

FISH FORM THE WAVES OF JAPAN'S CULINARY CULTURE

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INTERVIEW WITH FOOD CULTURE EXPERT TAKEO KOIZUMI

TRADITIONAL Japanese cuisine, known as *washoku*, was included in December 2013 as a part of UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage list. Fish are an indispensable element in *washoku* culture, where a diverse array of ingredients is used with subtlety to prepare each dish. To learn more, we spoke to food culture expert and fermentation scholar Takeo Koizumi, who possesses vast knowledge about *washoku* and fish.

Why is Japan so intimately involved with fish?

Japan is a maritime nation surrounded by the ocean. From long ago there were many opportunities for catching fish, and records of eating fish date back to the middle of the Jomon Period [approximately four or five thousand years ago]. The Oyashio and Kuroshio currents carry small fish close to the coastal areas, and they attract packs of larger fish in pursuit, so there is an abundance of fishing grounds along the coasts.

When we look inland, we see that a mountain range runs along the center of Japan, with annual rainfall of almost two thousand milliliters. That large amount of rainwater is split by the mountain range and flows down to both the Pacific (eastern side) and the Sea of Japan (western side) forming a vast number of rivers. Thanks to this, the clear water streams were blessed with an abundance of freshwater fish, including species such as *ayu* [sweetfish] and *ugui* [dace]. Because the Japanese are a rice-farming people, we

have reservoirs and marshes for creating rice paddies, and since fish live there as well, the people seldom ate meat until about a hundred years ago. Fish were their primary source of animal protein.

What part do fish play in the creation and composition of *washoku*?

Washoku is comprised of seven principal types of ingredients and one supporting ingredient. The principal ingredients include root crops, greens, fruits and vegetables, edible wild plants, pulse crops—of which soybeans are prominent—marine plants, and grains, of which rice is prominent. Added to these is a supporting ingredient consisting of animal protein—fish, meat, eggs and so on.

While animal proteins are converted to amino acids inside the body and function as a source of stamina, the vegetable proteins contained in soybeans provide sufficient energy from a nutritional standpoint. Thus a *washoku* meal can be complete without the supporting ingredient. However, among the animal proteins, fish have the longest history as a dish eaten by the Japanese people, and so it is an essential part of *washoku* culture. Having a strong reverence and protective spirit for animals, the Japanese are a people who have been said to refuse to eat four-legged animals, even in times of famine. But they would gratefully accept the life force of fish, and leave nothing to waste, even eating the entrails and bones.

Umami has become a globally common term. How have fish been a part of *umami* culture?

From a physiological standpoint, the sense of taste

was long considered to involve five flavors: sweet, spicy, sour, bitter and salty. Now *umami* [savory] has been added to that list. When soybeans are fermented, their proteins are converted to amino acids mainly comprised of glutamic acid, while fish proteins are converted to nucleic acids comprised mainly of inosinic acid. When these two types of acids are mixed, they create a synergistic effect that stimulates a magnified sense of *umami*. The Japanese people taught the rest of the world about *umami*, and I believe this is precisely why *umami* has now become a globally common term.

What are the defining characteristics of fish in Japan?

First of all, because there is an amazing variety of fish, fish can be enjoyed seasonally when they are at their most delicious, when they are cheap and most available, have the most nutritional value, and can be prepared in a variety of ways. Second, both Japan's seawater and freshwater fish can be consumed raw. Third is the presence of soy sauce, which is a seasoning that goes well with fish. Nothing goes as well with fish as the *umami* of soy sauce, which is made by fermenting soybeans.

In Japan, it is said that children today do not like fish, but that is because the adults did not properly instill the custom of eating fish in them when they were younger. The effects of what children eat today will appear thirty years from now. I would like to stress that children should be properly taught from a young age to eat a healthy *washoku* diet that mainly features fish, soybeans and vegetables. **17**

EDIBLE SEAFOOD SUPPLY AMOUNT PER CAPITA—TOP TEN COUNTRIES* (2009) KG/PERSON/YEAR

* Population over one million

Sources: UN Food and Agriculture Organization (food balance sheets for countries other than Japan); Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries/Fisheries Agency, "Food Supply and Demand Table"

