

Lessons from Ochi: Healthy and mindful food habits



Healthy food practices are taught in Japan at a young age

Caroline Ishii
Columnist

OCHI — I thought it would be simple to write about food. It's easy to write about what you love, right?

I realized this may not always be the case. It's like when someone asks me about Japan after being away for a year. What can you say without sitting down with them for a few hours?

Instead, I give an elevator pitch. It was great, I learned a lot, I loved Shikoku island. I know this is not enough for me, but the other person is satisfied. It is hard to sum up what you love and why.

That's what happened when I spoke about my time in Japan during the Virtual Communal Table I hosted on Zoom for World Food Day on Oct. 16. Be-

fore the event, guests picked up or were delivered a Japanese-inspired five-course meal.

The table was set for me to speak, but I was hesitant about what to say about food and Japan. Why?

First, for me, food is more than food. It is about nourishment, beauty, excitement, adventure, learning, and much more. Most of all, it's about love.

Living in Japan, I realized that my approach to food was not as unique as I thought. It's part of the Japanese culture and people. Food for the Japanese is not just something you must do along the way to something else. It is the journey and the destination, an important part of daily life.

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Japanese meal traditions

Before Japanese people begin their meals, they bow slightly, with palms together and eyes closed, and say, *itadakimasu*. This means, "I will humbly eat this food served to me." It is about respect, sincerity, and gratitude for all that went into the meal. From everything it took for the food to be grown, harvested, prepared, and brought to you.

Following a meal, saying *gochisousama* is a way to express that

you are done eating and enjoyed the food. It is also a way to further show appreciation toward the feast and everything it took to create it.

Japanese school lunches

Respect for food is taught at a young age. In the elementary and junior high schools where I worked as an assistant language teacher with the Japan Exchange and Teaching Program (JET), school lunches, called *kyuushoku*, are more than just a meal.

The lunches are planned by the school nutritionist and cooked onsite in a commercial kitchen by paid staff. There are no cafeterias, and instead, students eat lunch together in their home-room classroom.

The schools have a highly efficient operation for serving lunch. Each class receives a big trolley from

the kitchen, stacked with large metal bins of food, along with dishes, cutlery, and glass jars of milk.

During the lunch period, the classroom turns into a mini cafeteria with long tables. Some of the students are designated as the chefs for the day. They wear special outfits of cloth gowns, masks, and chef hats to serve their peers.

It's hard for us to imagine six-year-old children serving each other. Still, they do it in Japan



PHOTO COURTESY: CAROLINE ISHII

School children take turns serving each other lunch in Japan.

with incredible focus and care, that I watched in amazement.

The homeroom teacher reminds the students to take only the portion they want to eat, and they must eat everything they take.

After they finish, each student is responsible for clearing their tray, putting everything back in a neat pile of dishes, cutlery, and trays. They scrape their dishes, throw away the trash, and wash out their milk bottles, so everything is in orderly and clean piles as they came in.

They clean their desks with a damp cloth and then grab their

toothbrushes with their names on it in an assigned covered holder and brush their teeth. And all this, they do on their own without prompting, which fascinated me to no end.

Japan's school lunch system began in 1889 in Tsuruoka, Yamagata prefecture. An elementary school began serving lunch to students who couldn't afford to bring lunch. Schools across the nation began to follow suit.

School lunches in Japan are taken very seriously, like a course in the educational curriculum. It

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Frankly speaking: Eating tofu sparks food memories



Eating tofu reminded me of some Japanese food incidents

Frank Moritsugu
Columnist

TORONTO — The other day I experienced a food delight. Yup, with my *gohan* (steamed rice), there was nice cold *tofu* cut up in small blocks that I lightly touched in *shoyu* to enjoy.

Tofu is one of many Japanese goodies that I've been eating since I was a young child in Vancouver. In the Kitsilano Japanese community, there was a *tofuya-san* (maker) a block away from where we lived. I'd go down the lane often carrying a pot with water to put the tofu into.

For some reason, Betty and I hadn't eaten *tofu* for some time. In our many years together, she'd become familiar with this Japanese foodstuff, too.

So last week she had bought some *tofu* she found at our local supermarket. *Sushi* is also offered there as many Toronto stores do these days.

And eating the *tofu* was refreshingly tasty and got me

thinking about other such Japanese eating experiences I've never forgotten.

For instance, when I was in the Canadian Army, the food was healthy, but like many other Canadian Nisei, we naturally missed meals with steamed rice.

During 1945, with the war still on against Japan, a group of us attached to a British secret service operation as interpreters was crossing India on a train from Bombay (now Mumbai) to Calcutta (now Kolkata). Unfortunately, our dinners during the three to four day trip were the same each day. What's worse, the "meat" was corned beef in those unusual cans. Put me off corned beef forever.

And in India after having all this British army food, many of us JCs kept wanting rice desperately. No. Not with curry.

One unexpected venture with a Chinese restaurant near an army camp in India we tried was quite memorable. This happened after the war was over, and our group of JCs was returning home. We were in a camp not far from Bombay, waiting until a ship leaving Asia would have room for us.

Needing to eat steamed rice badly, we asked around. One British soldier told us about a Chinese restaurant a few miles away. So we rented a horse-drawn wagon and down we went.

The building was unmistakably Chinese, with that bright red colour and a high staircase to be



PHOTO CREDIT: ALBERT TAKIMOTO/WE WENT TO WAR

These nine Nisei Canadian Army sergeants are shown in India in 1946, waiting to go home with the activities in Southeast Asia over. Front Row (left to right): Frank Moritsugu, Sid Sakanashi, Elmer Oike, and Edgar Iwamoto. Back Row: Jin Ide and Fred Kagawa (who visited Scotland together with Frank), Albert Takimoto, Harold Hirose, and Ernie Oikawa.

climbed to the restaurant. As the wagon unloaded us, an Asian fellow in civilian clothes was part-way down that staircase, and as we neared him, he started to welcome us in Chinese.

So we stopped, shook our heads, and when the fellow asked in English, "Who are you?" One of our gang yelled, "Japanese Canadian!"

"Oh," he said, then came down to welcome us with, "*Irrasshai*,

Irrasshai."

He led us inside the restaurant and seated us after connecting some tables together.

Then he went into the kitchen

"And in India after having all this British army food, many of us JCs kept wanting rice desperately. No. Not with curry."

and out came what seemed to be the entire staff—those with white chef hats and others. Obviously to see us "Japanese" in this part of India.

I asked the welcomer in *Nihongo* where he learned the language, and he said he'd worked in Yokohama before the war.

We all had a good time there and the Chinese dinner was also most enjoyable. Afterward, as we talked about this experience to our *hakujin* mates at our camp, we were told there were Chinese restaurants all over

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Difficult move east of the Rockies

NAJC seeks apology from Toronto for Second World War rebuke

Mel Tsuji
Contributor

TORONTO — The National Association of Japanese Canadians in Toronto is seeking an apology from the city for ignoring pleas of help to escape racial problems in B.C. nearly 80 years ago.

The request was made to Toronto Mayor John Tory during a town hall meeting Oct. 6 in Toronto. He admitted he had no answers for Lynn Deutscher Kobayashi, president of the NAJC Toronto chapter, at this moment.

But Tory said he would have a reply for Kobayashi at the end of the month.

This involved an issue that had been around since 1942, when Japanese Canadians were rounded up and forced to live in B.C. internment camps. A war against Japan had started the year before bringing one of the worst human rights violations down upon the Japanese Canadian community for the sole reason that they looked like the enemy.

All Japanese Canadian properties and possessions were confiscated, their fishing boats and businesses taken from them and never returned. It was the culmi-

nation of years of racial discrimination against the Japanese Canadian community.

That was why Japanese Canadians wanted out of B.C. and to get to other Canadian cities, where they hoped they might be welcomed. But they were to find their hopes were premature.

According to Ken Adachi, the late Nisei historian, Lethbridge, Alta. was becoming known as an “anti-Japanese” city after its city council banned Japanese Canadian girls from working as domestics and further banned all Japanese from beer parlours and liquor outlets in the province.

Calgary and Edmonton also urged the removal of all Japanese from the province.

But most Japanese Canadians were looking further east, to Ontario. Despite farm labour shortages, towns and cities in Southwestern Ontario flatly refused to accept Japanese.

In Ingersoll, Grimsby and Georgetown anti-Japanese demonstrations were reported. The criticisms had a familiar ring: the inassimilabiity of Japanese Canadians, unfair competition to local farmers, a threat to national security and a lower standard of living.

At first, Toronto said flat out it didn’t want them. After meeting with business, labour and patriotic organizations, Toronto’s board of control prohibited the Japanese Canadians’ entry into

the city.

The key reason, they said, was vulnerability of local war industries. But by the 1943, the ban was relaxed and 700 Japanese Canadians were allowed to enter the city.

Adachi wrote that Japanese Canadians were to discover the restrictions were still very much around. In November of 1944, the Toronto Police Commission refused to issue licenses for trade and business to Nisei evacuees who wanted to establish businesses.

After receiving approval to buy a small restaurant, one Nisei was forced to sell out at a loss after a hearing for the license was postponed eight times and finally rejected.

Adachi writes that another Nisei, who hoped to operate a radio repair shop in North Toronto, had his application turned down after a protest by a local businessman.

“I did not come here of my own choice,” he said during a hearing. “I had a business in Vancouver, but I had to give it up. Personally, I think in a country like Canada which is fighting for democracy that I would be given more consideration.”

Presiding Judge Herbert Barton replied: “You write and tell the holy father in Japanese to call off the war and then I will con-

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teaches students etiquette, serving and cleaning skills, healthy food choices, and lifelong eating habits, and introduces them to a variety of food. Most importantly, the lunch system creates a bond between schoolmates in sharing a meal.

For the school office staff and teachers, lunch is served by the assistant in a separate room from the office. She lets the staff know when the trays of food are ready. Even with the announcement, they do not rush in to eat. There is a slow meandering to sit at the table, and often staff encourage each other to go first.

Was anyone hungry? I’m sure they were, but in Japan, it’s always “you before me,” which makes it awkward to be the first to begin without a little embarrassment or guilt.

Some teachers supervise the student lunch service in classrooms and eat with them. Sometimes I ate with the students at the elementary school.

I learned so much about Japanese culture and how children are taught mindfulness at an early age. It was a year of observation, where I began reflecting on my thoughts and actions.

Japanese Canadian inside

I may look Japanese on the outside. However, the more I lived in my town, the more I realized how Canadian I was. Town residents would always treat me as a

foreigner, which reinforced this.

However, at the same time, I was expected to follow Japanese traditions and school rules that were often unspoken. I would often find out about them if I crossed any invisible lines.

My colleague or boss would whisper words to me in Japanese about what I did wrong. Their words would seem kind enough initially because the tone was soft and gentle. However, as I heard the words, a knot would form in my stomach. I could feel the sting of their words intended to discipline and ensure I stay in line with the others. I felt like a scolded child and guilty about something that I hadn’t even

became extremely popular in Japan. They sell everything from hot meals, sake, and cold beer to cigarettes, costumes, and hilarious festive headgear for your cat. Instead of entering a store and going through the exchange and formalities that are part of the culture, you can pay and get what you need quickly and privately.

The god in your onigiri

Part of Japanese culture and tradition is making a conscious effort to be mindful of food. Food, like most things in Japanese life, is spiritual.

Some believe there is a god in everything, including food. So, if there is a god in food, might we treat it more carefully?

It’s about being mindful of what you eat, how much you eat, and how you eat it. I never witnessed any quick, messy, or haphazard eating. It was all about intention and focus on whatever you are doing, including eating.

That’s why it’s frowned upon to eat or drink while you are moving. It’s disrespectful to the food. You wouldn’t want to offend your *onigiri*, would you?

Often you see people at vending machines drinking what they just purchased or standing at counters to eat their ramen or tempura. You seldom see people walking while eating and drinking.

What a waste!

I hate wasting food. I learned this growing up, putting even the smallest portions of leftovers in

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known about.


Rules about food and eating and just about everything in Japanese life encouraged me to be more mindful of my actions. At times, this was challenging, being a Canadian girl at heart and wanting to be the feisty, independent, and free spirit I am. It was a fine balance.

I found out over time that it’s not just me. When speaking to my Japanese friends, they said sometimes it can be a burden to always act in the right way at the right time, especially for women, when if you don’t, you are frowned upon and shunned.


That’s why I heard vending machines, called *jidohanbaiki*,

“Maybe it’s time we thought about it”
“We were curious ... so we asked a specialist”

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Caroline with Chef Yamada-san of Mominoko in Japan.

the fridge for later. In coming to Japan, I learned that not wasting is part of the Japanese approach to food and life. The word *mottainai* refers to both physical waste and wasteful action.

When I trained in Japanese cooking at a macrobiotic, organic restaurant called Mominoko in Tokyo, the chef would use all parts of the organic vegetables. Nothing was thrown out. He wasn’t afraid to show customers on their plates parts of vegetables often thrown away in traditional restaurants.

In Chef Yamada-san’s cooking, you would see the ends and tops of carrots made into a pickle or added to a salad. If there were any discards, they were put into the miso soup.

Each part was used, and the customers appreciated this. I thought this was smart, and why not? Who taught us that we should only use certain parts of any food?

In the supermarkets, prices are lowered in the evening, so almost all the food is gone by the time the store closes. Those who are looking for bargain food items for future meals come during this period. I couldn’t resist the meals, snacks, and sweets at reduced prices.

The Japanese use *mottainai* not only for food. It also refers to respecting the short time we have on this earth, and for me, this always includes good food shared with others.
