Japanese Home Cooking Connects Hearts and Minds

Soy sauce in a small dish. Soy sauce is made mainly from soybeans (top right photo).

Photo: ISHIZAWA Yoji

MOE is an influencer who promotes Japanese home cooking to the world under the name Kimono Mom. In this month's issue, we asked her to talk about Japanese home cooking.

Kimono Mom

I'm working to make Japanese home cooking more popular around the world. I do this because I think home cooking can help people rediscover their own roots and lead strong lives in today's world. I also want to ensure the next generation connects with the culture of the Japanese food that I grew up eating.

No matter where in the world you may live, home cooking has the power to heal the soul and connect families and cultures. For me, I felt this power most strongly through the home-cooked meals my mother made for me when I was little. Of course, it was mainly Japanese food. In both happy and sad times, my mom encouraged me and supported me with her cooking. The day before a test at school, she would make pork cutlets to cheer me up, and when I endured hardships as a *maiko*,[1] she would sneak me my favorite dish—curry and rice. Even now, I can still remember eating it, tears streaming down my face. My mom's cooking was always infused with a love that words can't fully convey. For me, home cooking is a key element that makes me reaffirm my family ties and my own identity, and that's why I want to pass on this precious culture to the next generation.

When making Japanese food, I believe that the key element for preserving the food's "Japanese-ness" is the combination of soy sauce[2] and *dashi* (soup stock), which is full of *umami*.[3] As long as you have these two items, you'll be able to experience a flavor typical of Japanese cuisine no matter where you are in the world, even if the other ingredients are different. *Oden* and *chawanmushi* are two typical examples of Japanese home cooking that use soy sauce and *dashi*.

Oden

Oden consists of a variety of items you can enjoy, all of which are simmered in a broth of soy sauce and *dashi*. *Daikon* (Japanese radish), konjac, eggs, *chikuwa* (tube-shaped fish paste cake), and other ingredients are boiled together until they completely absorb the *dashi* stock. People often eat *oden* during the cold weather months, enjoying it at home or at a street stand. Since it's easy to prepare—all you have to do is simmer the ingredients together—you can easily make it outside of Japan, too. The flavor of the

MOE (Kimono Mom)

An influencer who promotes Japanese home cooking to the world. After retiring from her work as a *maiko* and *geiko* in a Kyoto's *kagai*, traditional entertainment district, she launched her YouTube channel "Kimono Mom" in February 2020. Her videos mix in English and include introducing Japanese home cooking while wearing a kimono.

* See "From Maiko to Influencer: The Charm of Kyoto's Gokagai," in the November 2024 issue of HIGHLIGHTING Japan.

Kimono Mom

Japanese *dashi* (soup stock). *Dashi* made from *kombu* (kelp), *katsuobushi* (dried bonito flakes), and other ingredients is used to create the typical flavor of Japanese food.

Photo: ISHIZAWA Yoji

Oden, a cold weather favorite in Japan.

Photo: ISHIZAWA Yoji

A bowl of *chawanmushi* (steamed egg custard). This one features shrimp and shiitake mushroom, with a garnish of *mitsuba* honeywort.

Photo: ISHIZAWA Yoji

soy sauce is nicely emphasized, and the taste of the dish is characterized by the soup, infused with the *umami* of the ingredients. Soup stock made from *kombu* (kelp) or *katsuobushi* (dried bonito flakes) gives it a particularly deep flavor.

Chawanmushi

Chawanmushi is a soft steamed dish made from a base of egg and *dashi*. You make it by mixing eggs with *dashi* and soy sauce, adding other ingredients, and then steaming it in a steamer. You can put in things like chicken, shrimp, gingko nuts, and shiitake mushrooms. Each household makes its own version. *Chawanmushi* is distinguished by its soft texture and mild flavor, and it highlights the delicate *umami* of the *dashi* and the texture of the ingredients. *Chawanmushi* can be prepared without special implements, by using a steamer or a pot, so it's an easy dish to try outside of Japan.

I believe that, in the future, even if we are beset with a global food crisis and ingredients become limited, we can keep Japanese food culture alive as long as we have soy sauce and *dashi*. They will continue to support the essence of Japanese food and play an indispensable role in handing down our culinary culture.

From now on, I'll keep sharing the appeal of Japanese home cooking with the world. I will link people all over the world to the power of home cooking and connect the next generation to Japanese food culture.

1. MOE used to work as a *maiko* (apprentice *geiko*) and as a *geiko* in Kyoto.
2. A liquid seasoning made mainly from grain such as soybeans and wheat and fermented by adding *koji* (malted rice) and salt.
3. Considered one of the basic flavors along with sweet, sour, salty and bitter. Chief components of *umami* are glutamic acid, inosinic acid, and guanylic acid.