

My Experience in Europe as Japan Cultural Envoy

Hiroko Nakazawa (Professor at Nagano Prefectural College)



Hiroko Nakazawa
Food culture researcher

Born in Kumamoto Prefecture, Ms. Nakazawa completed the master's course in Food Sciences at Ochanomizu University Graduate School of Domestic Sciences in 1989, and the doctoral course in Health Sciences at University of Tokyo Graduate School of Medical Sciences in 1996 (Ph.D. in health sciences). Currently she is a professor at Nagano Prefectural College, and a guest speaker on Food Culture at Ochanomizu University Graduate School.

She has been conducting research on local foods and food cultures in villages, mainly in Nagano Prefecture. She is also actively engaged in food education. She has given many seminars on cooking and foods, ranging from such basic instructions as table manners and how to sharpen kitchen knives to more advanced cooking methods using Japanese ingredients.

Appointed by the Agency for Cultural Affairs as the first Japan Cultural Envoy in the field of food culture, I visited seven European countries (France, Germany, Poland, Hungary, Italy, Slovakia and the United Kingdom) for two months from the middle of August 2014. The Japan Cultural Envoy project was launched in 2003 to send artists and other cultural specialists overseas for specified periods. The aims of the program are to educate other nations in understanding Japanese culture and to promote coordination and cooperation between Japanese artists and cultural figures and their counterparts in other nations. Washoku, the traditional dietary cultures of the Japanese, was listed as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2013. In line with this, I planned my activities with the hope of conveying the charms of a Japanese food culture that respects nature. I also hoped to further European interest in Japanese food culture while helping others to enjoy preparing and tasting Japanese home cuisine, which is quite different from what is usually offered at Japanese restaurants.

With the support of the Agency for Cultural Affairs, Embassies of Japan, and others, I delivered PowerPoint presentations entitled "Food Culture of Japan: A Healthy Diet Full of Wisdom and Ingenuity" and "Food Culture of Nagano, a Prefecture of Good Health and Longevity," assisted

by an interpreter. I also held workshops on making rose-style *futomaki matsuri-zushi* (Chiba Prefecture festival sushi rolls with a rose pattern in the center), and tasting events for miso soup, *nikujaga* (meat and potato stew), chilled soba noodles and other Japanese dishes. To offer the best Japanese dishes, the rice, Shinshu soba noodles, nori



seaweed, soy sauce, miso, powdered sushi vinegar, and other ingredients, as well as cooking tools such as pans for making rolled egg, *makisu* (bamboo mats for sushi rolls), and cooking sheets were shipped from Japan or procured in Europe, with the support

of many people. In Europe, several people were very generous in helping to purchase fresh ingredients and cook food. I put all of my heart into preparing these dishes in gratitude for their help.

The participants in those European countries truly enjoyed the workshops and tasting events. The rose-centered sushi rolls were favored for their visual appeal and for being easy to make, and people enjoyed them with the liberal use of soy sauce. Miso soup and *nikujaga* were so popular that



many were asking for second servings. One embassy staff member said, "Back in the early 1990s, people detested sushi because of the raw fish, and shied away from rice because they thought it was tasteless. So, after every embassy reception, we had an abundance of sushi leftovers." In complete contrast to what he said, I felt people now have a deeper understanding of Japanese food. Many

wide-ranging questions were asked during the question-and-answer session after the lectures. Judging from the questions and comments at tasting events, as well as the questionnaire results, it seems that Japanese food is highly esteemed because of its taste, appearance, and health qualities. I also commented on the characteristics and attractive features of the food culture of each country I visited, and shared wonderful times with the people there.

I learned from these experiences that cultural exchanges focusing on Japanese food culture are an excellent way to build friendly relationships, as there is a high level of interest in Japanese food and it opens up a variety of topics for discussion. I had countless valuable experiences as a Japan Cultural Envoy that I could never have had otherwise. I learned a great deal and forged strong friendships with some wonderful people. I would like to express my profound gratitude to all who were involved.