Japanese Food Overseas: Past and Present

Japanese food is popular as a type of “health food.” The global Japanese food boom started with sushi, which spread throughout the U.S. due to a health conscious trend during the 1970s. Subsequently, sushi spread to Europe and the rest of the world. The explosive popularity of Japanese food outside Japan underwent qualitative changes over time, and eventually people began to demand more “realistic” Japanese food. This article re-examines the transformations experienced by the Japanese food boom and probes the underpinnings of the enduring popularity of Japanese food.

Delicious “Healthy Food”

According to a JETRO survey (Note 1) of consumers outside Japan, “Japanese food” was the top response to the question, for “What is your favorite foreign food?” (Figure 1). Behind the popularity of Japanese food lies an increase in health consciousness. An image has been established in which “Japanese food” equals “healthy food.” This is shown by the fact that, in the same survey, when Americans were asked why they go to Japanese restaurants, the second most common response after “I like the flavor” was “It’s healthy” (Figure 2).

What causes Japanese food to be rated as “healthy food”? In a word, it is the nutritional balance. A traditional Japanese meal is composed of rice, soup, a main dish, and two side dishes. According to Shigetoshi Nagasawa, president of Hakubaku, a company that produces grains, Japanese food is exemplary because “The staples are grains such as rice and barley, which do not require oil to cook. The focus is on an intake of carbohydrates (starch) and protein, and it is nutritionally rich and balanced.”

Figure 1: Favorite Foreign Food that You Eat at Restaurants

![Figure 1: Favorite Foreign Food that You Eat at Restaurants](chart1)

Figure 2: Question to Americans: Why do you go to Japanese restaurants?

![Figure 2: Question to Americans: Why do you go to Japanese restaurants?](chart2)

Note: Multiple responses were possible to the question “What is your favorite foreign food that you eat at restaurants?” The numbers represent the percentage of respondents who selected that cuisine. Selection of one’s own country’s cuisine was not an option.

Source: Figures 1 and 2 are both from JETRO’s “Survey of Overseas Consumers concerning Japanese Food” (December 2012).

Copyright©2013 JETRO. All rights reserved
U.S. Food Situation Ignites a Fad
Since ancient times, Japanese food has fostered the health of the Japanese people. Thus, what triggered such a demand for it overseas? Most likely, it was the food conditions during the 1970s in the U.S. that caused Japanese food to become popular there, igniting a real Japanese food fad.

In the latter half of the 1960s in the U.S., there was an upsurge in people suffering from lifestyle diseases, causing the cost of health care to balloon nationally and resulting in a higher fiscal deficit. Thereupon, to improve the American diet so as to reduce health care expenditures, the Senate issued a recommendation, titled “Dietary Goals for the United States,” commonly called the “McGovern Report,” in 1977. The report recommended that people consume carbohydrates (starchy material) in the form of unrefined grains as a dietary staple, together with seasonal vegetables, seaweed, fish, and shellfish, while reducing intake of foods high in animal fats, sugar, and salt. This is exactly what traditional Japanese food is. The nutritionist Nanako Ogino, who is known as the author of Taishibokei Tanita no Shain Shokudo (The Employee Cafeteria of Tanita, a Manufacturer of Body Fat Measurement Devices), had the following to say.

“Ingredients like seasonal vegetables and mineral-rich seaweed provide good nutritional balance. One of the characteristics of Japanese cuisine is a method of cooking that draws out "umami” or a savory taste of the ingredients by adding flavorful broth.”

The McGovern Report is known as the first formal document that mentioned that dietary imbalances can cause illness. Since then, there has been substantial research done on preventing illness through diet, and initiatives have been undertaken and an overall awareness of health has blossomed. This trend fostered broad interest in Japanese food as “health food,” and cookbooks that use Japanese ingredients such as miso, tofu, and seaweed became common in bookstores throughout the U.S.

Around the same time, sushi also created a buzz in the U.S. Starting on the West Coast around Los Angeles, “healthy sushi” was appreciated as fashionable foreign food by Hollywood actors/actresses and the wealthy. The sushi boom spread to New York on the East Coast, and by the beginning of the 1980s, it had spread throughout the entire country. Nobuyoshi Kuraoka, president of the restaurant, Nippon, a Japanese restaurant in New York in business since 1963, said, “In the 1970s and 1980s, Americans began to build up a sense of ‘slim down beautifully,’ and in their search for low-calorie food, more and more people tried sushi.” However, at the time of this first wave of the sushi boom in the U.S., there were also many Americans who were repulsed by the idea of eating raw fish. Thus, locally created sushi roll variations such as the California Roll became popular. Starting from the mid-to-late 1980s, the sushi boom rippled across Europe and the rest of the world.

Hunger for the Realism
The surge in Japanese food has gone through qualitative changes, in keeping with the times. Based on various sources, JETRO broadly classifies the global Japanese food boom into three stages: (1) pioneer days, (2)
The pioneer days were the period when the target customers of overseas Japanese restaurants began to shift from Japanese expatriates to the natives of the given country. In short, it was the dawn of localization (see the yellow sections of the table). As national income reached a certain level and as daily diet became more varied, a “health consciousness” began to grow. The characteristics of sushi fit in perfectly with that, triggering the first wave of the Japanese food boom. In addition to the U.S., regions where the pioneer days took hold relatively early include Great Britain, Germany, France, Brazil, and Hong Kong. Meanwhile, in Russia and emerging markets such as Southeast Asia, a Japanese food boom accompanied the acceleration of their economic growth from the late 1990s through the 2000s.

In the development period, Japanese food became more of a regular fixture on the local food scene (see the orange sections of the table). It became possible to locally procure ingredients that had formerly been available only by import and to locally produce items indispensable to Japanese food, such as flavorings and sake. It also became possible to offer a wider menu selection that went beyond sushi, at cheaper prices. Nobuyoshi Kuraoka reflected on the development period in the U.S. as follows.

“From the late 1980s, there was growing interest in soba (buckwheat noodles) and tofu as health food. That led me to create original menu items at my restaurant such as ‘salad soba,’ which is soba topped with salad. Also, I started to offer many Japanese food items in addition to sushi, including simmered foods, along with fugu (puffer fish) dishes which became a sensation after American food critics, etc., in New York referred to it as ‘the ultimate sashimi. It thus took hold in the consciousness of American customers.”

Sushi had led the pioneer days of the Japanese food boom, and sushi, particularly sushi rolls, came to be sold at supermarkets and other retail shops. Sushi continued to garner mass appeal with the appearance of conveyor belt sushi restaurants, and local consumer understanding of sushi deepened. It was a period that saw an increase in sushi restaurants that were better suited to the lifestyle of the local consumers, accelerating sushi’s integration into ordinary life. Starting in the late 1990s in cities such as Shanghai and Beijing, multiple Japanese restaurants began to offer the popular “all-you-can eat and drink” menus. This updated the image of Japanese restaurants, which had been seen as too high-toned and difficult to enter for ordinary consumers, and brought Japanese food closer to ordinary people by making it seem an accessible foreign food.

As Japanese food became more accessible and as the number of consumers who could navigate Japanese menus increased, many customers began to search out Japanese food that they could consider “realistic.” This was the period of evolution to realism (see the green sections of the table). During this period, a stream of specialized Japanese food chains opened, offering foods such as ramen, udon (wheat noodles), and curry rice. “Realistic” Japanese food covers the wide range of food found in modern Japan, from the high-class genre that pays particular
attention to ingredients and quality to the so-called “B-grade” gourmet food. In fact, this includes everything from meticulously prepared multi-course feasts at high-end Japanese restaurants to so-called “Japanese Western food” such as hamburger-based dishes and curry rice, in addition to bread and cookies. In particular, Asian countries that are culturally close to Japan have been quicker to evolve toward “realistic” Japanese food than have Europe and Russia.

It was the rise in health consciousness that drove the popularity of Japanese food overseas and led to the sushi boom. Subsequently, the Japanese food boom underwent transformations, in keeping with the times, and now people mostly demand "realistic” food that is close to what is actually eaten in Japan. Thus, what has underpinned the long-lived popularity of Japanese food? It has been neither more nor less the strong image of Japan’s manufacturing-related technological capabilities, the esteem due to increased enhancement in which Japan’s cultural industries such as anime are held, and Japan’s long life expectancy. These have boosted the trust placed in the “Japan brand” and have thereby further heightened the popularity of Japanese food.

Collaboration with Adjacent Fields
In what direction will Japanese food in the overseas market move in the future? If one were to choose a keyword to express the direction, it would be “collaboration.” In short, collaboration between food and adjacent fields will further boost the recognition of Japanese food. To give an example, there could be a collaborative project with industries involved in illness prevention and treatment, such as health care services and the industry involved in measurement devices for the human body. (Note 2)

In the U.S., European, and emerging countries, where lifestyle diseases are a problem, daily habits that prevent disease should be inculcated, and thus we could encourage people to rethink their daily diets by suggesting Japanese food. Concurrently, we could try introducing Japanese measurement devices and recommend that people get in the habit of measuring their state of health.

In recent years, medical tourism has been flourishing, as people cross national borders in a search of better services to treat their illnesses in areas with medical expertise pertaining to their illness. Japan could consider promoting inbound medical tourism, with the selling points being Japan’s strength and its world-renowned technologies in cellular regeneration technologies and cancer treatment, as well as advanced devices for diagnostic imaging. It is worth studying the selling of “health” as part of the Japan brand, backed by Japan's long life expectancy, to foreign travelers, and selling advanced health care in combination with the experience of Japanese food culture. Japanese food has the potential to open up new markets by creating linkage with non-food industries.

Tomomi Endo
Agriculture, Forestry, Fisheries and Food Research Division
Agriculture, Forestry, Fisheries and Food Department
Notes:

1) In December 2012, JETRO conducted the Survey of overseas consumers concerning Japanese Food. The survey covered 2,800 consumers in their 20s through 50s living in the seven countries and regions of China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea, US, France, and Italy. The survey asked (1) what foreign cuisines they like (including Japanese) and (2) their evaluation of Japanese sake, green tea, and other Japanese foods they like, etc.

2) Devices that measure the composition of the human body, such as body fat, muscle mass, and bone density.
# Changes in Japanese Food Overseas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>US</th>
<th>EU</th>
<th>Russia</th>
<th>China</th>
<th>Southeast Asia</th>
<th>Brazil</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-1960s</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970s</td>
<td>1972 Nissin Food (Gardena, California)</td>
<td>McDonald’s (France)</td>
<td>1970s (Soviet era)</td>
<td>1981 McDonald’s (Spain)</td>
<td>1982 Japanese restaurants began to open in upscale hotels (Thailand, Singapore)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980s</td>
<td>1973 Kikkoman (Waltham, Wisconsin)</td>
<td>McDonald’s (France)</td>
<td>Japanese restaurants exist in upscale Moscow hotels</td>
<td>1991 Nissin Food (India)</td>
<td>1990 1980s - 1990s Several Japanese restaurants opened, but they were so expensive that no one besides some high-wage earners could eat there</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early 1990s</td>
<td>1975 Yoshinoya (Dover)</td>
<td>Glico (France)</td>
<td>Increase in Japanese-style restaurants</td>
<td>1992 Kikkoman Trading (late JFC) established in UK, London, England</td>
<td>Late 1980’s - Early 1990s Japanese-style restaurants increase in cities such as Shanghai and Beijing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late 1990s</td>
<td>1994 Asahi Beer (Vancouver, Canada)</td>
<td>Nissin Food (Thailand)</td>
<td>Late 1990s Japanese restaurants became well established with the boom in Japanese anime and dramas, and a sushi and ramen boom started as well.</td>
<td>1996 Ajinomoto Frozen Foods (Bangkok)</td>
<td>2000s Japanese restaurants, specialty food shops, and pub chains in a low price range became well established</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000s</td>
<td>1994 Kikkoman (Folsom, California)</td>
<td>Nissin Food (Thailand)</td>
<td>Increase in Japanese-style restaurants aimed at expatriate Japanese employees</td>
<td>2000 Ajinomoto Frozen Foods USA</td>
<td>2000s Japanese restaurants, specialty food shops, and pub chains in a low price range became well established</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>