

News from under the Southern Cross - Edition 28

The power of *Washoku*

1 September

In my almost 40 years as a diplomat, something that still leaves a deep impression on me has been the permeation of Japanese cuisine (*washoku*) throughout the world. Let's take a personal look back on it in this issue of my newsletter.

1. It started in New York

My first overseas assignment following my entry into the Ministry was to study abroad (train abroad) at the Graduate School of Columbia University (1985 – 1987). Since I was living in Manhattan, there was so much (food) to choose from. From famous, high-class restaurants that I barely knew, all the way down to the ramen and gyoza restaurants that I frequently visited with Japanese expats in New York.



Ramen, Gyoza (Image File Pictures)

The diversity of New York was symbolised in its sushi. I could find the high-class sushi restaurants offering the pinnacle of *toro* (the fattiest part of tuna, known for its delicacy but also its price), those with Taiwanese, Thai, and Chinese chefs and takeaways run by Koreans.

Given that I was so blessed with food, I didn't really miss Japanese cuisine compared with my colleagues who were sent to study in America's countryside. Every now and then when I had saved up some money, I would take my American, European, and Asian student friends to a Japanese restaurant and entertain them with food and drink. Of course, the standard meal consisted of tempura, sukiyaki, *shabu-shabu* (a meat and vegetable hot pot) and California roll sushi. One lesson from this were the subtle reactions that the raw egg in sukiyaki and the manner in which chopsticks were dipped into a (shared) *shabu* pot could elicit.



Typical Japanese cuisine that I often ate during my time in New York (Tempura, Sukiyaki, California roll, Shabu-shabu from the top left in clock wise) (Image File Pictures)

2. Washington D.C.

My very first diplomatic post after completing my training was Washington D.C. (1987 – 1990). I made a habit of inviting American journalists and government figures whom I had met through work to eat Japanese cuisine. This was the very time that sushi began to be celebrated among the ‘yuppies’ of New York.

Oh how popular the prawn tempura was at Residence receptions hosted by Ambassador MATSUNAGA Nobuo and Ambassador MURATA Ryohei!

However, this was still a time when more than half of Americans had an aversion to eating raw fish. As a result, I often had to entertain Americans at teppanyaki restaurants. Names like ‘Japan Inn’, ‘Hisago’, and ‘Unkai’ etc. bring out the nostalgia in me.

3. Hong Kong, Geneva, London

Thereafter, from the late 1990s through to the first half of the 2010s, I was stationed in Hong Kong, Geneva, and London. I have lost count of the number of times I took people from my host country and negotiation partners off to acquaint them with Japanese cuisine, to places such as ‘Nadaman’, ‘Kenzou’, and ‘Ginza’ in Hong Kong, ‘Uchino’ and ‘Sagano’ in Geneva, and ‘Mitsukoshi’ and ‘SOUSEKI’ in London.

These were places with relatively high prices that were difficult to visit in private in general. Hence the number of people who happily responded to my invitations clearly began to grow. However on the other hand, even in cities like London that claim to be cosmopolitan, there were times when 1 in 3 people would politely tell me “I’m not a big fan of sushi” etc.

4. And then Australia

Having gone through these experiences, Canberra at the moment is like another world.

The attached picture is of a menu for a dinner that took place at my Residence. The line-up of Wagyu steak and *nigiri sushi* (hand-formed sushi) is a real “winning formula”. When I take a moment’s respite, given I have been concentrating intently during conversations at my dinner receptions, often many of my guests have neatly cleaned their plate and started conversing about Japanese cuisine.

The greatest contributor to the success of these lunch and dinner events at my Residence is Chef OGATA. He’s an extraordinary talent with outstanding sense who originally won awards for French cuisine. Moreover perhaps because of the firm but warm guidance he received under Head Chef FUKUDA

at his alma mater the Tokyu Hotel, his knowledge of Japanese cuisine and his willingness to do research about it deserves special mention. He has already cemented his place with a reputation for “the finest Japanese cuisine in Canberra”.



Residence dinner menu



Nigiri-sushi made by Chef OGATA. The sushi from the top right, starting with the *karasumi* (made by salting mullet roe), has been made from scratch with a lot of time and effort

But this isn’t all. While reputed local high-class restaurants and dinners at the ambassadorial residences of other countries usually stop at 3 courses, with Chef OGATA 5 elaborate courses are a mainstay. Through rigorous selection of locally obtainable ingredients and on a limited budget, he is able to bring together the 3 essential qualities of taste, appearance, and volume. From time to time

he adds a “souvenir” such as dressings and jams. One of those, his plum jam, was simply divine. And it appears the spirit of ‘hospitality’ behind it is well appreciated by invited guests.



(Picture Caption: Plum jam serving as a ‘souvenir’ at the Ambassadorial Residence)

By the way, the plum jam is something that you can easily make at home, and so we’ve released a video about how to make it (which can be viewed [here](#)). We have started placing videos up on the Embassy website titled “Chef’s Kitchen” so you can enjoy the Residence’s cuisine at home. By all means give it a go.

5. And so on to even greater heights

There has been a development that can’t be overlooked in the Japanese cuisine boom which itself has become an established form of soft power. Australians are starting to whet their palettes with foods that in the past they would have regarded as exotic or too authentic. Good examples of this are the ramen stores in Canberra and the soba noodle shops in Sydney. No matter how dyed-in-the-wool an Aussie they are, the time is surely coming when they too will find satisfaction in slurping down noodles (lol). Let’s welcome it.



Popular Japanese cuisine in Australia (Image Files)

Whenever major events like the Japan Self-Defense Forces Day reception are held at the Embassy, not only sushi and tempura, but *gyudon* (beef bowls), curry, cutlet sandwiches, and *hiyashi udon* (chilled udon noodles) start being passed around in earnest. When I look closely, they all seem to be flying off the serving trays.

We are backed up by strong reinforcements who are able to supply us directly with the finest ingredients from Sydney. “Food is culture”. Joining forces of the entire staff of the Embassy, I want to sell Japan to the world. And of course, it goes with saying that my priority here is the recovery of the region devastated by the Great East Japan Earthquake.

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