

Food and the Osakan Culture
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“Hello there, what would you like to drink today?”

“Water please.”

“Here you go. Water...and rice crackers.” The flight attendant handed me my snacks and proceeded to serve the next passenger.

Rice crackers...I wonder if the Japanese ate rice crackers...or if that was just one of those faux Asian foods. Speaking of rice crackers, I was a little hungry. My last meal was a little over 6 hours ago, and it was airplane food, which consisted of a small salad, bread with butter, cold soba, and salmon in red sauce. It was quite delectable, and I had been quite full. But that was then, and right now, I was hungry...and I wanted some *real* Japanese food.

“...Passengers, please return to your seats and adjust your seats and trays to the proper upright position. We are now approaching our destination, Osaka, Japan.”

I finished off my water and dropped my empty cup into the trash bag the flight attendant was holding. I then grabbed Adri's hand and squeezed it, giving her nervous smile. She looked back at me and her expression summed up my feelings exactly. We were about to immerse ourselves in the Japanese culture for 3 whole weeks.

Japanese culture. To me, that meant tradition, language, hospitality...and last but not least, it meant a whole lot of delicious food.

“Ehh...Serena wa onaka ga suiteru?” My host mother pointed at a café next to the subway entrance gates. She had just picked me up from I-House and I looked at her with wide, confused eyes, a look that my host father would come to imitate whenever I did not understand something. Sensing that I couldn't comprehend what she was saying, she attempted to speak English, “Serena...lunch...eat?” OH! How could I have not known what she meant?! I nodded, and we proceeded to wheel my luggage into the café. I looked at my surroundings in disbelief. Around me were the most mouth-watering fresh baked goods that I had ever seen in my life. Golden buns topped with a sprinkling of coconut, green tea sponge cakes with sticky red bean filling, warm sweet rolls that were generously slathered with thick creamy frosting; my senses were in heaven!

I couldn't make up my mind, there were so many to choose from. After a few minutes of contemplation, I finally decided on melon pan, brioche covered with a sugary top crust. My host mother and I sat down on tall stools, smiling nervously at each other.

“Oishii desu ka?” she asked me.

Oishii. I totally understood that. “Hai!” I answered enthusiastically; I was excited to finally be able to respond.

“ Donna tabemono ga osuki desu ka?”

Another phrase I understood! And this time, I could answer her with more than just a “Hai” or “lie”!

“Sushi...ramen....tempura...soba...udon ga suki desu. Zenbu nihonyouri ga daisuki desu.”

We spent our whole lunch talking about food. Food I liked, food that Osaka was famous for, food that I wanted to eat during my stay, and food I couldn't eat (Nothing!). By the end of our meal, despite the language barrier, I felt a lot more at ease.

After I settled in to my host family's house, my host parents took me to the supermarket. It was as if I had died and gone to heaven— sashimi, fresh fried tempura, yakitori, and tofu— my favorite foods, we all there. As my host mother wheeled the miniature sized shopping cart, she pointed at various foods, asking if I liked them.

“Suki?”

“Daisuki!” I would reply to every food.

“Itadakimasu!”

That night, we had a miso soup that made my body tingle with warmth, a crunchy salad that reminded me of home, and an assortment of sushi fit for a king. And that’s how I was treated my entire trip, like a king. Well, in my case, I guess you would say, like a princess. Every morning, Okaasan would make me a piping hot breakfast which included eggs, ham, bacon, or sausage, toast, a sweet pastry, and a cup of milk. This was certainly a far cry from the Frosted Flakes I ate for breakfast at home.

At school, my international classmates would treat me to traditional Japanese foods each day. This ranged from foods like umeboshi to natto. It was quite an adventure, to say the very least. My second to last night in Osaka, my whole class and I went to the Tenjin Matsuri, and we tried all the tasty fresh matsuri foods, which included cotton candy packaged in a doraemon bag, karaage packed to the brim in popcorn container shaped cardboard, and refreshing melon flavored shaved ice. All of this was followed by a late night savory cold eggplant pasta supper in a chic Italian restaurant in Shinsaibashi.

During the entire duration of my stay in Osaka, I noticed that food was everywhere—from the bustling matsuri stands, to tourist filled Dotonburi Street, to the quaint restaurants that filled up with salary-men during lunch time. The food was such a big part of the people—whenever I met anyone new, they would ask me about food.

“Have you had takoyaki?”

“You have got to try okonomiyaki!”

“What about natto? You can’t come to Japan without trying natto!”

“How is the food in America?” “Do you eat hamburgers everyday? I heard American hamburgers are as big as one’s head!”

Every time I met a new friend, we had a discussion about food, and we would end up going to some place which had “the best (replace with famous Osakan food here).” Needless to say, my famous endless stomach started getting a little full by the end of my trip.

I think the reason why food is such a big aspect of the Osakan culture can be explained through the friendly, outgoing, funny personality of the Osakan people. Food is very much a big part of socializing and it is only natural that the Osakan people more than embrace it. Food provides satisfaction and communication. It is an international language—good food is, well, good food. Ultimately, that is why food is such a big part of the Osakan’s cheerful culture, because good food brings joyful spirits.