

Sushi USA: The Japanese Paradigm

Based in Decatur, Illinois, John Kessler is a food writer and chief dining critic for the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. A graduate of Williams College in Williamstown, Massachusetts, Kessler also attended L'Academie de Cuisine culinary school in Bethesda, Maryland. Before his time at the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, Kessler worked in several restaurants and taught English in Japan.

Kessler's article "The Japanese Paradigm" explores the prevalence and misappropriation of Japanese food in American culture. He ^{声称} claims that for Americans, in contrast to the Japanese, the focus is on quantity over quality. Using obesity and life expectancy statistics as evidence, Kessler argues that the American "translation" of Japanese ^{烹饪} cuisine—such as deep-fried sushi—fails to capture Japan's healthy approach toward food. ^{摘要}

Sit down to a Sinatra roll at Shout restaurant, and this is what you get: a sushi roll stuffed with three kinds of fish and cream cheese, breaded and deep-fat-fried, and served up with spicy mayonnaise and a syrupy brown sauce.

My friend, I'll say it clear; I'll state my case of which I'm certain: Sushi "my way" is just so wrong.

How did it come to this? How did we Americans take an iconic Japanese dish that should be the essence of simplicity and freshness and turn it into seppuku on a plate?

Sushi is everywhere—so everywhere that it's turned into American food.

Supermarkets may no longer have butchers or bakers on site, but 5 thousands now have chefs who spend all day pressing California rolls. There's even one at the Wal-Mart in Plano, Texas. I saw it. Two nice

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Burmese men prepare 300 boxes each day next to a wall of Velveeta. The franchiser, AFC Corp., hopes to be in 200 more Wal-Marts soon.

We claim to love Japanese food, but we simply don't get it. Every good thing about the Japanese diet has been lost in translation.

Granted, the Japanese way of eating, unique to the culture that produced it, does not cross cultures easily. We may be in thrall to the small part we know, but we're still blind to the big picture of the Japanese diet—both its untold pleasures and its implications for health and well-being.

日本 → 対比
obesity Japan today has the thinnest people among 30 industrialized countries, with an obesity rate around 3 percent, as opposed to America's 31 percent. Japan also has the world's longest life expectancy. Yet the Japanese encounter the same lifestyle issues most often implicated in America's rampant obesity problem. They face the same daily stresses, the same disappearing family dinner hour, the same reliance on processed foods, and the same sedentary workplaces.

The Japanese eat more fish and vegetables and less overall fat. But the vital difference, I think, is in how they present flavors, approach meals, respond to hunger and engage all their senses at the table. Simply put, the Japanese know how to eat less and enjoy their food more.

The only way to explain this truth is to tell it.

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personal experience → In 1983, after graduating from college, I moved to the Kansai region of western Japan for two years to teach English. When I first arrived, each meal seemed booby-trapped. The yellow spongy tile on the sashimi platter was merely sweetened egg. But the pinkish goo in the small dish? Fermented squid innards that tasted like shark chum mixed with ammonia.

Learning to appreciate this food took patience. Some of my expat friends gave up hope and subsisted on McDonald's and care packages bearing Old El Paso taco kits.

For me, the turnaround came after I had been in the country for about a month and an American colleague who knew the ropes invited me out to dinner. The meal was unlike any Japanese meal I had eaten back home. The restaurant was in the labyrinth of Osaka's uptown entertainment district, in a dark underground bunker of a dining room. It was an *izakaya*—a kind of pub with an extended menu of snacks and other small dishes.

My friend and I knocked back draft beers as he did the ordering—crisp grilled rice balls, dressed boiled spinach, pork dumplings and a few other easy-to-like dishes.

No squid goo.

The food arrived helter-skelter, and we shared it all. We ordered more as needed, but after eight or 10 plates, our diminished appetites cut us off.

This one meal encapsulated everything I would come to learn about Japanese food over the next two years.

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For starters, it offered a far greater variety of foods than any I had eaten before. Variety, above all, is key to the Japanese diet.

At restaurants, at home, in packed lunches, Japanese meals do not seem complete without constant contrasts. A boneless chicken breast with rice and one vegetable? This kind of "wholesome American meal" would never pass muster in Japan.

Tokyo-based author Elizabeth Andoh attributes this deeply ingrained 20 Japanese impulse to a 1,200-year-old set of dietary guidelines. In her new cookbook, *Washoku* (Ten Speed Press, \$35), she notes that washoku, a derivation of Buddhist practice, suggests that each meal should contain five different colors, primary tastes (sweet, salty, etc.), textures and cooking preparations. These principles are not something most modern Japanese think about, but, as Andoh maintains, they are second nature.

"You could follow a girl who's been up all night in a club into a konbini [convenience store], and the assortment of junk food she puts into her kaato [shopping cart] will follow washoku," says Andoh.

The Japanese Health Ministry published a more contemporary set of nutrition guidelines in 1985 with the slogan "ichi nichi sanju hinmoku tabeyo," or "eat 30 different foods each day." (Japan's Martha Stewart, popular cookbook author Harumi Kurihara, still recommends this.) Compare this to the original USDA Food Guide Pyramid from 1992, with its suggested 15 to 26 servings of the various food groups, and the message is telling: Americans quantify what they eat, the Japanese qualify.

With such variety on the table, no one dish can predominate. Granted, my izakaya meal was similar to a tapas spread (albeit with more, smaller dishes), but in Japan this kind of decentralized approach is the norm, whether at a formal dinner, in a quick-service restaurant or sitting around the family dinner table.

"There's no main dish, but many small dishes," says Shinobu Kitayama, a University of Michigan psychologist who studies group dynamics. At a typical home dinner, he says, each member of the family gets a bowl of miso soup and rice, while the group shares a variety of *sozai*, or side dishes.

But these are not really sides in the American sense. They may be seasoned vegetables, meat or fish. Most often, *sozai* combine vegetables with small amounts of animal protein; any given meal might feature fish, beef and pork.

"Basically, Japanese are meat-eating vegetarians," says Kitayama. "You'd never see a 500-gram steak like you would in America."

Sozai may be homemade but will just as likely come from the freezer case, a supermarket, a convenience store or from the vast food halls in the basements of department stores. Everything is portioned and

individually packaged—hundreds of small dishes for the taking. Compare this deli experience to, say, Whole Foods Market, where the hot bar, salads and cheesy casseroles come by the pound.

Again, it's quality vs. quantity.

With so many small dishes on the table, the vessels themselves matter. Any Japanese meal presents a tableau of artfully mismatched dishware. Home pantries brim with small plates and bowls.

On a formal level, the art of Japanese food arranging is as codified as 30 flower arranging; in daily practice, people cook from a huge repertoire of dishes, each of which has an accepted "look." Embedded in the aesthetic lie constant visual clues to portion size.

Bear in mind this describes the sushi experience in Japan. Diners sit at the bar and order sushi by the piece or pair directly from the chef or, in an inexpensive kaitenzushi shop, taking plates off a conveyor belt. Most small neighborhood restaurants operate in a similar fashion. The moment a bite of food is ready, the cook hands it to you.

The Japanese approach to satiety is a parabolic curve with an infinite endpoint. "Stuffed" is never the desirable conclusion.

Kitayama believes this is why Japanese food favors subtle seasoning. "Strong tastes can stimulate your appetite, like in Chinese food." Japan may have the only national cuisine with no traditional use for garlic.

If an incremental, small-plates meal leaves someone with a big appetite hungry two hours later, there's a time-honored tradition called shime—"closing" the evening at a soup noodle stand. The broth will be dashi—the ubiquitous stock made from dried skipjack tuna and sea kelp—and it will be filled with umami.

This Japanese notion of a fifth primary taste (in addition to sweet, 35 sour, bitter and salty) was proven by researchers at the University of Miami in 2000, who isolated receptors on the tongue for the amino acids naturally abundant in dashi and many other foods.

In the West, we associate the satisfaction of umami with meats, cheeses and other caloric sources of animal protein. Because the Japanese didn't eat meat until the Meiji Restoration of 1868, the cuisine found ways to extract umami from sea vegetables, fish and plants. The food is low in fat but richer in sources of umami. On the most basic neurochemical level, it tastes meatier than actual meat.

That izakaya meal was for me the beginning of a lifelong passion for Japanese food. When I returned home after two years, I remember thinking how unnecessarily large the portions were here and how the food sat in my stomach after meals. Sadly, the feeling didn't last.

Fried anything—even sushi—is easy enough to eat.

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