

The Wisdom Behind Foods Developed in Edo

—Health Management Integrated into the Daily Diet—

In the previous issue, we reported on the dietary life of the Meiji period, when the term *shokuiku* (nutrition education) first appeared in Japan. If we trace Japanese wisdom regarding nutrition education back even further, we come upon the book *Honzo Komoku* (a materia medica) brought from Ming-dynasty China. This book systematically classified and described natural products and greatly influenced medicine in Japan. It also promoted the study of Japan's own natural products (foods and traditional medicines). At the core of both the book and the studies it promoted was the concept of day-to-day health management. Adherence to basic instructions for maintaining health, a simplified version of the studies mentioned above for the general public, became popular and integrated into the daily life of the people of Edo. In this issue, we take a look at how the dietary wisdom of the Edo period remains alive today.



Fujin Ichidai Kagami Kuizome no Zu
(Kunisada Utagawa; Kumon Institute of Education Co., Ltd.collection)

The Advanced Culture of the Edo Period Propagated the Wisdom Behind Foods

During the Edo period (1603–1868), pursuant to the policy of separation of samurai and farmers, villages were governed by a document-based principle rare throughout the world. Village leaders kept ledgers recording the arable land and population. These ledgers were exchanged between the Edo government and the villages. As a result, the literacy rate improved throughout the country and more people became better educated.

With the improved literacy rate, a number of books were introduced to the public during the Edo period. Among these were *Oraibutsu*, the equivalent of modern textbooks. *Doji Shorei Shitsuke-kata Orai* devoted many pages to explaining dining manners:

Before sitting down to the dinner table, higher ranking or older persons should be invited to sit at the head of the table, and everyone should bow once. After the meal is served, the person at the head of the table should be the first to pick up his chopsticks with the others following his lead. First, remove the lid of the rice bowl and place it on the right side of



Higoto no Kokoro-e; This modest Edo period meal of a bowl of rice and soup with a side dish set on an individual tray shows an atmosphere of family togetherness that has become rare today.
(National Diet Library)



Tosho E-iri Doji Shorei Shitsuke-kata Orai (Ikku Shigeta; Kumon Institute of Education Co., Ltd. collection)

the tray. The soup bowl lid should then be placed on top of the rice bowl lid. Take a sip of soup and then a bite of rice, repeating this several times while taking a bite or two from the side dishes. Follow this order



Kodomo Shorei Shitsuke-kata illustrates the proper way to serve and to sit at a meal tray. (Kuniyoshi Utagawa; Kumon Institute of Education Co., Ltd. collection)

strictly, even when a second or third tray may be present. Each bite should be small enough that it is possible to speak readily should it become necessary. Dishes placed on the right side of the tray should be picked up with the right hand and then shifted to the left. The left hand can be used to pick up dishes placed on the left side of the tray. Dishes of vinegared fish and vegetables should never be picked up.

Mansaku Orai describes important facts for farmers. For example, it lists in detail the crops to be stored in case of a bad harvest or even famine. It also warns against the daily consumption of rich or excessively large meals. *Mansaku Orai* states that the very best food is rice cooked with barley and that excessive intake of uncommon or new foods, as well as fish and poultry will cause ill health. It further describes effective cultivation methods, including the planting of medicinal herbs. *Mansaku Orai* reminds readers that while food, clothing, and shelter are all necessary for sustaining human life, food is the root of life. Since humans must eat everyday and food is in the hands of the farmers, it is understandable that farmers felt a sense of fulfillment in their work.

Precepts encouraging rice cooked with barley and discouraging excessive intake of fish and poultry deviate somewhat from modern practices, but it is said that apprentices from rural regions often suffered from beriberi after spending some time in Edo. When they returned to their villages, the beriberi disappeared. This is due to the fact that the Edo diet was based on plain white rice, which lacks sufficient vitamin B₁. Taking this into consideration, it is safe to say that the teachings of *Mansaku Orai* were quite reasonable for the time.



Mansaku Orai
(Kasen Yamakawa;
Kumon Institute of
Education Co., Ltd.
collection)

The Study of Disease Becomes a Study of Food

Throughout history, diseases have been humankind's primary nemesis. During the Edo period, as many as 20 to 25 percent of infants died before reaching their first birthday. Of those that lived to be adults, many died of epidemics such as measles, smallpox, tuberculosis, cholera, and even the common cold. A cholera epidemic in 1858 and a measles epidemic in 1862 each claimed roughly 250,000 lives throughout Japan.

Medicine at that time was almost powerless against such calamities. There were no techniques for discovering the causes of even common illnesses, and *honzo* (medicinal use of animals, plants, and minerals) research advanced using foods and Chinese herbs. The first *honzo* book in Japan was *Honzo Komoku* authored by Lee Shi Zhen in Ming-dynasty China. The book arrived in Japan in 1607.

Honzo studies continued in Japan, and Hitsudai Hitomi's *Honcho Shokkan* was published in 1697. This book examines the benefits of seafood, especially the dried fish and salted fish common in the everyday diet. In addition, Ekiken Kaibara's *Yamato Honzo*, completed in 1709, extensively analyzes a wide variety of Japanese products, not just foods.

Throughout the Edo period, theories regarding health management, based on *honzo* and targeting the general public,

were widespread. Another book by Ekiken Kaibara, *Yojo-kun*, was representative of such theories. Ekiken states that human life is a gift and that a long life is possible by paying attention to personal well-being. In short, the length of one's life is relative to the degree of awareness and attention to health. He also wrote that while eating and drinking are necessary for sustaining life, both should be properly controlled as they embody the avarice present within us, and therefore should not be done in excess.

Dietary Wisdom Derived from Honzo Research and Health Theory

Ekiken Kaibara wrote *Yojo-kun* based on his own experiences in life, as well as his wide knowledge of medicine, Confucianism, and other academic studies. It has been widely read and remains so to this day. The book explains ways in which to maintain a happy and healthy lifestyle from both physical and spiritual aspects. One of the many issues covered to make health management easily understood by the general public, examples of food combinations that may be harmful were described. Some of the combinations Ekiken advised against were rabbit and ginger,

rabbit and Japanese mustard, and rabbit and venison. Knowledge of ill-suited combinations like these were based on human experience and then applied to health management.

Another book, *Edo Shigusa*, was popular with Edo townspeople. *Edo Shigusa* discussed issues of health, human relations, and peace. The health section explained that meals should invigorate people and be a source of energy. The human relations section discussed the proper sharing of food, with consideration for age and physical condition, so that none was wasted. Using mackerel or bonito as an example, the book recommended that the easily digested lean meat should be given to the elderly while the fatty portions be given to those who are young and full of energy. *Edo Shigusa* also offered a variety of recipes using inexpensive and readily available *daikon* radish or tofu. Among these were meals designed specifically for ill people. During the Meiji period (1868–1912), an establishment similar to the modern hospice or nursing home served meals very similar to those described in *Edo Shigusa*. The meals were not only healthful but also comforting. Known as *goho no kaori* (five aromas), the meals consisted of five small mounds of cooked rice on a large plate, each topped



Nanju Byochi illustrates treatment of the 1858 cholera epidemic. (Juntendo University collection)

with a different nutritious food. The delicious aroma of the five fish and vegetable toppings stimulated the appetite and encouraged the ill patients to eat.

Goho no kaori also became common at hospitals treating gastrointestinal problems because even those with weak stomachs and intestines could eat it, and was standard hospital fare until the beginning of the Showa period (1928–1989). It offered excellent nutritional value with a balance of animal and vegetable protein. It also had aesthetic value as the presentation of the food was like a painting on the plate, a central aspect to Japanese cuisine. The Edo people's theory as regards food was that it was central to their ability to live a healthy life. This is something we could all learn from.



Hashika Kokoroe-gusa (Yoshifuji Utagawa; Kumon Institute of Education Co., Ltd. collection)

Wisdom from the Edo Period Alive and Well Today

During the Edo period, it was common for mothers to nurse their babies until they were three years old. Nursing was equated with love and babies were nursed whenever they wanted. It may well be said that children in those days were spoiled.

One of the factors behind this custom was the high infant mortality rate. Many infants and young children died of various epidemics. In 1703 a medical doctor, Gyuzan Katsuki, wrote Japan's first book on child rearing, *Shoni Hitsuyo Sodate Gusa*. Though the book dealt primarily with the treatment of diseases, it also stated that there were no effective measures for preventing major illness, but that one could only provide the proper care for a child once struck by disease. Rice gruel, rice with hot water poured over it, and glutinous rice powder were recommended foods for sick children. A popular get-well gift for stricken children was rice crackers made with glutinous rice and white sugar.



Hashika Yaku-harai (artwork by Tsuyahiko Ichiyusai, text by Oroka Zentei; Kumon Institute of Education Co., Ltd. collection)

When a child was stricken by an epidemic disease, parents could rely on nothing but talismans and incantations. The Boys' Festival held on May 5th had strong implications for warding off epidemics. When May arrives, the rainy season and the surge of epidemic diseases it brings with it are not far off. People placed mugwort and irises in the eaves of their houses and displayed

a popular guardian against evil in hopes of repelling such diseases.

Ekiken Kaibara, author of *Yojo-kun*, warned of the foolishness of indulging children. He believed that children would grow up weak if given sufficient food and clothing, and that the key to bringing up strong children was to always leave them feeling just a little bit hungry and cold. This theory was supported by a similar way of thinking passed down for many generations in Japan.

The people of Edo adapted the *honzo* imported from China to their own way of thinking and native products to establish the foundation for nutrition education suited to Japan's natural and social environments. This nutrition education formed a basic part of children's consciousness and grew into the food culture we see today. Are we, however, preserving and maintaining the wisdom of Edo? Perhaps we need to review the wisdom of Edo as regards food and incorporate it into the practical science of our daily lives.

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