WASHOKU FOR THE WORLD

An English teacher brings people of different nationalities together through some intensive, hands-on appreciation of traditional Japanese food culture, leading them into the world of Japan’s Intangible Cultural Heritage.

MICHAEL KANERT

Flanked by bookshelves in what was once a small private library in Tokyo’s Jimbocho district, Ayuko Akiyama addresses the small group seated at the long table before her:

“Wa means Japanese. Shoku means food.”

Most of her guests aren’t aware that the entry “Washoku, traditional dietary cultures of the Japanese” was added to the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage list in 2013, much less that washoku was recognized for its longstanding role in strengthening social cohesion and providing the Japanese people with a sense of identity. “I think most of the people simply love Japanese food, and don’t care about such things,” Akiyama states.

Ranked among online site TripAdvisor’s top three Tokyo cooking classes, Akiyama’s Buddha Bellies classroom received the TripAdvisor Certificate of Excellence for its consistently outstanding reviews. While she also offers classes in sushi, udon noodles and bento lunch boxes—as well as a four-hour sushi and sashimi cutting course in the cooler months—today three tourists from Sweden, two from Ireland, one from Germany and a Korean woman living in Hokkaido have assembled for a two-hour immersion course in washoku.

This isn’t Akiyama’s only job. A licensed teacher with a background in English literature, she also teaches English part-time at Kaisei Junior & Senior High School in northeastern Tokyo. “I like teaching and I love cooking,” Akiyama explains.

Her interests led her to study multicourse kaiseki cuisine at the Yanagihara School of Traditional Japanese Cuisine, after which she received her certification as a professional sushi instructor from the Japan Sushi Instructors Association.
Around September 2012, Akiyama formed a cooking class she dubbed Buddha Bellies. “It’s not meant to have a really serious meaning,” she says of the name. “It’s just something people can easily recognize as an image of Japan. I wanted people to come here and, through food and by gathering around the table with people of many different nationalities, make their bellies happy and big—so happy Buddha bellies is the concept.”

Her hands-on, multisensory lessons reveal the clear hallmarks of a seasoned teacher. Key ingredients are passed around for inspection before the students prepare a salad of vinegared seaweed and cucumber. They mix their own teriyaki sauce from sweet cooking rice wine, sake and soy sauce, and they learn first-hand the delicate art of adding vinegar to rice and cooling it with uchiwa fans to ensure the final mixture won’t fall apart when formed for sushi.

“It’s really interesting to have somebody who knows the culture and who can explain a bit more about why you do certain things,” says Tobias Karlsson of Sweden, who joined the class as part of his two-week holiday.

At the end of two hours, having rolled and cut sushi, fried their own cod (or tofu for vegetarians) and made miso soup from scratch, the seven participants have gained a personal understanding of the ichiju-sansai structure of a traditional Japanese meal. “Ich is one, and ju means soup,” Akiyama explains. “And sansai: san is three, and sai is dishes. So three dishes.” The students then learn to position their plates with the rice on the left-hand side, after which Akiyama shows them good form for placing their chopsticks when they’re done.

While she hosts roughly 1,300 such students per year, Akiyama tries to allow no more than eight in each class so she can adapt to their needs. “I didn’t create this business to make money,” she says. “I just wanted people to know about my culture.”

Akiyama’s philosophy is based on the Japanese saying Onaji kama no meshi wo kuu: We all eat from the same pot. Bringing people of many different nationalities together to share a common experience through Japanese cuisine, she says, “is kind of like scattering seeds for global peace.”

1 Fresh produce ready for preparation
2 Knives and cutting boards await hands
3 Akiyama keeps her groups small and the interaction lively
4 Students making maki-zushi (rolled sushi)
5 Frying up some pieces of cod
6 The final delicious product: a traditional Japanese meal