

An Introduction to Japanese Cuisine



Yoshiki Tsuji, president of Tsujicho Group

THE number of Japanese restaurants overseas has been increasing in recent years, and rising numbers of foreign tourists have been coming to Japan to enjoy Japanese cuisine. We asked Yoshiki Tsuji, president of Tsujicho Group, which has trained chefs in a wide variety of cuisines, about the special features of Japanese culinary culture and the internationalization of Japanese cuisine.

Can you tell us how Japanese culinary culture was formed?

The natural environment has influenced Japanese culinary culture in various ways. Throughout Japan, for example, localities have a variety of their own dishes and processed foods using fish and shellfish. This diversity has arisen thanks to the many rich fishing grounds off the Japanese coast. The waters of the Pacific off the coast of Tohoku are a typical example. This area of the sea marks the confluence of the Oyashio Current, which flows from north to south, and the Kuroshio Current, which flows from south to north. It has no equal anywhere in the world for the species and volumes of fish available.

Japan's culinary culture has been influenced by other countries as well. Rice cultivation, an important component of Japanese cuisine, was imported from the Chinese mainland and spread throughout nearly the whole of Japan starting from the Yayoi period, which lasted from around the third century BCE to about the third century CE. Owing to the influence of Buddhism, which was imported from China beginning in the sixth century, consumption of animal meat was banned or limited, so the foundation of Japanese culinary culture became centered on rice, vegetables and marine products.

During the Edo period (1603-1867), when exchanges with foreign countries were virtually cut off, Japanese dietary culture developed in unique ways. For example, *kaiseki ryori* developed under the influence of *shojin ryori* and *sado* (tea ceremony) became increasingly popular among the wealthy classes, including the Kyoto *kuge* nobility and rich

Osaka merchants. In Edo (present day Tokyo), meanwhile, sushi, tempura, soba and other styles of cuisine were served at street stalls as a kind of fast food.

After the Meiji Restoration of 1868, Western style foods became widespread, as did the consumption of animal meat. This led to the development of dishes such as sukiyaki, pork cutlet, curry rice and other dishes that were Western in origin but arranged in a Japanese style.

So you could say that the Japanese have adapted and refined a variety of culinary cultures from other countries to create one which is uniquely Japanese.

How have traditional Japanese foods such as kaiseki ryori influenced Western cuisine in turn?

Japanese cuisine began influencing Western cuisine from the 1970s. Top European chefs came to Japan at that time and sampled various Japanese foods such as sushi, sukiyaki and kaiseki ryori. Astonished at how delicious it was, they began using soy sauce as a condiment in their own cooking and adding raw fish to their menus. Some cooks later began to use uniquely Japanese coagulants such as *kuzu* starch. Most recently, first-rate chefs have invented Western dishes originating in traditional Japanese cooking techniques, including foods using *dashi* (soup stocks) made using kelp.

In recent years, increasing numbers of foreigners have been learning cooking in Japan. Right now there are about 200 foreign students from Asian countries studying at Tsujicho Group schools. This is more than 2.5 times the number we had five years ago. In Japan they're not just studying Japanese cuisine but also techniques for preparing refined Chinese cuisine, Western cuisine and confectionaries. Many of these foreign students have very specific plans. One Indonesian student wants to popularize confectionary culture in her own country, and a Korean student wants

to open a restaurant offering dishes which blend Korean and Japanese cuisines.

What will be necessary to further popularize Japanese cuisine overseas?

There's been a rapid increase in the number of Japanese restaurants overseas. However, there is a chronic shortage of human resources in the field of Japanese cuisine and, moreover, it would be presumptuous to assume that only Japanese can understand Japanese cuisine. It's very important that we boost the number of foreign chefs who've mastered the necessary techniques, knowledge and sanitation practices in Japanese cuisine.

Toward that end, the Tsujicho Group has formed educational ties with schools in Thailand and South Korea with a view to developing a unique curriculum through which students can learn both the techniques and the culture of Japanese cuisine. Just this September, we have also begun a partnership with the Culinary Institute of America to conduct specialized courses in Japanese cuisine.

We also need to make it possible for people overseas to enjoy other Japanese dishes besides sushi, tempura and ramen. As one effort toward that end, Tsujicho Group in 2011 opened a restaurant called "brushstroke" in New York jointly with an American chef. While the restaurant remains faithful to the traditional techniques of Japanese cuisine, it also serves a form of kaiseki ryori which the locals can enjoy.

There's great diversity in Japanese cuisine. It's also both traditional and innovative.

To make people overseas more aware of the qualities of Japanese cuisine, we plan to train chefs with the ability to adapt Japanese tastes and service in ways that are accepted by local people even as they remain true to the authenticity of Japanese cuisine. ■

Inverview by OSAMU SAWAJI
