

A Taste of Japanese Culture

Natsumi Suzuki

Aoyama Gakuin University

May 7, 2015

Food is a window into a culture. Even in the same country, each region has their own culture and their own traditions, which influences their local food. In just Tokyo, there are 17 types of local food (“Japanese Local Cuisine,” 2015, para.7). Through a simple calculation, we could say that there may be more than 130 types of local food in 47 prefectures, but there is even more. Local food changes their character depending on the ingredients. Since Japan has a wide range of areas, from subtropical to the subarctic zones, the food differs in each area. This means that the local food in the northern area and the food made in the southern area are very different. Hokkaido, Tokyo and Okinawa’s local food are three areas where the differences in food culture can be seen clearly.

First of all, Hokkaido’s food culture is different from other regions in Japan. Hokkaido is an island and is the biggest prefecture in Japan. Since Hokkaido has their big land and their sea that surrounds them, it is thought that they use those resources efficiently in agriculture, fishery and so on. This connects to their food culture. One example is the “kaisen-don” which is a bowl of sashimi on top of rice. It uses fresh seafood, from fishes to

shellfishes, from Hokkaido. Another example is the “steamed potatoes”. According to the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fishery (2014, p. 21), Hokkaido produces 77% of the potatoes that are distributed in Japan. Therefore, Hokkaido’s local food reflects their primary-industry.

Tokyo also has its own food culture that is different from other places in Japan. One example is “oden,” which has ingredients stewed in a light soy-flavored dashi broth. This style of stewing was made in the Edo period (“Japanese Local Cuisine,” 2015, para.7). Another example is “fukagawa-don,” which is a bowl of rice with shellfishes stewed with vegetables on top. This was originally made with shellfish caught in the Fukagawa River during the Edo period. The last example is “monjyayaki,” which is like a pancake with various ingredients like cheese and Japanese scallops. This food is also from the Edo period. Therefore, Tokyo’s food culture reflects the history of Edo.

Finally, Okinawa has its own food culture that differs from the mainland. This is due to the fact that Okinawa was a different country until the late 1800s. The Okinawa Prefectural Office (2014, para. 3) says “Okinawa was influenced by neighboring countries which also gave influence to the food culture.” The first example of a popular dish is “soki-soba,” which is a type of noodle made in Okinawa. This bowl is like a combination between udon and ramen. Another example is “goyachanpuru,” which is a stir fry dish that

uses goya, a type of bitter melon. “Chanpuru” means mixed in the Okinawa dialect and this word is sometimes used to refer to the Ryukyu, Chinese, and Japanese culture in Okinawa. The last example is “sata andagi” which is similar to a doughnut. In the Okinawa dialect, “sata” means sugar and “andagii” means deep fried. Black sugar, which is one of the Okinawa’s specialty products, is often used to make this dessert. Therefore, Okinawa’s food culture is different from other parts of Japan because of its ingredient and mixed culture.

To conclude, Japan has various types of local foods reflects each areas culture and history. Hokkaido’s food reflects its agriculture and fishery, Tokyo’s cuisine reflects its history, and Okinawa’s food reflects its own mixed culture. On eating from north to the south, you may feel like going on a cuisine tour through Japan.

Works Cited

Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fishery. (2014). *FY2013 Annual report on food agriculture and rural areas in Japan*. Tokyo: MAFF. Retrieved April 15, 2015, from <http://www.maff.go.jp/e/pdf/summary.pdf>

Okinawa Prefectural Government (2014). Okinawa's local food. Retrieved April 15, 2015, from <http://www.pref.okinawa.jp/index.html>

Japanese regional cuisine. (2015, March). *Wikipedia*. Retrieved April 15, 2015, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Japanese_regional_cuisine