

Mukasa Chieko



Local Produce the Building Blocks of *Washoku*

Although Japan is a long, narrow, small country that extends north and south, each region of the country has a wide variety of foods using local ingredients. We interviewed Mukasa Chieko, who has covered local foods for many years as a food journalist and has interviewed numerous producers and cooks, about the features and appeal of traditional Japanese food.

What are the main features of traditional Japanese food?

Because Japan is a mountainous country surrounded by the sea on all sides, there are a variety of foods using ingredients obtained from the sea and mountains throughout the country. This is a significant feature of traditional Japanese food called *washoku*. Each region has its own unique

cooking and food preservation methods that enable ingredients to last for a long time. People have long eaten dishes made with seafood, even in regions located far from the sea. Because different ingredients can be obtained in different seasons, some foods can be eaten only in a particular season and others are cooked only for special days like New Year's Day. Fermented seasonings, such as soy sauce and miso, which form the basis of *washoku*, have different flavors in different regions. In addition, *washoku* is also characterized by making foods with umami (one of the five basic tastes) by using *dashi* stock made by soaking shavings of *katsuobushi* (dried, fermented, smoked skipjack tuna), *kombu* kelp or small dried fish in hot water. I think that Japan is one of the countries with the greatest variety of ingredients, tastes and dishes in the world.

What interests you about the traditional local dishes nationwide?

What is appealing about the original local foods in each region is not only their flavors, but also the stories behind their origins. Local dishes are born and changed during people's lives. Take *imoni*, which is traditionally eaten in Yamagata Prefecture. It is said that *imoni* originated in the Edo period (1603-1867) from boatmen on the Mogami River, which flows through the prefecture, who

stewed and cooked sticks of dried codfish and *satoimo* (taro), a specialty of Yamagata, in pots on the riverbanks. Since Western food culture prevailed in the Meiji period (1868-1912), beef and pork, which had previously not been commonly eaten in Japan, were added to the ingredients of *imoni*. In addition, in fall people came to enjoy an *imoni* party called *Imoni-kai*, at which family and friends ate *imoni* on a riverbank together. This is how the food culture of *imoni* has been passed down to this day.

Fermented foods to which a range of ideas for food preservation are applied are also an aspect of the appeal of local dishes. *Nare-zushi*, which is made by pickling fish in salt and rice and fermenting it in lactic acid, is a typical example of fermented food. *Funa-zushi* made with *funa* (crucian carp) from Lake Biwa is a fermented fish specialty of Shiga Prefecture, while *heshiko* pickled mackerel is a specialty of some areas including Fukui Prefecture. Shingu City, Wakayama Prefecture, has *nare-zushi* made with Pacific saury as its local specialty, and many customers from both Japan and overseas visit stores here selling “thirty-year-old” fermented fish, which is soft like yogurt. *Nare-zushi* has an abundance of lactic acid bacteria that build up people’s immunity, and it is also very good for the health.

Has anyone made a particular impression on you in connection with food?

There are many people who work hard to protect traditional Japanese food cultures in many parts of the country. Tokushige Ayako, aged 91, who lives in Miyakonojo City, Miyazaki Prefecture, is one of them. She cultivates chemical-free *ume* (Japanese apricots, commonly known as plums) and makes and sells foods using *ume* such as *umeboshi* (pickled plums). *Umeboshi* is a traditional Japanese food. After salting *ume*, people dry them in the sun and pickle them further to make *umeboshi*. It is common for people to eat *umeboshi* as a

side dish of rice. *Umeboshi* also has such a great disinfection effect that it has long been useful as a folk drug. Sickly in childhood, Tokushige ate *umeboshi* when she was in poor shape. Wishing to share *umeboshi*, which supported her health, with as many people as possible, Tokushige founded her own business about thirty-five years ago. In those days, there were few companies both producing raw materials and selling their products or, what’s more, managed by women. Tokushige faced numerous difficulties. However, the story went around that her *umeboshi* tasted great and were also good for the health, and she received orders from all around the country. Even today, as she passes her skills down to her grandchild, her successor, she still works hard making *umeboshi*.

What advice would you give foreign tourists when it comes to enjoying *washoku*?

I recommend that they stay at highly acclaimed local farm tourist homes. These tourist homes serve traditional Japanese breakfasts. Breakfast consists of rice, pickles, miso soup and a side dish, a group of foods that form the basis of *washoku*. Because the water and climate vary from region to region, the fragrance and flavor of the rice differ. Vegetables for pickles, such as eggplant, cucumber and turnip, are also cultivated nationwide. Various native varieties exist, however, meaning that the pickles taste different in different regions. An increasing number of farm restaurants using fresh local ingredients operate in many parts of the country. In Tokyo as well, there are *izakaya* Japanese-style bars and *soba* noodle restaurants using traditional vegetables called “Edo Tokyo Vegetables,” such as Senju Negi green onion and Terashima Nasu eggplant. I hope that tourists from other countries will enjoy the taste of traditional Japanese food at such restaurants. ▮

Interview by SAWAJI OSAMU
