

The Roots of My Food Culture



Charlotte A. Kennedy-Takahashi
President and Representative
Director, Oak Associates K.K.

Charlotte A. Kennedy-Takahashi graduated with M.A. from the University of Colorado in 1971 and from the American Graduate School of International Management in 1976. She established Oak Associates K.K. in Tokyo in 1981 and assumed the post of President and Representative Director. The company provides human resource consulting services for global companies. She has been Vice President of the American Chamber of Commerce in Japan and is Vice President of the Tokyo American Club.

Charlotte Kennedy-Takahashi has lived in Japan for 21 years.

A Japanophile who visits a sushi restaurant once a week, she

talks about her memories of Baltimore and Kansas, as well as

her experiences with the wide variety of food she has

encountered around the world.

The Tastes of Baltimore, Kansas... and the World

Charlotte A. Kennedy-Takahashi spent her formative years in the port city of Baltimore in Maryland on the east coast of the U.S. The lively marketplace in Baltimore during the 1950s was brimming with food from all over the world, as well as with fresh local seafood and vegetables. It is a city of fond memories, where she first came into contact with the food cultures of the world when her father took her for walks through the marketplace.

She recalls: "My father was a lawyer, and he was a gourmet who would buy food from such far-off places as Poland, Germany, Italy and France. My mother was born in America of German extraction, and she cooked wonderful German food. I grew up eating food from all over the world. Baltimore has the best oysters in the U.S., and I was very fond of raw oysters from the time I was small. I believe I was fortunate in my culinary experiences. 'Summer meals'—American home cooking during the summer—is mother's cooking that I remember best: cold fried chicken, coleslaw, freshly cooked corn, chilled potato salad and for dessert, hot baked cobbler with melted ice cream on top. This is typical American cooking. German borscht made with fresh cream and German-style dumplings stuffed with meat are also mother's cooking I remember well. All vegetables used in cooking were from the garden cultivated as a hobby by my father. There were more than 15 varieties of strawberries, blackberries and red raspberries, and mother would bake all kinds of pies with these.



At Ms. Takahashi's favorite sushi bar, *Yoshizushi*, in Meguro, Tokyo, where she visits once a week to enjoy hand-rolled sushi with sake.



Looking back, it was an extremely luxurious culinary environment."

Mrs. Kennedy-Takahashi's father passed away when she was 12 and her mother returned to her native Kansas. She looks back at this time, saying that the difference in food culture caused what may be called "food shock." "In Kansas, 80% of the population comprised German immigrants, and we ate German food and steaks. This was entirely different from Baltimore," she continues, "where we had access to fresh vegetables and fruit and were able to experience food from around the world. But because of this, I am discerning in the way I judge beef!"

Based on her own culinary experiences, she disagrees with the opinion that the dishes best representative of American cuisine are the hamburger and the hot dog. "America is a country of immigrants," she explains. "Each family carries with it the taste of its 'old country' and through fusion with ingredients in the region in which the immigrants settled, an American style of cooking was born. In every family, a different food culture is experienced from the time a person is young, be it European, Mexican or Chinese."

After graduate school, Mrs. Kennedy-Takahashi worked at American high schools in Honduras and Korea teaching history and debate and traveled around the world. The countries she has visited currently number 65. One of the objectives of her trips is to experience the food of the countries she visits; her curiosity about food is something she inherited from her father.

"Travelling around the world I have eaten just about everything—excluding monkey meat! I ate barbecued rattlesnake in Kansas which was not all that good, but the Indian-style barbecued buffalo served in the U.S. Midwest is delicious. The buffalo meat is roasted for many hours and contains no cholesterol and is healthy. I hear it is popular in the U.S. these days. When I came to Japan and visited a sushi restaurant, the first thing I ordered was octopus," she says. "It was delicious. Since I had enjoyed fresh seafood in Baltimore, Japanese flavor that insists on freshness was to my taste and I found the way the dishes are used and the presentation to be wonderful."

Against this background in global cuisine, Mrs. Kennedy-Takahashi looks back on the island of Rhodes in Greece, which she visited with her husband three years ago, as being truly memorable. "Dinner one evening was lamb, fresh vegetables and wine. Everything was superb . . . the music played for us and the sophisticated conversation added new dimensions to the food. It was a marvelous encounter with food culture for me," she reminisces.

Mrs. Kennedy-Takahashi visits a favorite sushi restaurant in Meguro, Yoshizushi, once a week. She enjoys Japanese sake along with shad wrapped in pickled ginger and rolled sushi—her favorites—as an appetizer.

