

Public Symposium on Japanese Food Culture

Lecture 1:

Japanese Food as *Chomiryo* Culture

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I am deeply honored to have been given this wonderful opportunity to speak to you today. My long-time friend Professor Collcutt has kindly agreed to provide a commentary, so hopefully he will be able to expand on any points that are not adequately covered in my lecture.

What is “*chomiryo*”?

When we use the word *chomiryo* in Japan, we refer to things like sugar, *mirin*, salt and vinegar; but by far the most important *chomiryo* are soy sauce and *miso*. The English word seasoning and the Japanese word *chomiryo* do not necessarily carry the same meaning. We use a slightly different term, *koshinryo*, to refer to herbs and pepper, which are not considered part of the category of seasonings known as *chomiryo*. I believe some thought should be given in the future to drawing up a world map showing exactly where and how these seasonings, *chomiryo*, spices and any other substances that add flavor to food are used. However, there is still much work to be done on this subject, and it remains a project for the future.

In East Asia, the use of fermented seasonings is particularly well developed. As you no doubt already know, the ancient Romans used a type of sauce made from fish, which in Japanese we call *gyosho*. Today this sauce is extremely popular throughout Southeast Asia; in Japan, however, it is rarely used. Instead, the Japanese use primarily soybean-based products such as soy sauce and *miso*.

If I may digress slightly, together with Professor Hidetoshi Kato I recently edited a book entitled *A Dictionary of Japanese Loanwords in Other Languages*. A quick count in an English dictionary found some 950 words of Japanese origin. Karaoke, sushi and tempura are among the many Japanese

words that have been adopted into the English language. As many as 60 to 70 Japanese loanwords pertain to foods—seven percent of the total 950 words. Within these food-related words, there are 29 words that have some relation to soybeans. Because words relating to soy sauce entered English such a long time ago, many Americans are unaware that the word *soy* in “soy sauce” actually has its origins in the Japanese word for soy sauce: *shoyu*. Indeed, when I asked some young Americans about this, they said they had no idea; it seems that many young people believe that *soy* is a native English word.

History of *Miso* and Soy Sauce

The development of soy sauce is relatively recent and is predated by the development of *miso*. *Miso* is thought to have been originally developed in China and to have entered Japan in ancient times, perhaps around the seventh century. But in fact there was already a product used for seasoning in Japan called *hishio*. The *shio* in *hishio* means salt, which indicates that *hishio* was a salty fermented seasoning made using salt.

Sometime in the Middle Ages, after the 14th century, *miso* began to gain a role in Japanese cooking. *Miso* probably found its way into Japan as one of the many cultural elements imported from China. One such element was the style of cooking practiced in Chinese temples called *shojin* which uses

tofu and other vegetarian products in a style wherein *miso* plays an extremely important role. Owing to religious taboos, fish and meat products could not be used. Everything was made from beans, wheat, seeds, seaweed and the like, and so the development of *miso* was closely associated with Buddhist temples. Take, for example, the dish known as *dengaku*, which consists of tofu baked and coated with *miso*. It is said that the finished dish resembled in appearance the practitioners of a style of ritual dancing called *dengaku*, and that this is how the name came about.

Also in the Middle Ages, the Japanese began using *miso* not just as a seasoning but as a food in its own right. They added vegetables to it, or served it as a side dish when drinking sake, or ate it with rice. *Miso* eaten in this way came to be known as *namemiso*. We can see from these examples that by the 16th century, *miso* had become the principal seasoning in Japanese cooking.

By the end of the Middle Ages, the Japanese began to extract liquid from *miso* and use this in their cooking. One such product was *tamari*, made by sinking a bamboo container into *miso* and collecting the essence that seeped through. Another similar product was *tare-miso*, made by dissolving *miso* in water, hanging the mixture in a bag, then collecting the liquid that dripped out from the bottom. When most people think of Japanese food they think of sashimi. In fact, the practice of eating sashimi with soy sauce actually began in the Edo period (1603-1867). Before that time, sashimi was eaten with a range of different dipping sauces. Typical of these was a dipping sauce called *irizake*, made by combining *tamari*, sake, *umeboshi* (pickled plums) and *katsuobushi* (dried bonito flakes), then reducing this mixture down to about one-third by boiling.

The first reference to soy sauce in Japanese literature appears in 1597. Although the actual process used is slightly different, soy sauce is prepared in a somewhat similar manner to *miso*. But because of the technique required to extract soy sauce, and because only a small amount of liquid can be extracted at a time, the end product is more highly valued, and for that reason is more expensive. Another problem is that because the process is efficient only if a large amount of soy sauce is extracted at a time, it was initially unfeasible to manufacture soy sauce on one’s own.

A solution to this problem was not found until the Edo period, when soy sauce came to be manufactured on a commercial scale. The first commercial production of soy sauce took place in the major towns of western Japan, such as Wakayama and Sakai. Later, large quantities of soy sauce made in the Kyoto-Osaka area were shipped to the city of Edo (present-day Tokyo) by sea. The amount of soy sauce that made the 500-kilometer journey from Osaka to Edo was astonishing. Calculated on the basis of Edo’s

population at the time, this works out at an annual consumption of around 14 liters per person. This amounts to nearly double the current average annual soy sauce consumption of around nine liters. By the 18th century, soy sauce had become the principal flavoring ingredient in Japanese food. This coincides with the development of the modern style of Japanese cuisine with its exquisite colors, tastes and aromas, a development made possible by the introduction of soy sauce.

The Roles Played by *Miso* and Soy Sauce in Japanese Cooking

Both *miso* and soy sauce take time to produce. In the past, some versions of these products took one or even two years to make. During this aging process, the protein in the soy sauce is converted into amino acids, producing the sauce’s distinctive flavor, or *umami*.

Although a more detailed analysis is required, it is possible to make an extremely crude comparison of the basic approaches to cooking in the West and China, and in Japan. The basic approach in both China and in the West is to use salt, seasonings and other comparatively simple natural ingredients to enrich the flavor of a dish during the cooking process, so that the final taste of the dish is largely determined during its preparation. In Japan, on the other hand, owing to the existence of ingredients such as *miso* and soy sauce that have been prepared over a long period of time, the basic approach is to add little to the flavor of the food during preparation. In many cases the seasoning takes place when the food is eaten, so that it does not saturate the food itself. Strongly seasoned dishes have become the mainstay of cooking in both China and the West, while in Japan seasoning often takes the form of a sauce that is added to complement or help bring out the flavors of the natural ingredients.

To illustrate this, let us consider what we would find on the table at a popular restaurant or in a typical home. In Japan we would normally find a bottle of soy sauce. In China we would find soy sauce and vinegar. In the West we would find salt and pepper, just like at the hotel restaurant where I ate my breakfast this morning. But these seasonings are also used in different ways.

In the case of Western food, those who want to use salt and pepper can, while those who don’t want to can leave it out: the person eating the food can season it according to individual taste. The West and Japan are the same to the extent that most food served has already been fully seasoned in the kitchen, but in Japan there are some dishes, such as sashimi, that are served at the table completely unseasoned: in these cases, soy sauce is essential. Sometimes soy sauce has already been used during the cooking process, but it is also provided at the time the food is served for additional seasoning.

This approach is closely associated with the properties of Japanese food. The Japanese think of a meal as comprising principal and subsidiary components. These components can also be divided into four categories: rice, soup, side dishes and pickles. A typical Japanese meal might consist of the following: a bowl of rice, which is the principal component but which has very little taste; a bowl of *miso* soup, which has a strong flavor; *okazu*, or side dishes, which usually consist of a selection of cooked meat, fish or vegetable dishes to be eaten together with the rice; and a selection of pickles.

Note that Japanese *miso* soup and Western soups have totally different characteristics because of the different roles they play. While Western soup is eaten on its own as a separate dish, *miso* soup is always eaten together with rice. There are some exceptions, however. Once when I ate at a Japanese restaurant in Germany, the *miso* soup was served first on its own. I waited a while for the rice to come before starting, but there was no sign of it. I realized that they were not going to serve the rice until I had finished my soup! I imagine that most of you have eaten Japanese food at a restaurant. Often this takes the form of a series of dishes resembling hors d'oeuvres that are served to accompany alcohol of some kind. You may think this is a typical Japanese meal, but the reality is quite different. This is in fact a banquet menu put together with alcohol as the principal component. The traditional Japanese meal is in fact the same as a typical meal prepared in a Japanese home, which starts with rice, *miso* soup and a variety of side dishes. Pickles are eaten at the end of the meal to neutralize the aftertaste of fish and other strongly flavored side dishes. As indicated by the Japanese term for these pickles, *konomono*, which is written using the character for aroma, these dishes often have a strong aromatic flavor.

When Westerners eat Japanese food, they often start with *miso* soup and then eat the side dishes, leaving the plain white rice till last. Because the rice has little taste, some people are driven to pouring soy sauce over the rice, something that the Japanese themselves frown upon. The Japanese approach is to eat the bland rice together with the more strongly flavored *miso* soup and side dishes, which then provides a balanced range of flavors throughout the meal. This balance is similar in some ways to that which is achieved when bland raw ingredients are combined with soy sauce.

Chomiryo Across the Border—Future of Miso and Soy Sauce

Finally, I would like to offer a few comments on the future of *miso* and soy sauce. First of all, fermented seasonings are not confined to Japan, but are widely used throughout East Asia and, as mentioned earlier, were even used in ancient Rome. Far from being a

regional specialty, such seasonings are in fact universal. There are numerous recent examples of how soy sauce can be used very successfully in Western cooking. Further, unlike many Western seasonings, *miso* and soy sauce have no oil content at all. In light of this, they can be regarded as extremely healthy seasonings. Currently in Japan, many different types of *miso* are also being used, including varieties from outside Japan, such as Korean *miso* with chilies. This breaking down of cultural barriers can be seen as a form of globalization, and has led to a situation in which new ingredients are continually appearing and disappearing.

It is not known exactly why seasonings were first used, but it is generally thought that they were originally used for their preservative properties. Salt and vinegar are said to be the oldest of the seasonings, since they can both be found in their natural state and used without any processing. For example, I am sure you all use lemon from time to time. In Japan, however, we have traditionally used the juice squeezed from a citrus fruit called *yuzu* on our fish. These and other naturally occurring seasonings were probably first used to preserve food and prevent it from going off, rather than to adjust its flavor. However, it is likely that fermented seasonings were developed for reasons that have more to do with taste than with their preservative properties.

It has generally been accepted until now that differences in “taste” are the result of different environments and different ethnic backgrounds. However, it could also be said that the fact that soy sauce is becoming popular all over the world is a sign that a new experiment is in progress, one that would seem to indicate that taste is not bound by such things as ethnic groups, international borders or cultures. In other words, we can expect that the widespread use of soy sauce and *miso* in Western cooking will lead to a greater appreciation of the diverse range of cooking styles that exist around the world. What I would like to stress in this connection is that people should first take the opportunity to experience the true taste of *miso* and soy sauce as they are used in traditional Japanese cooking. Don't simply fill your bowl from a pot of *miso* soup that has been sitting on the stove for eternity, but experience the true delicious flavor of a freshly prepared pot.

Unique soy sauce, Japan's predominant seasoning, is now accepted worldwide and enjoys global popularity. How soy sauce is used outside of Japan will be determined by how it fuses with the traditions of distinct localities, with the potential to create new approaches to seasoning food. It is my hope that soy sauce and the way it is used in Japan will be emulated wherever it is used, whatever the cooking method and however it may be served—thus preserving in some small way the essential quality of its taste and aroma.