

Nihonteki na Ryouri

“Japanese” Cuisine

When one thinks of Japan, they can already form an image, a stereotype, and a way to distinguish what is Japanese and what is not. This is the definition of ‘Nihonteki’: characteristics that make Japanese things Japanese. What really developed my definition of ‘Nihonteki’ was my childhood and high school experiences. When I was eight, while I was watching Japanese dramas non-stop in front of the TV, I would absorb the language, fashion and culture from them. My high school gave me opportunities to explore Japanese not just as a language, but as a culture. Throughout high school, I diligently learned Japanese, while being an officer of a culture club called Japanese National Honor Society. My Japanese teacher was a huge inspiration to me and helped me develop a deeper sense of my own characteristics for what Nihonteki is. I believe that Nihonteki can be described into 3 specific characteristics: Seasonal (季節感), Nature-like (自然的), and Rich with History (歴史的). I decided to experience the characteristics that I developed through the food of Japan by going to Osaka.

Prior to going to Osaka with my co-student ambassador, Matthew, I always thought that Japan only made seasonal and limited products so that the stores could attract customers and make a profit. In America, it is different. Products in America are never seasonal because America always imports products from other places. In Japan, everything being sold is regional, therefore they are literally “seasonal” products. This is probably because Japan is a small country, so they would make the most of what they have. When asking the Japanese people I met on the trip, they said that seasonal ingredients makes them enjoy the food more. For instance, during the scorching hot summer, they eat unagi (eel) because eel is good for your health and for the autumn, Japanese people would say 「食欲の秋」、Taste of Autumn, where they eat mushrooms, potatoes, and chestnuts. Therefore, menus in restaurants change from season to season, because the four seasons are all around them and truly important to their values and beliefs.

Japan also values and treasures nature. Japanese people appreciate it because according to Shinto, a Japanese religion, everything has a soul, especially nature. Both my host mother’s daughter, Kaoru, and one of the college students, Yuuki, strongly believed everything has a God. That is why Japanese people are grateful and respect the food that nature provides for them. They appreciate it to a point where they like to imitate nature through food. A good example is when I went to a shop that sold Wagashi, a traditional Japanese sweet, with Kaoru on a day that could roast a turkey, and the employee served us cool ocha and Kinako Kuzumochi, a mochi that is topped with kinako powder, as a sign of welcoming and hospitality. It was definitely refreshing after walking outside for a good five minutes, but what really awed me was how the

wagashi was shaped like a pond with lotus and fish stamps embedded in it, with the name of 清流、Clear Stream. Another example of the great appreciation of nature would be an interactive food event, Nagashi Soumen, long cold noodles are placed in cold water that flows through a long bamboo flue. Kuboi sensei, an university teacher whom I respect dearly, brought Matthew and I, to an elementary school where we interacted with students and their parents to prepare the event. When I saw nagashi soumen for the first time in real life, it strongly resembled a river and the soumen looked so elegant and natural, perfect on a hot day like so.

Every cuisine has its history such as what is eaten on certain occasions. The development of Japanese cuisine is deeply rooted in the culture. For instance, Okonomiyaki and Takoyaki, the Soul Foods of Osaka, was invented near Osaka and got popular because it was cheap and convenient to eat anywhere at anytime. It goes hand in hand with Osaka people because people of Osaka are famous for being busy bees. During my stay in Osaka, I ate okonomiyaki twice and the first time I ate it, it was made perfectly to my liking, with meat and a runny, sunny side up egg. The second time I ate it was when I was at a festival with Kaoru; she brought me to my first festival (matsuri) in Japan and I could recognize that there were specific foods that you would see at every festival, similar to an American carnival having cotton candy and hot dogs. The mobile food stands (Yatai) were definitely a part of the history of festivals and how the stands came to be. In the past, Yatai were set up in temples where they sold medicine to act as fundraising for temple repair fees. It evolved to today's food stands where a small portion of the yatai's profit will contribute to the temple/shrines. There was always okonomiyaki, takoyaki, and something similar to a candy apple, only there were a variety of fruits. The matsuri(s) had food that could suit everyone's tastes that ranged from the savoriness of yakitori, barbecued chicken, to the cooling sweetness of kakigori, shaved ice. The Yatai offer these types of food because they are cheap enough for even children to afford and convenient to eat as well.

This trip really helped me develop and understand Nihonteki and what it means to me. Reason being that Nihonteki is so much more than a stereotype, it is something that develops when one is truly immersed in the Japanese society and lifestyle. One has to really look into the culture and the atmosphere around Japan and the hospitality, Omotenashi, that Japan offers to everyone. I didn't just go to Japan to eat and study about the food. Meeting the people that helped and got to know Matthew and I really enhanced my meaning of Nihonteki. They treated us with such kindness and did not expect anything in return, but for us to have a good time and bring the knowledge and beautiful memories of Japan back home.