

The Roots of My Food Culture



Elizabeth Andoh
Journalist/Lecturer

Elizabeth Andoh was born in New York City. She graduated from the University of Michigan and later attended the Yanagihara Kinsaryu School of Traditional Japanese Cuisine, where she studied with Toshio Yanagihara and his son, Kazunari, the current head of the school. After moving to Japan in 1966, she pursued a wide range of activities in both Japan and the U.S. as a journalist, instructor and business consultant. She now specializes in dietary culture, cross cultural communication and travel. Andoh is a *Gourmet* magazine's Japan correspondent and a frequent contributor to *The New York Times* and other notable publications. Andoh has authored a number of books on food and food culture. Since 1994, she has overseen *Bunka no Aji* (A Taste of Culture), a forum that offers a broad introduction of Japanese cuisine to foreign residents of Japan.

Elizabeth Andoh is active in introducing Japanese food culture to a wide audience through writing, lectures and other activities. She has also participated as a panelist and workshop instructor in the Food Culture Forums organized by the New York-based Japan Society. *Food Culture* spoke with Elizabeth Andoh about her “dietary roots” and how these have influenced her work and life.

Encountering Japanese Cuisine

On her first visit to Japan as a graduate student, Elizabeth Andoh discovered the tastes of *udon* and *umeboshi*. They left indelible memories. She had traveled to Japan to take a break from her medical studies and put her thoughts on her future into perspective. She arrived in the Sanuki region of Shikoku, exhausted by the long journey and the humidity of the Japanese summer. “Despite having no appetite, I found the hot *udon* delicious,” she remembers. “There was ample ginger garnish, a refreshing experience . . . In the morning, I was served *umeboshi* at breakfast. I fell in love with the taste right away.” Never having experienced Japanese food before, Andoh was enthralled by its flavors.

In Japan she encountered for the first time a diet that she felt suited her: she had never taken to dairy products and eggs, and had never grown to appreciate a diet of doughnuts and coffee. “When I look back on my childhood in New York, there was no particular taste that I can instinctively describe as forming the ‘roots’ of my eating habits, although this is being a bit tough on my mother, who was always busy with her job.” Andoh had “aunts” who would prepare dishes typical of middle European, Jewish home cooking. “Before coming to Japan,” she remarks, “I saw food simply as something to eat whenever you were hungry.”

Although Andoh had never cooked for herself before coming to Japan, she prepared her own food during her stay as a student in Tokyo. “I only knew the ‘instant rice’ that you reconstitute by adding hot water. The little girl who lived in the house where I was staying laughed at the sight of me pouring hot water on grains of uncooked rice,” she recalls. “I knew nothing and had to start from zero. But, since my earliest encounters with Japanese food had been so tasty, I knew I wanted to learn how to cook for myself.”



Ms. Andoh explains “cherry-blossom viewing lunch box” at A Taste of Culture—her own Japanese culinary arts program.

Andoh had come to Japan intending to stay only briefly; but her growing interest in Japanese food led her to enroll in the Yanagihara Kinsaryu School of Traditional Japanese Cuisine. Here, she began to study in earnest. “I had a really tough time, struggling with the language, and because most of the ingredients the Japanese take for granted were new to me. Only after a year or so of hard work did I come to enjoy it and find it all fascinating.

“When I read the essays written by Toshio Yanagihara, I was amazed. They showed me that there is more to cooking than just ‘preparation and consumption.’ There is a kind of narrative to cooking, and also a world that may be communicated to others in writing. The work I’m engaged in today all started from my wondering back then how I could go about conveying this world to those not brought up with Japanese culture. It was a lucky encounter, because it led to my being able to explore a number of different avenues.”

Insights into Japanese Cuisine

Andoh’s present-day diet consists of Japanese food, morning, noon and night. “You can see the real me by taking a look inside my refrigerator,” she says. An inspection reveals twelve types of *miso*, two varieties of *umeboshi* (chosen through repeated sampling), three kinds of tofu, *tsukudani* (a condiment of home made soy-simmered kelp), flaked salmon, and *chirimenjako* (young Japanese anchovy, slightly dried after being blanched in salted water), among other Japanese foods and ingredients.

This is all she needs to have on hand, Andoh explains, to prepare the *kondate* (constituent dishes) for a basic meal of three dishes and soup (*ichiju-sansai*). Her pantry also has a “dried foods corner,” which includes *konbu* (dried kelp) and *niboshi* (dried young



Ms. Andoh demonstrates how to make *konbu* kelp stock.



Shokado-bento—a boxed lunch, composed of four sections of colorful dishes, was served with a cup of fragrant cherry blossom tea to introduce a traditional Japanese taste of spring.

sardines).

While that first taste of *udon* and *umeboshi* may constitute the “roots” of her present immersion in Japanese cuisine, Andoh says that, in conveying this world to others, it has become clear to her what it means to have been born into a completely different food culture. She remarks that, for example, people who have only experienced a single dietary culture may find it hard to imagine just how deep-rooted the concept of *kondate* is here.

The Western-style breakfasts sometimes served at Japanese inns are occasionally mistaken by foreigners for traditional Japanese fare. This is because soup appears on the breakfast tray as part of the meal, along with a salad. In the U.S., for example, neither soup nor salad is served for breakfast. Rice served with a side dish, pickles and *miso* soup—the typical Japanese *ichiju-sansai* menu—is replaced by elements taken from Western cuisine; that is, bread, soup and salad, but ends up appearing “Japanese.”

Andoh concludes that the components of a meal are the framework that determines what and when you eat, and how you experience what you are eating. “Although you can incorporate the influences of different food cultures into the ingredients and recipes of your native country, basic food habits, such as menu planning, are not so easily changed.

“When attempting to convey Japanese food culture to people who have not grown up in a Japanese household, it is important to have more than one perspective. In this sense, my acquired, but deeply rooted, Japanese habits and the American roots of my birth and early upbringing, come together to enable me to be a conduit for information about Japan’s food culture and a catalyst for others wanting to discover its wonders.”