of automatic rice cookers in Tokyo and throughout Japan. as rice became a “food for success”.

For the 1972 Olympic Winter Games in Sapporo, the organizers first took into account the experience acquired in the 1964 Games and in many ways food service operations echoed those of Tokyo eight years earlier. The Sapporo organizers reported proudly that they assembled “Japan’s best and most skillful cooks, dining room managers and bartenders” as well as students from various hotel schools and university programmes in hotel management and tourism. The organizers believed that these latter recruits were important because, “from the demeanor and deportment of these fine young people. we can be sure that the dining room will be a place for fostering international goodwill and not merely a place to eat”.

The Sapporo organizers also made sure that the dining area for the press was “organized with no less care than for the athletes and officials.” The dining facilities reserved for the press included the added bonus of a “cocktail area staffed by the most carefully selected bartenders: to ensure that the atmosphere in the press house is convivial and conducive to the exchange of experience and ideas”.

In the lead-up to the Nagano Olympic Winter Games in 1998, food manufactur-

...and sushi



ers and tourism-related industries joined to organize a “Nagano cooking contest” in which contestants used materials from the region to create dishes that



A competitor with an eye for detail.



Almond, mulukhiya and wild grape bread.



Koya.



Kakis and dried apricots in rum sauce.



best represented the host city. "Let's take the opportunity of the Nagano Winter Olympic Games to create a new food culture and a new flavor for Nagano", the call for entries read. The cooking contest organizers also plan to hold a "Forum on the culinary culture of Nagano" while the Winter Games are underway.

The cooking competition was divided into three categories: dishes for regular sit-down dinners, light meals or snacks that can be eaten with one hand while standing, and *o-miyage* or local specialty foods that will introduce Japan and Nagano to the rest of the world.

A total of 914 items were entered by 118 professional and amateur chefs from Nagano and 527 from elsewhere in Japan. In the final competition, the 36

items that stood out as written recipes were produced for the panel of judges which included Murakami, now a food critic and consultant for the Imperial Hotel. Yoshiro Itabana, the winner in the dining category, created a dish of "dried persimmons and apricots flavored with rum sauce", while a sweet almond bread with *mulukhiya* (an Egyptian vegetable) and wild grapes won the *omiyage* category. "All of the items in the contest used materials from Nagano. They were all overflowing with local pride, and the feeling that this is the Nagano they want to show the world". Murakami said in praise of the culinary creations.

When the world flocks to the Japanese Alps in February 1998, the athletes and officials can be confident that the necessary meals will be provided, prepared by some of Japan's finest cooks. And beyond the athletes' dining hall, adventures in Japanese and local Nagano cuisine are waiting. Just remember. "Can you use chopsticks?" is not really a serious question, but rather an attempt by your hosts to engage you in a friendly conversation.



Award ceremony, for the Nagano cooking competition