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12 Reinventing Culinary Heritage in Northern Japan
Slow Food and Traditional Vegetables

STEPHANIE ASSMANN

CHINESE DUMPLINGS: RECENT FOOD SCANDALS, IN JAPAN

AT THE BEGINNING OF THE YEAR 2008, Japan was shaken by a food poisoning scandal over frozen dumplings (gyōza) imported from a Chinese company. Ten people in Hyogo and Chiba prefectures were reported to have fallen ill after consuming the tainted dumplings that contained traces of two pesticide organophosphates (MHLW website 2008; Yoshida 2008). The food-poisoning scandal has triggered a call for a return to domestic food production (kokusan) in the media. A telephone survey conducted by Kyodo News on February 9 and 10, 2008, revealed that 76 percent of the respondents intended not to use Chinese food products after this incident (Japan Times Online 2008, February 11).

The recent emphasis on domestic food products can be seen as a response to the concern over Japan's low self-sufficiency rate and a series of food-related incidents that have occurred in Japan over the past several years in a relatively short amount of time. In January 2007, the Japanese confectioner Fujiya had to halt production after admitting the repeated use of expired ingredients and the mislabeling of consume-by dates of its products. In the same year, an investigation of the Mie prefectural government revealed that the confectioner Akafuku had falsified production dates of its popular bean-jam sweets (Japan Times Online 2007, March 2 and October 21).

Yet, despite the fact that a number of these food scandals have involved Japanese food companies, consumers tend to equate food safety (shokuhin anzen) with the consumption of domestic food products (kokusan). A reason for this trust lies in the notion that domestic food products are often associated with greater traceability, transparency of food distribution channels, and reliability of their origins. A food product whose "producer's face is visible" (seishansha no kao ga mieru) is considered trustworthy. Furthermore, food
laws with an emphasis on quality checks of food products such as the Food Safety Basic Law (Shokuhin anzen kijun hô) and the Food Sanitation Law (Shokuhin eisei hô) aim to ensure food hygiene and investigations of food products with regards to their safety (Takarajima-sha 2008, 12).¹

JAPAN’S LOW SELF-SUFFICIENCY RATE

As the above-cited telephone survey by Kyodo News revealed, the recent food-poisoning scandal over frozen Chinese dumplings has reaffirmed the fears of many Japanese consumers of imported food products. Yet the desire to become independent of imported foods may prove to be wishful thinking. Japan remains highly dependent on food imports. The United States of America and China are Japan’s major food suppliers, followed by Australia. According to data compiled by the Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO), during the first half of the year 2006, Japan imported 22.9 percent of its food from the United States of America and 16.8 percent from China, followed by 8.1 percent of foods from Australia (JETRO 2008). Japan has a food self-sufficiency rate of around 40 percent, which is the lowest among the major industrialized nations.² Japan’s food self-sufficiency rate shows a gradual decline from 78 percent in 1961 to 50 percent in 1987 and reached a record low of only 37 percent in 1993 (MAFF 2008).³

One reason for the decline of the food self-sufficiency rate is the decrease of farm households in Japan. Farming has become less attractive as a professional occupation over the past forty years. The number of farm households declined from 5.4 million in 1970 to 3.3 million in 1998. Correspondingly, the number of farmers has decreased from 37.7 million in 1950 to 14.8 million in 1998 (Mulgan 2000, 3). Another reason for Japan’s low food self-sufficiency rate lies in a gradual shift from the consumption of rice, Japan’s major staple food, to an increased consumption of wheat and meat. According to data from the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries (MAFF), the consumption of rice has decreased from 48.3 percent of a Japanese person’s total diet in 1960 to 30.1 percent in 1980. In the year 2004, the consumption of rice only amounted to 23.4 percent of the diet of a Japanese person. At the same time, the share of oil and fat rose from 4.6 percent in 1960 to 14.2 percent in 2004 (Suematsu 2008, 44–46). The introduction of milk and wheat through the U.S. Food Aid Program marked a major shift in the Japanese diet that occurred after the end of World War II (Cwiertka 2006, 157–58). Milk and wheat products became part of school lunches (kyûshoku) that were provided to children and provoked a change of eating habits of an entire generation. A further major shift of eating habits occurred at the beginning of the 1970s when fast food chains such as McDonald’s, which was established in Japan in 1971, became popular in Japan (Cwiertka 2006, 164–67).

“BUY LOCAL”—A RESPONSE TO GROWING CONCERNS ABOUT FOOD SAFETY AND FOOD IMPORTS

Increasing concerns over Japan’s low food self-sufficiency rate and a number of recent food scandals have triggered a response by a variety of initiatives that proclaim a return to local foods (furusato no ryôri or jimoto no ryôri) in order to counterbalance a growing diversification of food practices, to maintain regional agricultural products, and to ensure a high quality of food. As an example, in Miyagi prefecture in the northern part of the main island, the prefectural government has made an effort to enhance the attractiveness of the area as a tourist venue by forging connections between local culinary specialties and the natural resources in the region such as hot springs. In order to attract more tourists through the combination of nature and food, the prefectural government also promotes the initiative of “Green Tourism”—a combination of “farm stay and restaurant” and the revival of “traditional” vegetables (dentô yasai) (Miyagi Prefectural Government 2008). Interestingly, fast food chains such as Mos Burger have also adapted to demands for regional and seasonal products.

SLOW FOOD JAPAN

Given such various channels of preserving culinary heritage, I examined the question of how accessible local foods are for different economic groups, and how practical the integration of these local foods into daily food practices will prove to be. One initiative that promotes a return to supposedly safer local foodways and has focused on exclusive local food specialties is the NGO Slow Food Japan, which maintains close ties to its mother organization, the Italian Slow Food movement. Slow Food is currently active in 132 countries around the world and aims to counterbalance the globalization of food and the popularization of fast food. In 2005, Slow Food had 38,000 members in Italy. The United States followed with almost 15,000 members, third was Germany with approximately 7,500 members, followed by Switzerland with 3,800 members (Petrini and Padovani 2006, 132). The basic local unit is the
convivium, which “is the basic structural unit of Slow Food, the local chapter that serves as the most immediate point of contact between members, their local food culture and networks, and the wider public” (Parkins and Craig 2006, 21). Members of local convivia coordinate a variety of food-related activities such as wine and food tastings, food fairs, and public lectures to provide information about local foods, cultivation techniques, and special ways of preparation. They highlight food as a way to experience conviviality and pleasure, and advocate a slower pace of life, but they also seek to preserve local agricultural products that are in danger of vanishing. Additionally, members of all Slow Food convivia are encouraged to give advice to food producers on how to improve their marketing and distribution strategies and to increase the consciousness of consumers for culinary products in their immediate vicinity.

In other words, Slow Food invites people to rethink their conventional eating habits while emphasizing the pleasures of (sharing) food.

As stated earlier, Slow Food Japan maintains close ties with Slow Food Italy, which acts as an advisor on structure and administration to its Japanese counterpart. Slow Food Japan was launched in 1998 and has approximately 2,000 members (Miyagi Slow Food website, February 9, 2010). Approximately 140 members are involved in the activities of the Slow Food convivium in Miyagi prefecture. Members of Slow Food Miyagi occupy a wide range of professions. Some members work in health-related and food-related professions, such as restaurant owners, cooks, and sake brewers whereas other members work in education as teachers, lecturers, professors, or researchers. Slow Food Japan seeks to protect regional cuisines and regional agricultural products, and the branch in Miyagi is active in this goal. The Slow Food organization has created the “Ark of Taste” (in Japanese, *aji no hakubun*) to safeguard various endangered regional foods. Slow Food Japan only accepts products into the Ark of Taste that are at risk of extinction and have a long history. To be included on the list of endangered products, the product in question needs to have an excellent taste and a long history. Moreover, the product needs to be of environmental, economic, and historic relevance in the region of its cultivation. It should be cultivated on a small scale and finally must truly be at risk of dying out (Slow Food Japan Tokyo, 2006). As of February 2010, the following two products in Japan have been listed on the Ark of Taste as products that are on the verge of vanishing.

Haret su corn (*Hachiretsu tōmorokoshi*), Hokkaidō
Atsukai radish (*Atsukai daikon*), Iwate prefecture

Maibara leafy vegetable (*Maibara yukina*), Yamagata prefecture
Long grilled goby (*Nagatsura no yaki haze*), Miyagi prefecture
Japanese Shorthorn (*Nihon tankaku shu*), Iwate prefecture
Hanazukuri radish (*Hanazukuri daikon*), Yamagata prefecture
Amarume Green Onion (*Amarume negi*), Miyagi prefecture
Katakuchi Iwashizhi *shiokara*, Nagasaki
Unzen leafy vegetable (*Unzen kobukakana*), Nagasaki
Kosena radish (*Kosena daikon*), Miyagi prefecture
Fish shōyu of sandfish (*Hatahata no shottsuru*), Akita prefecture
Preserved mackerel (*Saba no narezushi*), Fukui prefecture
Dried persimmons (*Dōjō hachiyakaki*), Gifu prefecture
Red turnip (*Kiso akakabu*), Nagano prefecture
Nagasaki cabbage (*Nagasaki hakusai*), Nagasaki
Yatabe green onion (*Yatabe negi*), Fukui prefecture
Noguchi leafy vegetables (*Noguchi sai*), Nikkō
Masakari pumpkin (*Masakari kabocho*), Hokkaidō
Sapporo green onion (*Sapporo kii*), Hokkaidō
Dobsonfly (*Zazamushi*), Shinjū
Red onion (*Akanegi*), Ibaraki prefecture
Citrus fruit (*Yükō*), Nagasaki

Three of these vanishing products are cultivated in Miyagi and named after their location. The Kosena radish (*Kosena daikon*), whose long leaves are edible and especially tender, is one of these agricultural products. The availability of the Kosena radish is confined to its area of cultivation, as is the grilled and dried goby (*Nagatsura no yaki haze*). The Amarume green onion (*Amarume negi*) is known for its delicate taste and has an arched shape due to a special cultivation technique called *yatoi*. This vegetable is cultivated in humid soil and removed once during its growth to be replanted in a herded position. Although the Amarume green onion is rarely obtainable, a different version of the Amarume green onion is widely available in greengrocers and supermarkets in Sendai, the prefectural capital of Miyagi, under the name Sendai twisted leek (*Sendai magari negi*) (personal communication with Hachi Keizō on February 9, 2008). Thus, unlike the rest of the products listed in the Ark of Taste that are so rare, expensive, and delicate that it is not feasible to integrate them into daily food practices, the Sendai twisted leek is more affordable. Yet as the following example of a revival of culinary heritage of the Edo period (1600–1868) in Miyagi prefecture shows, attempts to revive local foodways often yield costly results.
COOKING WITH REVIVED PRODUCE

Initiatives to revive local food produce are not unique to Japan, but in Japan they are given a local expression as seen in the example of Slow Food in Miyagi prefecture. Since the summer of 2007, Satô Keizô, a specialist cook of traditional cuisine, has found a way to connect to the culinary heritage of prefectoral cooking by offering a classic cuisine lunch box (koten ryôri bentô) at the cafeteria of Tohoku University that enables visitors to experience the taste of the sophisticated banquet cuisine of the Edo period. This classic cuisine lunch is limited to twenty lunch boxes and is only available on weekends for the price of 2,000 yen (approximately $22) in a separate corner of the university cafeteria. The content of the lunch box is based on a variety of historical recipe collections such as the Cookery Collection (Ryôrishû) compiled in 1733 by Kikkawa Fusatsune (n.d.), who served as a cook for the feudal lord Date Yoshimura of the Sendai domain. Thus, the menus served at the Komorebi Café are patterned after those served at feudal banquets and attuned to celebrating seasonal events such as the New Year. The menu changes monthly and consists of four major components: sashimi, grilled foods (yakimono), nishime, and snacks (sakana). The following menu was served to members of Slow Food Miyagi on July 21, 2007:

MENU

Sashimi

Vinegared fish-salad of flatfish seasoned with salt and irizake* (Kaita kozukinenamasu)

Mountain Mallow (sangi)

Herbs (kôryô)

Flavored Sake (irizake)*

Grilled foods (yakimono)

Tofu made with eel (seta tôfu)

Nori

Tofu

Japanese pepper (sanshô nî)

Snacks (sakana yonjû)

Eggplant

A cooked salad with dressing (chinta ae)

Devil's tongue (kônyâku)

Miso paste made of leeks (negi miso)

Dried herring (mikaki nisshin)

Japanese pepper

Nishime

Stewed taro (satoimo umani)

Shiitake mushrooms (shiiake fukume ni)

Mugwort (yomogi)

Foilage of trees (konoha nakyô umani)

Rikyû egg (Rikyû tamago)*

Cold miso soup (hiyashiro or hiyajiro) made with dashi made of Miyagi Nagatsura goby (haze) with Sendai miso

Rice (mehi)

Mioga (mîoga), Asakusa nori, eggplant, dried beefsteak plant (shiso), cucumber

Pickles (kô no mono)

Radish (daikon), sake, soy sauce, citron (yuzu)

Japanese green pepper

Sweets (kannî)

Despite serving this meal to members of Slow Food, Satô reported that the ingredients he used for this and his other elaborate historical menus were not included in the Slow Food Movement's Ark of Taste. He explained that the foods on the Ark were too rare, too difficult to obtain, and too expensive (personal interview with Satô on February 9, 2008). However, Satô stated that he was indeed making an effort to purchase domestic ingredients (kokusan) exclusively, especially foods from the Tôhoku region in the north of Japan's main island and Hokkaidô, such as scallops (hotate) from Hokkaidô (Hokkaidô san) and Sendai miso (personal communication with Satô on March 1, 2008). The origin, such as "Hokkaidô produce" (Hokkaidô san), was marked clearly on the packages he showed me, but Satô admitted that he needed to trust the labels on the packages and could not further clarify the origin of the ingredients (sore iô ni kakunin dekinai). He also stated that he was making an effort to buy foods according to season, such as bamboo shoots (takenoko) from Kôchi (Shikoku), whose peak season lasts until the end of April. Therefore, in terms of seasonal foods, Satô purchases as many foods as possible from the northern prefectures while using additional seasonal ingredients from other parts of Japan.

Despite Satô's creative cooking using local products to create historical dishes, access to these remains limited. Satô's cooking has been featured in
the news (Kahoku Shimpō Online, July 7, 2007), but there have not been any extensive efforts to promote his cooking style. Furthermore, the availability of his classic lunch box is restricted to lunch hours on weekends and reservations are required. In addition, the price of the bento of ¥2,000 (approximately $22) is more than students who eat at the cafeteria would in most cases be willing to spend for a Saturday lunch. Taking these factors into consideration, Satō commented that the classic cuisine lunch boxes are usually served on special occasions such as festive banquets, as opposed to being a typical lunch. The enjoyment of refined regional culinary specialties is connected to special events that are directed at a very limited audience.

**SENDAI TRADITIONAL VEGETABLES AND GREEN TOURISM**

Another example of a revival of traditional foodways in Miyagi is the Miyagi prefectural government’s promotion of “Sendai traditional vegetables” (Sendai dentō yasai). The prefectural government lists six agricultural products on its website, including the Amarume green onion. These products are marked as “Sendai traditional vegetables” (Sendai dentō yasai) in order to make consumers more aware of the fact that they are buying a regional product. The names of these vegetables are:

- Sendai cabbage (Sendai hakusai)
- Sendai long eggplant (Sendai naganasu)
- Karatori potato yam (Karatoriimo Sendai)
- Sendai leafy vegetable (Yukina Sendai)
- Sendai Amarume green onion (Amarume negi)
- Sendai Japanese banana plant (Sendai bashōsai)

The prefectural government of Miyagi started the promotion of Sendai traditional vegetables in 2003 in collaboration with local farmers who sought to revive local agricultural heritage. There have been similar revitalization campaigns of “traditional vegetables” throughout the country, such as Kaga vegetables [Kaga yasai], available in Kanazawa in Ishikawa prefecture, and Yamato vegetables [Yamato yasai] in Nara prefecture. These efforts have been embarked on in the course of the past years, with Kyoto being one of the first and best well-known example of a revitalization of local vegetable cuisine. The campaign of Sendai traditional vegetables resembles the promotion of Kyoto vegetables that are known under the terms “Kyoto vegetables” (kyō yasai), “seasonal Kyoto vegetables” (kyō shun yasai), and “traditional Kyoto vegetables” (kyō dentō yasai) (Rath, forthcoming). Various kinds of kyō yasai are widely available in Kyoto and the surrounding areas as elaborate “Kyoto vegetable cuisine” (kyō yasai ryōri) and as exclusive products in specialty stores.

According to my conversation with Kimura Masaji, chief investigator at the Office for the Promotion of Agriculture in the Sendai region in Miyagi prefecture, the aim of offering traditional vegetables is “to provide local food to the population” and “to create a symbol for farmers,” meaning a vegetable that represents local agriculture. However, the vegetables grown are rare, their cultivation is limited to a particular region in Sendai, called Wakabayashi, and they are seasonally specific. For example, in the case of Sendai, the traditional vegetables named earlier are exclusively grown by seven farmers who specialize in the cultivation of either one or two of these local agricultural products. Equally limited is the distribution of these agricultural products. In most cases, the vegetables are directly delivered to restaurants that serve special dishes based on traditional vegetables. One of these restaurants in Miyagi is Sakunami Onsen, a hot-spring resort in Sakunami in the vicinity of Sendai, which began serving Sendai traditional vegetable cuisine in December 2007 (personal communication with Kimura Masaji, chief investigator at the Office for the Promotion of Agriculture in the Sendai region in Miyagi prefecture, on March 3, 2008).

“Farmers’ restaurants” (nōka resutoran) located in the suburbs of cities in Miyagi provide another example of places serving traditional produce. One of the farmers involved in cultivating Sendai vegetables, Kayaba Ichiko, runs a farmer’s restaurant called Moroya together with her husband, Kayaba Tetsuo, and their two daughters. The Kayaba family grows over a hundred different kinds of vegetables and operates a delivery service for vegetables for people living in Sendai. Customers who visit the place to relax for a day outside the city enjoy a menu that changes monthly and offers “seasonal vegetables” (shun no yasai). This farmer’s restaurant is one among approximately forty farmers’ restaurants in Miyagi prefecture and has been featured in Fountains, the magazine of JAL Hotels (Japan Airlines [JAL] 2007, 10–11). However, similar to the box lunches mentioned earlier, the customer base of this farmers’ restaurant is limited. Reservations are required, and it is not possible to visit this restaurant alone as the preparation of these vegetable dishes is too time consuming to be done for just one person.
SLOW FOOD AT FAST FOOD RESTAURANTS: THE CASE OF MOS BURGER IN MIYAGI

The arrival of fast food chains such as McDonald’s in 1971 and Starbucks in 1996 has influenced the nutritional habits of Japanese people. However, a very different and accessible way to integrate local food products into food practices has interestingly been made by a fast food chain, supposedly the main enemy of local food initiatives. The Japanese fast food chain Mos Burger, which serves teriyaki burgers and rice burgers, has begun to use local products on their fast food menus (Saijo 2008). As stated earlier, Japanese consumers tend to equate domestic food products whose origins are traceable and transparent with greater food safety. Responding to the increasing desire of customers for food safety, Mos Burger began using organically grown vegetables and started informing customers about the origin of its supply of vegetables. Customers who eat at Mos Burger can trace the origin of the food they consume: "Upon entering a store, customers can view a blackboard that informs them that the lettuce being used today comes from farmer x in y prefecture, the tomatoes from farmer w in z prefecture" (Jussaume, Hisano, and Taniguchi 2000, 221). In 1997, Mos Burger started cooperating with 2,000 farmers to use their agricultural products for their fast food menus under the motto “fresh vegetables of Mos” (mosu no nana yasai) and “vegetables that reveal the faces of producers” (seisansha no kao ga mieru yasai) (Mos Burger Japan website 2008).

Since June 2002, the company has offered special burgers that are only available in a certain areas (chiiki gentei), during a certain season (kisetsu gentei), and/or during a specific time period (kikan gentei). For example, in January 2008, Mos Burger launched the “Iwate Prefecture Nanbu Dori Burger” (Iwate ken san nanbu dori bāgā) in the Tōhoku area and in Hokkaidō (Mos Burger Japan website 2008). This emphasis on local food products points to Mos Burger’s marketing strategy that aims to distinguish it from other fast food companies such as McDonald’s by positioning Mos as a local business that values national and regional culinary treasures (Ohnuki-Tierney 1997). At the same time, Mos Burger has created local foods that are affordable. A typical local burger costs ¥320 (83), which is much less than a $20 classic lunch box served in the upscale restaurant mentioned earlier.

A return to local foodways may appear to be one answer to recent food scandals involving foreign foods. However, excepting the fast food chain Mos Burger, the accessibility of “traditional” food products is restricted and confined to a limited number of occasions and a small audience. If only small segments of Japanese consumers can afford more costly and supposedly healthier local foods, these foods will not pose a practical alternative to foods that are perceived to be harmful. Despite the rhetoric of the Slow Food movement and the efforts of chefs and the Miyagi prefectural government in reviving traditional foods and promoting safe foods, it is ironic that a fast food chain has provided the only accessible versions of these foods thus far. Albeit local foods are currently not fully integrated into Japanese daily food practices, the significance of local produce lies in the potential tie-up of food and eco-tourism, and in the integration of local food products into conventional eateries or even fast food restaurants.

NOTES

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1. The Food Safety Basic Law (Shokuhin anzen kijun hō) can be found at http://www.rou.gr.jp/law/law/shok_anz.htm, last accessed on February 9, 2010, and the Food Sanitation Law (Shokuhin eisei hō) can be accessed at http://www.houko.com/oo/oo/S22/233.htm, last accessed on February 9, 2010. The Food Safety Basic Law contains regulations with regards to the assessment of safety of food products, labeling as part of food safety, and the education of citizens with regards to food safety. The Food Sanitation Law prescribes standards for food additives, labeling and advertising, packaging, and food inspection.

2. I refer to the self-sufficiency rate computed on a caloric scale, which is calculated as follows: The supply of calories based on domestic food products per day for one person is divided by the supply of calories based on all foods (domestic and nondomestic food products) per day for one person (Suematsu 2008, 17).

3. By international comparison, the self-sufficiency rates of other major indus-
trialized countries are much higher: According to data compiled for the year 2003, the United States of America has a self-sufficiency rate of 128 percent, Australia’s self-sufficiency rate lies at 37 percent, Canada’s at 145 percent, France has a self-sufficiency rate of 122 percent while Germany’s self-sufficiency rate lies at 84 percent (MAFF 2008).

4. **Shiokara** consists of different parts of fish such as the flesh, eggs, and inner organs that are pickled in salt (Hosking 1996, 138).

5. Hosking lists this food as fish *shōyu* (*woshōyu*), “a salty, golden-colored, clear liquid, the product of fermentation with salt” (Hosking 1996, 166). This dish is especially well known in Akita prefecture.

6. **Narezushi** is an ancient technique of sushi, used to preserve fish using salt (Hosking 1996, 105).

7. **Nishime** consists of dry boiled foods such as fresh or dried vegetables, fish, and also meats that are simmered until no liquid remains. These foods are seasoned with ginger, *mirin*, and often soy sauce. **Nishime** is a dish that is often offered for New Year (Hosking 1996, 110).


9. The origins of soy sauce (*shōyu*) can be traced to the Muromachi period (1336–1573). At the beginning of the Edo period, the soy sauce industry came into practice, and only in the middle of the Edo period did soy sauce begin to be consumed more widely. Up until that point, *irizake* was used instead of soy sauce.

10. The *Rikyū* egg was named after the tea master Sen Rikyū or Sen Sōeki (1522–91), who was said to like foods made of sesame. This dish consists of a dissolved egg to which ground sesame (*goma*) and a little bit of sake (Japanese rice wine) is added before it is steamed. Alternatively, instead of sesame, walnuts (*kurumi*) can be used for this egg dish (Matsushita 1996, 200).

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Culinary Heritage in Northern Japan
WEBSITES


PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION AND INTERVIEWS

Interview, Fukano Setsuko, representative of Slow Food Miyagi, Sendai, February 5, 2007.
Visits to Slow Food Fair, Yokohama, Minato Mirai, April 28 and 29, 2007.
Visits to the Komorebi Café, Sendai, July 21, 2007; February 9, 2008 and March 1, 2008.
Interview with Kimura Masaji, head of the Office for the Promotion of Agriculture in the Sendai region in Miyagi prefecture (Miyagi ken Sendai shi chūō shinkō jimusho nōgō shinkō bu), March 3, 2008.
Visit to the farmers’ restaurant Moroya and conversation with Kayaba Ichiko, May 10, 2008.

13 Rämen Connoisseurs
Class, Gender, and the Internet

SATOMI FUKUTOMI

RÄMEN AND JAPANESE CONSUMERS

On March 20, 2007, Japanese newspapers and television news programs featured images of a long line of consumers waiting patiently outside Taishōken, a small, time-honored rämen specialty shop. After forty-five years of dedicated service, it was the last day on the job for the founder of the shop, Yamagishi Kazuo, who is said to be the inventor of the tsuke men type of rämen. Customers hoping to taste Yamagishi’s rämen one last time had to wait longer than usual; the first customer in line waited outside the shop for over twelve hours, and the average wait was four to five hours. The dedication displayed by these loyal customers illustrates the degree to which rämen, a fast and inexpensive food, is being transformed into an object of connoisseurship.

In this chapter, I argue that connoisseurship is a mode of consumption and embedded in everyday life in contemporary Japan. I define connoisseurship as a taste for and an expert knowledge of a subject or an object—for example, wine, which has long been recognized as an object of connoisseurship (oenology). Connoisseurship often connotes aesthetic qualities, high class (exclusiveness of other classes), and a sense of leisure, and is often considered an appurtenance of “high culture.” However, Michel de Certeau alludes to the inclusiveness of all classes and says that certain skills of everyday life have their connoisseurs (de Certeau 1984, 18). I argue that certain practices of rämen consumption challenge the normative association of elite status with connoisseurship. More specifically, I discuss how and why particular everyday commodities become connoisseurial objects in the context of Japanese consumer culture.

Rämen is an everyday food that has, for a number of complex reasons, come to be considered a national dish (kokumin shoku) in contemporary Japan. By “national dish” I mean foods that the majority of a nation's citizens, if not the entire national body, know about and most likely have eaten. Rämen in its capacity as a national food is embedded in the daily life of
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