



Vegetables and the Diet of the Edo Period, Part 3

The Diet of the Common Townspeople of Edo

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Introduction

A survey conducted in 1869 shows that samurai districts accounted for approximately seventy percent of the urban Edo area, temples and shrines roughly fifteen percent, and the remaining fifteen percent occupied by common townspeople. Edo was a metropolis with a population exceeding one million in the early 18th century. As the number of residents in the samurai districts and the common townspeople's districts were roughly the same, the population making up townspeople's districts was extremely dense. With such a dense population, backstreet row houses were extremely small. In Part 3 we will look at the diet of the common townspeople, focusing primarily on the role of vegetables.

1. The Living Space and Work of Rowhouse Residents

Edo Jutaku Jijo, compiled by the Tokyo Metropolitan Archives using historical materials in its property, contains housing plans for the various towns of Edo. One such plan, from 1807, shows roughly thirty dwellings on land owned by the Mitsui family in Kanda Mikawa-cho, near Nihonbashi. Four or five rowhouses facing the main street seem to be two-story buildings used by merchants as both their shops and homes. The remaining buildings were extremely small backstreet rowhouses, including twenty-four with a size of four *tsubo* (one *tsubo* equivalent to roughly 3.3 m²) or less. At that time, the common size of a small house was three *tsubo*. These houses, each of which had a small sink and stove, provided very little room for living and sleeping. Some rowhouses had two rooms, or a second floor. Each cooperative rowhouse complex had a water

well, four toilets and a garbage collection box that were shared by all complex tenants.

Some old family registers have been preserved in Matsuda-cho, another town near Nihonbashi. According to these records, sixty percent of the households in Matsuda-cho were three or four *tsubo* houses. 578 residents lived in 150 households consisting primarily of three to five people, with the exception of two single-person residences and one eight-person household. Presumably, the family of eight lived in a two-story rowhouse. This leaves no doubt that all of these families lived in extremely crowded conditions. Many of these tenants were craftsmen or minor merchants. A diversity of craftsmen and artisans, including makers of tatami mats, wooden containers, kimonos and glass, as well as those involved in woodblock printing, lived in the three or four *tsubo* rowhouses. The majority of the minor merchants were street peddlers of such items as vegetables, confectioneries and knickknacks. There were also female peddlers who sold such items as chili peppers.

2. The Work of Peddlers and Their Rent

Many of the rowhouse residents made their living by peddling goods in the streets of Edo. *Morisada Manko*, by Kitagawa Morisada, is a precious historical record that provides a detailed description of life near the end of the Tokugawa shogunate (1603–1868) and compares this life with that of the Kansai region (south-central portion of Honshu island, including Osaka, Kobe and Kyoto). *Morisada Manko* mentions a wide variety of food peddlers, including those who sold dried fish, fresh fish, charcoal-broiled eel, cockle and shark sashimi, icefish, shellfish, boiled eggs, sushi, charcoal-broiled grasshoppers, salted fermented

fish and shellfish products. Peddlers of fresh vegetables could be divided into three categories: those who sold a variety of vegetables, those who sold a very limited selection of vegetables, and those who specialized in items such as *matsutake* mushrooms or fresh chili peppers. Other peddlers sold items such as tofu, *natto* (fermented soybeans), pickles, *amazake* (a low-alcohol drink made from fermented rice), dried vegetables, dried *nori* seaweed, steamed sweet potatoes, fried *kombu* kelp, *koji* (the *Aspergillus oryzae* mold, used to ferment soybeans and in the making of alcoholic beverages), powdered chili pepper and *tokoroten* (agar jelly strips). There were also peddlers who specialized in salt or soy sauce, as well as confectioneries, snacks and candies. Water peddlers sold the vital drinking water, and in the summer, peddlers of cold water sold bowls of spring water with dumplings made from rice flour and sweetened with white sugar.

In some Edo areas, especially reclaimed areas where the ground water was salty, well water was not potable. To respond to the demand for drinking water that increased as the population grew, the Tokugawa shogunate constructed waterworks, including the Kanda and Tamagawa waterworks. Spring water and water from the Tama river were diverted to and distributed throughout districts via wooden and stone pipes buried underground. In each district, water was fed to wells built by stacking wooden barrels. Drinking water had to be purchased when the water supply was interrupted and in areas where such wells were not available. Any excess water diverted through the system was released into rivers downstream. This was the water collected and sold by water peddlers.

With a few exceptions, peddlers had to have permits. The results of a survey of such permits issued in 1659 in the northern part of Edo remain to this day. According to the survey, 5,900 peddling permits were issued. Of these, more than seventy percent were issued to children, the elderly and the physically handicapped, with approximately fifty-two percent of recipients aged fifty and over, twenty-one percent aged fifteen and younger, and two percent physically handicapped. This shows that there was some protection of the more challenged components of society. Although other people were prohibited from starting new peddling businesses, these people were given preferential treatment as they were able to acquire permits for peddling such items as candies, confectioneries, tofu and konjac, and were allowed to peddle items such as dried bonito and salted salmon without permits.

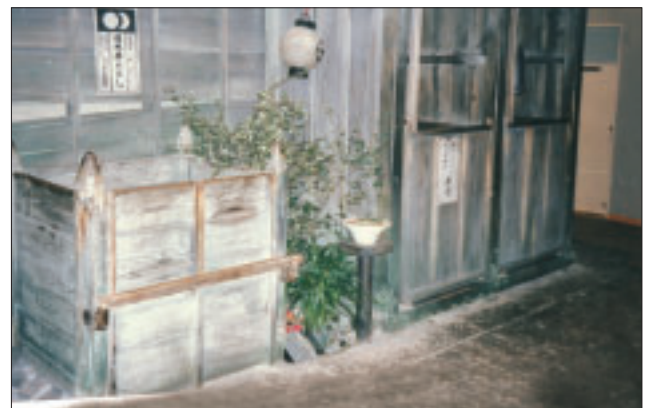
There are no records clearly indicating the daily income of peddlers. Therefore, we attempt to infer this information from data included in *Morisada Manko*



Reproduction of a communal well (courtesy of Fukagawa Edo Museum, photographed by the author)



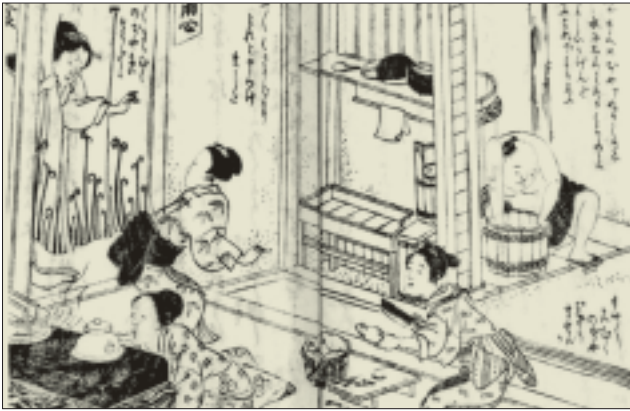
Reproduction of an Edo-period rowhouse kitchen. The wooden sink, stove and water pot were essentials. (Courtesy of Fukagawa Edo Museum, photographed by the author)



Reproduction of communal toilets and garbage collection box (courtesy of Fukagawa Edo Museum, photographed by the author)



Reproduction of a greengrocer (courtesy of Fukagawa Edo Museum, photographed by the author)



Slightly larger-than-normal kitchen. This sketch includes an instruction that the skins of sweet potatoes should be left on when they are cooked with rice. (*Nichiyo Joshoku Kamado no Nigiwai*, property of Tokyo Kasei-Gakuin University Library)



Children eating rice and sweet potato porridge in a rowhouse kitchen. This sketch, from a book published during the Great Tenpo famine, illustrates a common rowhouse kitchen. (*Nichiyo Joshoku Kamado no Nigiwai*, property of Tokyo Kasei-Gakuin University Library)

about the earnings of carpenters and laborers. As carpenters and laborers earned 300–500 *mon* (the standard currency of the time) and 280 *mon* per day respectively, a peddler in the late Edo period presumably earned around 200–300 *mon* per day.

Naturally, housing rents varied depending upon the size of the dwelling and its location, and was relatively high in the Nihonbashi-Kyobashi area. According to *Edo Jutaku Jijo*, mentioned above, the monthly rent for a three-*tsubo* backstreet rowhouse ranged from 900–1,500 *mon* per month in the Nihonbashi-Kyobashi area while it was just 120–150 *mon* in low-rent areas on the outskirts of the city. Therefore, while a peddler could pay rent in the Nihonbashi-Kyobashi area with the earnings from three to five days, the need to pay for other necessities such as clothing, meals and social requirements, along with the fact that they could not work everyday, meant that their financial situation was not necessarily a comfortable one.

According to *Ryuan Zappitsu*, an essay by Kurihara Nobumitsu published in 1848 near the end of the Edo

period (1603–1868), the household of a carpenter, his wife and small child earned 540 *mon* per day. The carpenter worked 294 days per year for an annual income of around 159,000 *mon*. The family spent approximately ninety-five percent of this income. Approximately twenty-two percent (35,400 *mon*) went to the purchase of rice, forty-four percent (70,000 *mon*) to salt, soy sauce, oil, firewood and charcoal, and 7.6 percent (12,000 *mon*) to rent. As the purchase of pickles and vegetables and seafood used in side dishes was presumably included in the forty-four percent (70,000 *mon*) indicated above, a rather large portion of this family's income was spent on food.

3. Everyday Meals and Rice Consumption

While the meals of the upper classes, especially those served on special occasions, were often recorded, there are very few records that tell us about the meals of the common people. Therefore, we refer to essays and stories published near the end of the Edo period, as



Just as with fish, Edo people placed great value on the first vegetable products of the season. Bans on the early sale of fish and vegetables were frequently imposed but rarely observed. (Property of Tokyo Kasei-Gakuin University Library)



Vegetable peddler (Shokunin Uta-awase, property of Tokyo Kasei-Gakuin University Library)



Fish peddler (Shokunin Uta-awase, property of Tokyo Kasei-Gakuin University Library)

well as to *rakugo* (the art of comical storytelling that became very popular during the late Edo period), to get an idea of the diet of Edo's common townspeople. *Morisada Manko* indicates that by the end of the Edo period, the meals of those living in Edo and those living in the Kyoto-Osaka region had become somewhat different. For example, while white rice, only cooked once a day to save firewood, was the primary staple in both areas, freshly cooked rice was served for breakfast in Edo and for lunch in the Kyoto-Osaka region. The commoners of Edo ate freshly cooked rice and *miso* soup, with or without a simple side dish, for breakfast, cold rice and a stewed dish for lunch, and rice with green tea poured over it and pickles for supper. In contrast, the people in Kyoto and Osaka ate freshly cooked rice, *miso* soup and a stewed or grilled dish for lunch, and the same rice with green tea poured over it and pickles for supper that the people of Edo ate. As rice cooked the previous day becomes quite

hard overnight, the people of Kyoto and Osaka ate rice porridge for breakfast, especially on cold winter mornings. Breakfasts of rice porridge are still popular in the Kansai region today.

Although it is difficult to find accurate records indicating the quantity of rice consumed by the people of Edo, we can guess using information contained in *Ryuan Zappitsu*. The aforementioned carpenter family consumed 3.54 *koku* (one *koku* equivalent to approximately 180.39 liters) of rice per year. Assuming that the child ate only half, or less, of what the parents each ate, it can be estimated that an adult ate approximately 560–600 grams of rice per day. In another example introduced in *Ryuan Zappitsu*, the members of a merchant family ate slightly more rice at around 630 grams per person per day. This clearly shows that the people of the Edo period consumed much more rice than modern Japanese, with nearly eighty percent of their dietary energy supplied by rice. This dependence on rice or rice mixed with barley or other minor grains continued until Japan's period of high economic growth (1955–1973) after WWII. A national nutrition survey conducted in 1960 showed that the Japanese received roughly seventy percent of their dietary energy at that time from the staple foods of rice and minor grains.

Kofi is the *rakugo* story of a young man who lost all his money to a pickpocket, was rescued by the owner of a tofu shop, and subsequently helped to make the shop more prosperous. Dialogue from the story tells us that 3.575 kg of rice was prepared every morning for this household of five or six, including employees. That means that each person ate 575 to 715 grams of rice per day.

4. Pickles, an Indispensable Food

One famous *rakugo* story tells of rowhouse tenants invited to a cherry blossom viewing picnic hosted by the administrator of their complex. The lunches served included common pickles formed to resemble more extravagant dishes. Yellow *takuan* pickles made from daikon radish pickled with salt and rice bran looked like rolled omelets and white *daikon* radish pickles were sliced to look like steamed fish loaf. In another *rakugo* story, a squash peddler saves a young man about to throw himself into the river. The peddler takes the man home and tells his wife to feed him. The wife replies that while she has some cooked rice, she has no side dish to go with the rice. The peddler tells her that pickles will be sufficient. These stories indicate that most households always had some form of *daikon* radish pickles on hand. Pickled vegetables

were an indispensable part of the diet of all people, from those who lived in rowhouses to regional lords. They were even served in formal and ceremonial meals such as weddings and New Year's celebrations. Therefore, every family either made their own pickles, or purchased them from pickle vendors.

The village of Nerima was known for producing daikon radishes that were good for pickling, and was a major supplier of the radishes to Edo. In addition to fresh *daikon* radishes, Nerima also sold dried *daikon* radishes ready for making *takuan* pickles. *Takuan* pickling kits of dried *daikon* radish, salt, rice bran and a wooden barrel could also be purchased. Families with no space for storing the pickling barrels could place an annual order with the village of Nerima, where the pickles would be made and then delivered to the customer periodically throughout the year.

An article titled *Siebold ga Kirokushita Edo no Shokuzai* (by Isao Kumakura and Masahide Miyasaki, *Vesta* No. 27, January 1997) gives an idea of the price of pickles. 0.9 liters of pickled *ume* (plum) cost 72 *mon*, one pickled *daikon* radish 16 *mon*, and ten pickled eggplants 50 *mon*. The price of fresh *daikon* radishes differed by variety, with ten Nerima daikon radishes costing 200 *mon* and ten generic *daikon* radishes 72 *mon*. Although the price of pickles was roughly double that of fresh vegetables, they were rather inexpensive and could easily be purchased by the common townspeople of Edo. In comparison, fish was considerably more expensive than vegetables. Relatively inexpensive seafood included horse mack-

erel (ten for 300 *mon*), mackerel (300 *mon* each), sardines (ten for 120 *mon*), common oriental clams (1.8 liters for 16 *mon*), Japanese littleneck clams (1.8 liters for 32 *mon*) and freshwater clams (1.8 liters for 16 *mon*). Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that the diet of common Edo townspeople consisted primarily of rice, potatoes and other vegetables, as well as the occasional inexpensive seafood.

5. Inexpensive Everyday Dishes

To discover foods commonly used in side dishes and soups, we refer to *Ukiyoburo*, a book published in 1809 by Shikitei Sanba, which depicts the energetic and flexible lifestyle of the Edo townspeople through ordinary conversations at a public bath. The following episode features a man who has recently moved to Edo from Osaka and lives alone in a rowhouse. He sometimes buys discounted fruits sold in bulk on his way home from work. He gives this fruit to his neighbor in hopes of receiving some prepared dish in return. The episode tells us the sorts of dishes that were common in everyday meals.

Sometimes I have to give them fruit such as five slightly spoiled peaches or a discounted watermelon that I've paid 36 mon for. If I chat with the wife and children for a while, the wife will give me a dish like grilled eggplant with sweet miso or cooked clams.

The man also talks about tofu, which, according to Morisada Manko, was sold in much larger blocks in



Rowhouse kitchen (Tohi Anitsu-den, property of Tokyo Kasei-Gakuin University Library)

Edo than it was in Kyoto and Osaka, and that quarter cuts of tofu were also sold in Edo.

I love tofu, but even a quarter block is too big for me. I have no choice but to settle for much smaller grilled tofu. I wish I could bring my wife here soon.

An ordinance issued by the magistrate to the townspeople of Edo in 1843 indicates that some tofu shop owners had called upon the Edo magistrate seeking the standardization of the size of tofu molds, the manner in which tofu should be cut for sale and the pricing of tofu. Apparently some were selling smaller blocks of tofu to make up for an increase in the price

for grilled tofu. Blocks of hard tofu were cut into eighteen slices and then fried to make deep-fried tofu. Prices after the ordinance was issued were higher than before. Prices rose to 52 *mon* for a block of tofu and 5 *mon* for a piece of grilled or deep-fried tofu. However, 13 *mon* for a quarter block was still rather inexpensive.

Further evidence that tofu was affordable can be found in the aforementioned *rakugo* story, *Kofi*. The story tells of a row-house wife who buys tofu or tofu products daily from the young man rescued by the owner of the tofu shop because she is so impressed by his diligence. Her husband complains about having to eat tofu for breakfast, lunch and dinner everyday. The

wife responds that tofu is the best option given his income. This conversation between husband and wife clearly shows that tofu was a popular processed food available at a very reasonable price. As with *takuan* and other pickles, tofu was an important food for all classes of Edo people, including the samurai and regional lords. *Natto*, soybeans fermented with *Bacillus subtilis*, also became a popular food in Edo. Originally available only in the winter, it later became available year-round and had become common in Edo by the time *Ukiyoburo* was written. One of the characters in the book states that he is lucky to have been born in Edo, as there is such an abundant variety of foods. He says that he is lucky to be able to have soup with *natto* in August.

New varieties of vegetables, especially *daikon* radish, were developed during the Edo period. Varieties that were ready for harvest at the various seasons of the year were produced in great volume, making *daikon* radish more affordable. *Ukiyoburo* tells us that many rowhouse dwellers made their living by peddling, and also purchased their food from peddlers. The book also shows that dishes served with everyday meals were primarily made by stewing seasonal vegetables. On special occasions such as New Year's, special dishes such as *zoni* (*mochi* rice cakes simmered in a vegetable soup), herring roe, and sweetened stewed black beans were served.

The episode from *Ukiyoburo* about the man from Osaka gives more insight into the vegetables available to the townspeople of Edo. The vegetables mentioned include ginger, oriental pickling melon, squash, yard-long beans, winter melon, *myoga* ginger (*Zingiber mioga*), green chili peppers and eggplants. Being from Osaka, where haggling is an art, the man is able



Making pickles from daikon radish (*Tsukemono Shio-kagen*, property of the author)

of soybeans. The ordinance issued by the magistrate standardized the size of a block of tofu at a ninth of a full slab of tofu made from 7.2 liters of soybeans. The dimensions of a block remained unchanged at approximately 21×18×6 cm. A harder tofu made from roughly 8.66 liters of soybeans, with each block cut into twelve smaller pieces, became the standard

to talk the peddler down from 35 *mon* for a squash to 13 *mon*. He also gets the peddler to agree to sell him a lot of eggplants (ten) at half the original price, and then tries to buy only two eggplants from the lot. The peddler tells the man to go to the greengrocer if he does not want to purchase a full lot. This shows us that vegetable peddlers generally sold their products in lots rather than individually. As many customers would have attempted to haggle over prices, the peddling business must have been tough. In the end, the peddler in the *Ukiyoburo* episode ends up selling the Osaka man just two eggplants at less than half their original price.

Conclusion

Part 3 of this series looked at the lives and work of Edo rowhouse dwellers, focusing primarily on the role of vegetables in their diet. Ordinary meals generally consisted of white rice, soup, a side dish and pickles. Stewed dishes made from vegetables such as eggplant



Backstreet rowhouse (*Ehon Imayo-sugata* by Utagawa Toyokuni, presumably published around the Kansei era, 1789–1800; property of Edo-Tokyo Museum, reproduced for use here from an image in the Tokyo Foundation for History and Culture image archives)

or *daikon* radish were the most common side dishes, though fish dishes made from sardines or salted salmon were sometimes served.

Dishes mentioned in *Ukiyoburo* include *hijiki* (*Sargassum fusiforme*) dressed with mashed tofu, soup with *daikon* radish and grilled tofu, and a stewed dish of dried juvenile Japanese anchovies with potato, carrot, burdock root and *daikon* radish. In one episode a woman advises the use of ark clams rather than dried anchovies to avoid the fishy smell and make the dish taste better. In another episode, one woman asks another to accompany her while she purchases pepper

on the way home from the bath house, as she wants to make stewed cod and kelp seasoned with soy sauce, which requires a dash of pepper. These episodes show that people were concerned with both the flavor of dishes and the latest cooking trends, and also eager to collect new recipes as well as other information about food.

In yet another *Ukiyoburo* episode, a child says that a roasted sweet potato would be nice after bathing. Roasted sweet potatoes had become such a common treat by that time that even children were familiar with them. In addition to roasted sweet potatoes, other sweet snacks and desserts were mentioned in *Ukiyoburo* conversations, indicating that rowhouse dwellers were quick to catch on to new foods and eager to make their diets more flavorful within their tight budgets.

Due to limited space, there simply was not room to discuss Edo's food stands and food service industry. Therefore, I would like to briefly mention that Edo had a large number of street stalls and shops similar to

today's fast-food restaurants that catered to the many unmarried residents of the city. Dishes such as buckwheat noodles, *udon* noodles, sushi and tempura ranged in price from 4 to 16 *mon*. In addition, prepared dishes could be purchased in Edo to add to the meal staples made at home.

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