

That's why Japanese Food is
Loved All Over the World -

The source of the health and longevity

Yoshikatsu Murooka and Ichiro Saeki



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Longevity

Yoshikatsu Murooka

Translated by Ichiro Saeki

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Preface

World travelers' preferences for national cuisine

Tuscany, located on the west coast of Italy, is one of the most famous wine brewing areas in the country. In the old town of Siena, perched on a hill, vineyards stretch as far as the eye can see. I once visited the old town in a Fiat driven by professor of my friend and charming assistant professor of Bologna University. We enjoyed the local Tuscan cuisine (Fig. P.1). Even though it was only the afternoon, the professor ordered plate after plate of pasta and poured different kinds of wine one after another telling us, “This Chianti red wine is good with this pasta” and “this Toscana white wine is good with that pasta”. I realized that we, Japanese are not yet a match against Italians in wine selecting even if we consider ourselves to be a wine connoisseur.



Fig. P.1 *Enjoying Italian foods at a restaurant in Siena, Italy.*

This situation is similar to the explanation that we give foreign tourists to Hiroshima, saying, “Among Japanese *Sake* made with soft water of the *Saijo* area, *Kirei* is comparatively a little sec dry and *Hakubotan* is demi-sec and *Kamozuru* is famous as a *Ginjo-shu*, a *sake* brewed from extra-polished rice, and *Kamoizumi* is popular as a good *Junmai-shu*, that is, a brewed *sake* with special rice and pure water” (Fig. P.2). But I can say that any kind of *sake* is fit for every Japanese food.



Fig. P.2 Japanese sake brewing factories in Saijo, Hiroshima, Japan.

Saijo is known as one of the best three sake brewing towns together with Nada (Kobe) and Fushimi (Kyoto) in Japan. Clockwise from upper left, Hakubotan, Kamozuru, Kamoizumi and Kirei sake brewing factories. Eight factories in this area including the four factories pictured above are brewing sake in the winter season.

Appreciating the local food and wine is always a pleasure when travelling abroad. No Japanese people want to go abroad for the purpose of trying foreign countries’ versions of Japanese food. The same thing could be said for people from foreign countries who visit Japan.

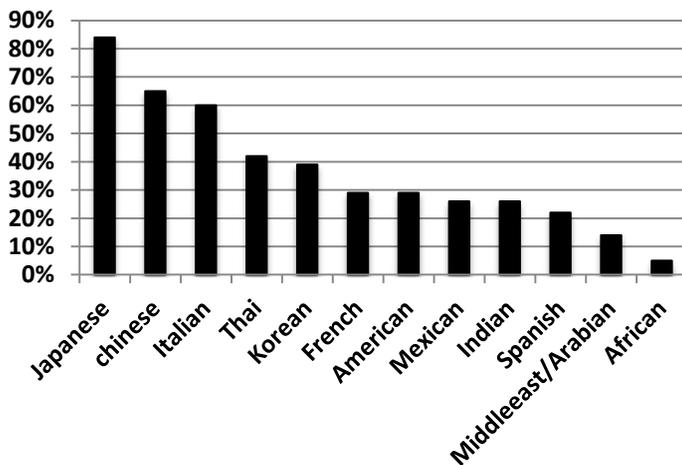


Fig. P.3 Ranking of favorite country's foods.

The data were surveyed in 7 countries. Each examinee was allowed to choose multiple countries except for their own country. Marked point ratio per examinee's number is shown as a percentage (%). (Report from JETRO, 2013).

Table P.1 Ranking of national cuisine by international travelers*.

No.	National cuisine	%
1	Italian	32
2	French	24
3	Japanese	18
4	Chinese	13
5	Spanish	11
6	American	10
7	Mexican	8
7	Thai	8
9	Taiwanese	5
9	Indian	5

*hotel.com.

How popular is Japanese food, or *washoku*, aboard? Table P.1 shows how the local foods of 10 countries are popular among people who travel around the world.

It is surprising that Japanese food is ranked higher than Chinese food, and it could be said that Japanese food is becoming more and more popular. According to a different survey, Japanese food is the highest ranked favorite national cuisine when examinees can mark all answers that apply to them (Fig. P.3).

Personally, I try the local foods of the countries I visit and very rarely eat the Japanese food there. The local foods reveal the character of the country. So when we taste the local foods, it can be said that we can touch the culture of the country. It is even better if the local foods are cheap. Because the locals are often eating local produce, they don't charge unreasonable prices. If you forgo the restaurants which foreign tourists often visit, and look for a locally-run shop, foreigners are mostly welcomed warmly even if you cannot communicate in the native language. A few times I have been asked to join them in drinking and singing. I once visited a local restaurant in Madrid with my wife. Although we could not speak Spanish, I happened to find a word, 'Octopus' on the menu. Octopus *sashimi* is one of our favorite Japanese foods, so we ordered some octopus dishes. We were almost speechless with surprise when we saw an 8 legged octopus with a boiled bold red head sitting on each dish. All the customers in the restaurant were looking at us and then burst out laughing with us. We got familiar soon and talked together about Spanish and Japanese dishes.

When I was spending my youth abroad, I could do without Japanese food for a couple of years. Maybe because I am old now, and nearing the end of my journey, I come to long for Japanese food. I come to want to eat foods like *udon*, *soba* and *ochazuke*, in particular. That's why I cannot introduce the Japanese food from the point of view of a gourmet. Thus, in this book, I'm going to explain the background of the global Japanese food boom from a scientist's point of view.

We often hear about the health benefits of Japanese food from Europe or the USA, but the papers which were written about it from the scientific aspects were rarely published. I was once invited to the International Symposium held at MIT,

which was held to commemorate the retirement of a famous professor. I thought that it would be a good chance for me to give a lecture on the science behind traditional fermented Japanese food. As I expected, my lecture was well received and some participants in the symposium said to me, “This is the first time I’ve ever heard the science behind Japanese foods”. I was also asked to write this lecture into a review paper by the chief editor of a scientific journal. Thus, I submitted a paper^{*1} written in English which was built of several papers which had been published in Japanese. Looking back, I am not completely satisfied, but this paper is read and cited most often even now among many original papers and reviews that I have published in English.

Citing various papers and reviews, I will start my simple introduction to the scientific basis of why Japanese food is a source of health and longevity. For those who are not familiar with Japan, I will also introduce typical Japanese dishes and the culture concerned with Japanese food on the basis of my previous book written in Japanese^{*2}.

^{*1} Murooka, Y. and Yamashita, M., Traditional healthful fermented products of Japan, *Journal of Industrial Microbiology and Biotechnology*, 35: 791-798 (2008).

^{*2} Murooka, Y., “Dakara Yappari Nippon Shoku: Kaigai Kara Mita Nippon Shoku no Miryoku”, Tokyo Tosho Syuppan, Tokyo, Japan (2013).

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