



'My sick husband'



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A collage of just a handful of the delicious and 'kawaii' spring treats that Caroline has seen while in Japan.

Springtime in Japan: *Mochi is my sensei*

Springtime in Japan doesn't just bring in sakura, but all of the delicious spring-inspired treats



Caroline Ishii
Columnist

I love that food for the Japanese is so much more than just food. It is an integral part of life.

Food is always right there, like the inexpensive and easy-to-grab *onigiri* rice ball you'll find in 7-Eleven or Lawson convenience stores, called *konbinis* in Japan. Food also is an important part of Japanese culture, and a necessity in any celebration.

Springtime is approaching in Japan, a change you can see in the different blossoms slowly popping up. I told a man I saw *sakura* and he replied with a definite "no." He added, "it's too early, perhaps *ume* (plum)?"

Don't mess with the Japanese, they know their blossoms around here, and the difference between plum, peach and cherry.

Back home, we have foods that signify the arrival of spring like asparagus and rhubarb, and I love that. But here it seems like the whole country is in a collective conspiracy to celebrate spring before even the first blossoms appear outside.

The first sign that spring is approaching is the displays in stores. Almost overnight, everything has changed to beautiful displays with spring pastel colours, carefully arranged branches with blossoms made of paper and ornate Japanese ceremonial dolls.

First, there is *Hinamatsuri* or Girl's Day, which is celebrated on March 3, to pray for the health and happiness of young girls in

Japan. Soon after arrives *hanami* (cherry blossom viewing) which starts anywhere from the end of March to early May. The exact timing depends on the region, and there are always news forecasts on when the blossoms are arriving. This is a much-anticipated time for gathering with family and friends to view the blossoms and have picnics.

As with all holidays in Japan, there is, of course, special food to match.

One of my favourite things to look at and taste are the special spring-themed *wagashi*. *Wagashi* are traditional Japanese confections, often served with tea, usually made of *mochi*, sweetened *azuki* bean paste, and fruits, and are typically made with plant ingredients.

Japanese spring sweets include:

- *Chi chi dango* (it reminds me of *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* for those who remember the movie), small soft and chewy pink *mochi* dumplings, served for Girl's Day
- *Sakura mochi*, a pink-coloured *mochi* with an *azuki* paste centre, wrapped in a pickled *sakura* leaf
- *Ichigo daifuku*, a combination of fresh *mochi*, *azuki* paste, and a fresh strawberry
- *Hanami dango*, traditional tri-color dumplings, made with sweetened rice flour and served on a skewer
- Spring colourings of *yokan*, a red or white bean-based dessert with agar and sugar
- Beautiful transparent *kanten* (agar) jelly molds are filled with spring-type arrangements and fruit
- *Rakugan*, traditional candy made by pressing Japanese sugar, soybean flour and other fine powders in wooden molds, changed to blossom shapes and spring colours.

Storefront windows arranged with these sweet treats feel like

department store windows back home at Christmas with so much to see and marvel at, especially as a child. Here it is the adults who come to admire and leave with packages of sweets to share.

A Canadian friend of mine who is living in Tokyo said he didn't have a sweet tooth before coming to Japan. Now he loves the Japanese desserts, with interesting shapes and textures, and often sweet and salty combinations.

My Japanese ancestry is confirmed when I cannot pass booths with freshly made *mochi* without stopping. Even as I write this column, I am getting a strong craving for *mochi*.

While the Japanese may seem conservative and reserved on the outside, there is an endearing focus on children and the wonder of childhood that is kept alive everywhere, with cute or *kawaii* prominent in all things, in particular food.

There are many French bakeries and cafes in Tokyo that sell beautiful cakes and pastries with a typical French elegance, but *kawaii* presentation. Mont Blanc is a favourite dessert of puréed, sweetened chestnuts formed in a spaghetti-like consistency like a mountain, topped with whipped cream to resemble the snow-cap. There are also desserts shaped like pandas, pigs, rabbits, cats, and dogs (it is the year of the dog after all) competing in the *kawaii* category.

Kawaii desserts even invade the world of Japanese animations. Take Anpanman, your classic superhero who wears a cap, fights for truth, justice, and no biggie, but he happens to be a bread roll with sweet bean paste inside. Doraemon, the famous blue cartoon cat from a manga series, has a special pouch for his favourite food, *dorayaki*, a dessert of small pancake-like patties wrapped around *azuki* paste filling.

If I was one of these superhe-

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roes, my dessert would be *yomogi daifuku*, which is *mochi* flavoured and coloured with mugwort leaves, which are common in Japan, and filled with sweetened *azuki* paste. Though if I had a special pouch, it would always be empty.

The Japanese love their sweets but not in the same way that we do back home. It's not so much that they have a sweet tooth or have it at the end of the meal. Actually, I have found many prefer salty to sweet, but like everything else that they eat, they like small portions to eat, share and give away as *omiyage*.

Omiyage, or gift-giving, is an important part of the culture in Japan and sweets are one of the main things people give, so it is a big business here.

I was in a department store basement, where all the wonderful food is hidden and a must-visit when in Japan, and bought *manju*, a small pastry usually filled with *azuki* paste, from a vendor. It was 100 yen or about \$1.19 CDN.

The young woman greeted me warmly, repeated my order, and asked me to wait while she got it ready. Before she did this, she served me a warm Japanese tea and a small sweet on a tray while I waited.

I watched her as she carefully placed my *manju* in a special box, wrapped the box in beautiful paper, sealed it with a special sticker, tied it with ribbon, and put it in a bag.

There was no rushing, impatience or irritation that I had just bought one. She did her job care-



PHOTO COURTESY: CAROLINE ISHII

Spring store displays are like Canadian ones during the Christmas season.

fully and cheerfully. I gave her the money. She said thank you as she bowed deeply to me and presented me with my receipt and package. I felt good about my experience and was excited to try the *manju* when I got home.

As much as I will remember the delicious food here, I will remember the kindness of friends and strangers that are happy to have the honour of serving you.

Looking at the Japanese celebration of cherry blossom

viewing provides a glimpse into Japanese culture. The Japanese reunite with friends and family to enjoy special food under the beauty of the blossoming *sakura*,

"As much as I will remember the delicious food here, I will remember the kindness of friends and strangers."

spectacular but short-lived for about two weeks.

Sakura season signifies the beginning of spring and a time of renewal and optimism as it coincides with the beginning of the

Japanese fiscal and school year.

It also symbolizes a major theme in Buddhism, the impermanence of life, and therefore the importance of being mindful and living in the present.

It is admirable, though I do admit to being so hungry that I have to buy an *onigiri* or *yomogi daifuku* on the way home and hide out as I eat it. You rarely see people eating or drinking on the run here.

In the several months I have been here and seeing thousands

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tions of the sport such as weight divisions. Canadian Doug Rogers took the silver medal in the heavyweight class.

His conqueror, with a narrow decision by the judges, was Isao Inokuma, the all-Japan champion. Doug's achievement was something to be very proud of. His coach in Tokyo was Frank Hatashita, of course.

As for my own judo career—I resigned my vice-presidency, wanting to slow down a little. I still went in once or twice a week to the original Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre in Toronto to help teach the judo classes under Peter Hasegawa-sensei.

I worked with Gen Nakahara, the top-ranked teacher as the senior advisor, and with colleagues including Bill Aoki, Frank Ide-nouye, Mits Kamino, Frank Sumi and Harry Henning.

This went on until the 1980s, when I was still going strong in judo, but teaching journalism at a community college meant not having much extra time, even during evenings or weekends. So I had my *judogi* washed and stored, and wore it when asked to give talks at the *dojo* about our country's judo history to the current pupils.

Since then, I have become a happy spectator as judo remains one of the most popular martial arts in Canada, so much so that when a list of current *judoka*

appears, you have to search for Japanese names. They are outnumbered by so many other Canadian *judoka* passionate about the sport.

Founder Jigoro Kano and Canadian pioneer leaders Shigetaka Sasaki, and Atsumu Kamino must be most happy to see how the sport has succeeded in Canada.

Why Judo Still Helps Me

In a final reflection about judo, although I don't wear my *judo-gi* or get on the *dojo tatami* any more, my experiences during recent years have proved to me how useful my judo training still is for me.

It's when I fall or get knocked down. Even now, in my mid-90s, I don't worry about falling. Why not?

When I played slo-pitch softball at a Scarborough park until a few years ago, I fell a couple times (but safely). First, around home plate, for some reason there was some gravel sprinkled especially on the right side. So when hitting a single, and running hard to beat the fielder, I would occasionally slip on the gravel and fall.

Except that as I began to go down, I would unconsciously do an *ukemi* (the judo breakfall) so I would not hit my head or hurt my wrists or elbows.

Then one time a few years ago I was a runner on second. When the batter hit a sharp one towards

the shortstop, he came charging in to get the grounder. Seeing how sharp the hit was, I ran towards third incautiously. And then there was a collision: I had run into Norm who was running for the grounder.

He was not only a good baseball player, but he was also over 6 feet tall and more than 200 pounds. I ran right into him and bounced off his hip and went down to the ground.

But again, the *ukemi* set in and I was not hurt anywhere. I hoped I hadn't bruised Norm either. Happily, I hadn't—but I was tagged out.

"It's when I fall or get knocked down. Even now, in my mid-90s, I don't worry about falling. Why not?"

When I walked off, a couple of the guys on our team asked, "How come you take a somersault when you're running the bases?"

This is how my *ukemi* must have seemed. Particularly when the shortstop's hip was higher off the ground.

But the ultimate example of when *ukemi* helped me happened one winter night when a car hit me. It was a dark January evening when I was going from our North York home to get a copy of *The Globe and Mail* from the nearby convenience store.

The store was at a T-shaped intersection with stoplights. I was on the north side of the street and

crossing when the light turned green. Suddenly, something hit me (it was the fender of a car turning left at the intersection).

I went up in the air and then came down to the ground as the guilty car stopped. Since it was winter, I was wearing a parka and a hood, which helped.

But the main thing that helped was the automatic *ukemi* I spent so many years learning that made me tuck in my head to keep it from hitting the ground hard. Also I did not put any arms out or land on my shoulders.

So the only damage I incurred was the very sore bruise on my right thigh where the car's fender had got me.

I lay there for a few seconds as all the traffic at the intersection seemed to stop, and a kind fellow (who turned out to be an off-duty firefighter) stopped his car and ran over to help me.

So with him holding me, I limped into the convenience store where they found a chair for me to sit on. The police and the paramedics were phoned. As it happened to be a Friday lottery night, there was quite a lineup of people in the store, all curious about this victim who was trying not to make faces because his thigh hurt.

Then the paramedics' siren sounded, and in they came to check me out. They decided there

of people in passing, I have only seen a handful of people eating or drinking while in public and it's usually at certain locations.

It is considered rude to not stop while eating, in order to appreciate the food properly and give it the attention and respect it deserves.

Therefore, I try to stop myself when I'm hungry to wait to eat until I get home. This is where I think the Japanese develop their patience and perseverance because it's tough, and I don't succeed sometimes.

But when I wait until I come home to make some Japanese tea, carefully unwrap the *mochi* and eat it mindfully, appreciating its beauty and deliciousness with each bite, I am grateful for the experience, and I truly relax and come home.

Food is much more than food here. It's a spiritual experience. And *mochi* is my *sensei*. There is the opportunity for mindfulness and gratitude with every encounter with food, whether giving or receiving.

I am becoming more Japanese with every *mochi* I eat—I'm only counting those I eat mindfully. The other ones I count as mistakes. As I say in my cooking classes, the good thing about food is that you can eat your mistakes.

Happy springtime of renewal and optimism, wherever you are.

A Japanese-Canadian chef, author and speaker, I am in Japan finishing my book on Canadian Vegan Recipes for Kirasienne publishing in Tokyo, and eating lots of mochi. The book will be released in Japan in March 2018.

were no serious cuts or anything, but I should be X-rayed in case something really bad had happened to my stricken leg. The police officer decided to take me up a few miles to the closest emergency clinic.

And so my first—and so far only—ride in the back of a police car happened. At the Branson Hospital (now North York General Hospital), I had to wait a bit for the X-raying.

What was funny was the triage nurse telling the other nurse that I was in my 70s, while the other nurse looked at me and said, "Naw, he looks like he's in his 50s."

The x-ray proved nothing was broken so it wasn't such a bad night, after all. And that was my major *ukemi*-saved-me incident. All those years of judo had made the *ukemi* an automatic part of me that happened by itself.

Since then, each time the sore place on my thigh aches, it reminds me of the middle-aged fellow who was driving the car that hit me, crying tears when he came out of his car hoping his victim wasn't dead or seriously hurt. And the amazing thing was that my leg healed in five or six days, so I could drive our car again.

Thanks to judo and to Kamino-sensei who had made me practice for over a year to make sure my *ukemi* was done just right.
