



Dietary Life in Japan and Regional Characteristics of Soy Sauce

Japan's climate is generally mild, though hot and humid in summer. As Japan stretches from north to south, the yearly temperature, precipitation and other features vary by region, as well as between coastal and mountainous areas. The establishment of the food culture in each region reflects the local natural environment.

On the other hand, some foods have taken root in particular areas due to historical or other reasons. One example is kombu (kelp), which is produced in Hokkaido, but is more likely to be consumed in Toyama, Fukui and Kyoto prefectures, as well as in distant Okinawa. The reasons some foods have settled in certain areas are not always straightforward or easily explained. This article describes a study conducted mainly through interviews to clarify the characteristics of regional foods, with a focus on soy sauce.

Details of this study have been provided in the report on pages 8 through 25 of this issue of Food Culture. The study revealed significant and characteristic regional differences in soy sauce taste preferences.

The characteristics of traditional local dishes are often talked about by prefecture. However, the sweet soy sauce preference shown by people in Kyushu is also seen in the western part of Shikoku. Preferences are not uniform across the same prefecture, and the types of soy sauce used also vary. Thus, it is difficult to draw lines between prefectures to delineate areas of food culture. Another categorization of areas in addition to that by prefecture may be needed.

Okkirikomi, a traditional local dish of Gunma Prefecture is reported to have different flavors, including a miso-based flavor, a soy sauce based flavor and a mixture of both. *Kikigaki-Gunma no Shokuji* (Compiled through Interviews—Meals of Gunma), a book that illustrates the meals of the early Showa Era (mid-1920s through 1930s), presents *okkirikomi* from three areas, with miso-based dishes in two areas and soy sauce based dishes in one. In the soy sauce based area, people get together and make the soy sauce. The book reports, "As soy sauce production is labor intensive, people consume it carefully with noodles and simmered dishes on festive or ceremonial occasions, or when guests visit." Changes in taste preferences may be inferred by looking into traditional local dishes classified by the occasions for which people prepare them, whether for everyday meals or special occasions, or by investigating if, at a certain point in time, the preferred taste changed from miso-based to soy sauce



Ayako Ehara

Born in Shimane Prefecture, Ms. Ehara graduated from the Division of Food Science, Department of Home Economics, Ochanomizu University, and received a Ph.D. in education. After serving as a professor at Tokyo Kasei-Gakuin University, she is now a professor emeritus and visiting professor at Tokyo Kasei-Gakuin University. She is also vice president of the Washoku Association of Japan. She specializes in food culture history, dietary education history, and the science of cooking. Her published works include *Katei Ryori no Kindai* (author), *Nihon Shokumotsu-shi* (co-author), *Oishii Edo Gohan* (co-author), *Washoku to Shokuiku* (editor) and *Nihon no Shokubunka-shi Nenpyo* (co-editor).

based for the same dish.

According to cookbooks of the Edo Period (1603–1868), sugar was usually used for sweets, but not for simmered dishes. Sake was often used, but sweeteners were rarely added, as with Western cooking. In the late Edo Period, there was an increase in dishes that used *mirin* or sweet sake for cooking. In the Meiji Era (1868–1912), many of the simmered dishes in cookbooks used sugar. *Tokyo Fuzoku-shi* (Mode of Life in Tokyo, 1899–1902) depicted a trend where sugar was used in most of the cooking, including simmered dishes. This was reflected in the expression, "People in Kamigata (Kyoto and Osaka) prefer salty foods, while those in Edo (Tokyo) like sweet foods."

In a book compiled through interviews during the early Showa Era, it is stated that, for soy sauce production in individual families or communities in Oita Prefecture, only one area out of six commonly added kudzu arrowroot or brown sugar after the soy sauce was heated, while for the five other areas there was no mention of added sweetener. There is no statement regarding sugar used in soy sauce production in Kagoshima Prefecture, either. As brown sugar or molasses is added during soy sauce production in some areas of Kanagawa and Gunma prefectures, it may not be historically correct to say that Kyushu is the only region that favors sweetness.

For cooking that includes simmered dishes, multiple seasonings besides soy sauce, such as *mirin*, sugar and sake, are often used in combination. Consideration on how soy sauce is positioned in the combination of seasonings is also needed. Since the sense of sweetness is affected by each individual's food experience, it may deviate from objective sweetness determinations in some cases. When I order a simmered fish dish at a restaurant in Tokyo, it is so sweet that it seems like a confection to someone from Shimane Prefecture like me. However, the study results tell us that Shimane soy sauce is sweeter than the *koikuchi* (dark type) sauce of the Kanto region. When simmering fish with my family, we still use soy sauce with sake or a little *mirin*, but no sugar. The variety of soy sauce we use is *koikuchi* of the Kanto region, and I don't recall ever using sweet soy sauce. Dietary life cannot be easily explained, as shown above, but soy sauce is an important seasoning in Japan's dietary life. Perhaps a new perspective can be obtained by looking at the dietary life of different areas in Japan from the aspect of seasonings, focusing on soy sauce.

