

The Roots of My Food Culture



Corinne Bret
Journalist and Essayist

Born in Morocco, Bret is a French national and a graduate of the University of Paris Law School. She first visited Japan in 1975, but returned to Paris in 1978 where she graduated in 1981 from the Japanese Language Department at the Paris School of Oriental Languages (Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales Département Japonais). Since returning to Japan in 1982 as the Tokyo correspondent for the French daily *Libération*, Ms. Bret has reported extensively on a wide range of topics, including Japanese politics, economics and culture. She currently writes for a number of magazines in Japan. Her publications include *Sozo no Kuni: Japon* (Japan, a Creative Country), *Buronzu Shinsha; Oheso wo Nagamenagara* (Looking at One's Navel), Chikuma Shobo Publishing; and *Yamaneko no Ai no you ni* (Like a Wildcat in Love), Yomiuri Shimbun.

Since her first visit to Japan in 1975, Corinne Bret has pursued a successful career as a journalist. In 1990 she gave birth to a baby girl, and since then much of her writing has dealt with her experiences with Japanese childcare and food culture. We asked Ms. Bret what food means to her, and about the differences between the French and Japanese food cultures.

Maman's Home Cooking

Born in Morocco, Corinne Bret lived until the age of 10 in Algeria, where her father worked as an engineer. This was during the height of Algeria's struggle for independence. The nights were often shattered by exploding bombs, and she witnessed the deaths of friends and neighbors as a result of the terror. From the time she left Algeria until she was 17, Bret lived in Dreux, a small town located some 80 kilometers (50 miles) from Paris. Her first memories of home cooking prepared by her *maman* (mother) are from the time following her family's escape from war-ravaged Algeria. Bret recalls: "My mother served us home-cooked meals 365 days of the year, but because she was busy with volunteer work and other things, she couldn't spare much time for cooking. So her culinary style was simple, although she always chose the best ingredients available. One of my favorites was *pot-au-feu*, which is familiar to most Japanese, and also roast rabbit. This was roasted in a mustard and cream sauce and was delicious."

Bret's parents came from a fishing village on the coast of Bordeaux. Her grandfather spent four years fighting in the First World War and returned without suffering a single wound; Bret considers him a hero. He was expert at growing vegetables and many aspects of her basic approach to food clearly show his influence. "He lived to the ripe old age of 86," she says, "but his eating habits were simplicity itself: a few pieces of bread, soup made using his own vegetables, sausages, cheese, a bit of jam and red



Corinne Bret enjoys lunch at one of her favorite French restaurants, L'eau à la Bouche, in Shibuya, Tokyo. Bret says of Chef Nakajima, who is also a friend: "The unique world of flavors he creates by combining the traditions of French cuisine with his knowledge of Japanese cooking is spellbinding." Acknowledgement: The House of 1999, L'eau à la Bouche. Tel 03-3498-3001.



wine. This alone gave him his incredible stamina. For him, eating the same simple meal day after day was good for his body."

"These days I have the same feelings about my own diet. The best thing is to eat whatever keeps your body healthy and satisfies your inner self. At the moment I'm living alone with my nine-year-old daughter, and my aim is to prepare quick, tasty meals using fresh ingredients—and not to overeat."

Bret makes a point of not stocking up on food, and she is proud of the fact that her refrigerator is the smallest one-door model available. When buying vegetables, she never buys more than she can use within two days. If she buys spinach, for example, she'll serve some raw the first day, and the next day will parboil the rest to prepare as a side dish. Her daughter likes spinach Japanese-style, seasoned with sesame oil and soy sauce. "My daughter and I both love Japanese food," Bret explains. "Blocks of tuna cooked whole and then sliced and eaten with soy sauce and a dash of lemon juice, or cabbage quickly fried with a topping of dried bonito flakes. I'm not Japanese, so I can't cook authentic Japanese meals. I just make them in my own individual way."

Food That Feeds the Soul

Bret has been known to travel as far as Kyoto just for a taste of authentic Japanese food. Her eyes light up when she speaks of the joy of hunting for restaurants that specialize in tofu dishes or in *kaiseki ryori* (the traditional meal which accompanies the Japanese tea

ceremony)—restaurants where great meals can be enjoyed for a reasonable price. Bret remarks, "A lot of dishes in Kyoto incorporate the subtle aromas of ingredients like citron or Japanese mountain pepper (*sansho*). Well, it's the same with French cooking. In France, enjoying the aroma is an important part of any meal. A typical example of this is the cuisine of Provence, which uses many herbs." Provence, in the south of France, features a regional home-style cooking based on simple ingredients such as olive oil, butter and tomato sauce. These elements are accompanied by the rich aromas and flavors of herbs such as rosemary, basil, chives, chervil, thyme and saffron. The result is a cuisine that attracts lavish praise as "food that satisfies the five senses and leaves you feeling on top of the world."

"I also enjoy French cuisine cooked by Japanese chefs, especially if the chef has made an effort to add a personal Japanese touch to a traditional French recipe," says Bret. "It's a world of truly delicate, light and soft flavors." Several times each month, Bret likes to enjoy such a meal prepared at a top-notch restaurant. At the same time, however, she aims for simplicity in her own cooking. Perhaps such a diet, based on extremes of light and shade, is capable of stimulating the mind and refreshing the taste buds. "I also fast sometimes, which helps me truly appreciate the value of food," adds Bret. "I want to continue to enjoy a diet that enhances my sensibilities and nourishes my soul as well as my body, a diet that will satisfy me even if I'm eating slightly less."