

## Japan - The Apotheosis of Asian Cuisine

By

Ms. Jayashree Bhattacharjee

[jayashree.bhattacharjee@gmail.com](mailto:jayashree.bhattacharjee@gmail.com)

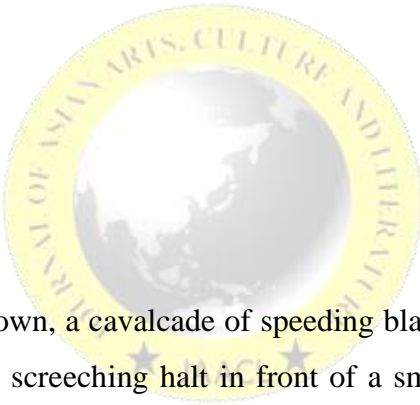
### Abstract

Japan is the one country which has tenaciously perfected the balance of the modern and the traditional, even after multiple attempts at cultural appropriation and dilution. And their cuisine is a big part of that.

### Keywords

Japanese, cuisine, fish

### Introduction



On the suburbs of a small town, a cavalcade of speeding black SUVs and limousines leave a dusty trail. They come to a screeching halt in front of a small row of shops. About twenty henchmen get out, ornate katanas in their scabbards hanging on one hip, automatic rifles on the other. They survey and secure the area. Once it's safe, someone opens the door of the Rolls Royce. A frail old man exits the vehicle, wearing Ferragamo shoes and a Tom Ford Suit. Heavily tattooed, battle scars visible wherever his skin is exposed. He's their boss, and every soul in the vicinity, not just his minions, bow as far down as their body permits, careful, maybe even scared, to avoid eye contact. He pushes aside the blue PVC curtains and enters what appears to be an almost dilapidated eatery, asbestos and thatched roof supported by plastic pipes and metal rods. But this isn't a tale of bloodshed. The old man has come for his lunch.

You might be wondering why he isn't at the penthouse of a luxury hotel. Well, the ramen shop he's visiting is one of the rarest of rare instances where roadside eateries are granted the coveted Michelin stars, which the classiest restaurants in France and every other country

compete for every year, mostly unsuccessfully. It signifies the epitome of gourmet cuisine across the world. The noble prize of the culinary world, if you will.

A typical ramen shop works the graveyard shift, because the storm in the ramen bowl is the broth. It's boiled anywhere between 6 to 24 hours, with different kinds of meats and condiments added at precise moments in precise quantities, from pork bellies to chicken feet. And if the visiting taste-master, (Yeah, that's a real thing, but they aren't known by that moniker), takes a sip of the broth and not another, the whole thing goes down the drain, and the process starts from scratch again.

That is what food, culture, honor, tradition, skill, craft, workmanship and respect mean to the people of this great nation. Welcome to Japan. The food capital of Asia. And if you are an adventurous foodie, there is no better place to be. There are street foods selling meaty treats made from organisms that you haven't even heard of. There are meals that cost more than a luxury car. And dishes that can kill you, as it does to about a thousand people each year, if it was prepared and cooked by someone who didn't know what he was doing, and what scientific and salubrious norms he had violated.

We are of course talking about the notorious puffer fish of Japan, The Fugu. It has lethal amounts of tetrodotoxin in its organs, especially the liver, the ovaries, eyes, and some other soft tissues.

Unless the fish is cleaned and prepared in a special manner, to carefully remove the organs containing toxin with surgical precision, the flesh of the fish gets contaminated with the toxin. But that doesn't stop the intrepid consumers from going nuts about this Fugu, one of the most famous delectable, and the demand is such that many famous restaurants are booked over months in advance. The descendants of the ferocious samurais court with danger even in their meals.

To understand the precision and integrity of the Japanese palate, you have to not only understand the complexity, properties and behavior of the ingredients, but glean the true essence of the Japanese parable, 'If it looks like miso, and tastes like miso, it's not real miso'. Guess you'll have to be Confucius to internalize that! Well Confucius was Chinese, but I'm

sure he visited Japan sometime in his simple storied life.

Normal people from other cultures might be perplexed, or even laugh at the highbrow histrionics, while chomping on their burger and fries, but that's how evolved gustatory Japanese aesthesis is. Wielding the samurai sword, the calligraphy pen, and the kitchen knives, are all held to equal cultural standards and spiritual excellence, and takes decades to master, usually under the tutelage of a revered sensei. And no matter what your preference of staff is, endurance, perseverance, and total dedication to the craft from an young age might just give you the edge over other million Japanese doing exactly that. Where else would you find a raw fish dish that's not only a delicacy that has conquered the world as sushi, but has elevated it to an art form that only grand-master chefs have perfected. The best are made from triple A graded tuna that will simultaneously melt and explode in your mouth.

Every established, traditional cuisine is now an amalgamation of various influences over centuries of contact and evolution. But Japan has miraculously kept its traditional culinary arts intact and has steadfastly held on to them, while keeping them something of a cultural and national secret. Of course influences and evolution are inevitable, but the Japanese have absorbed only the minutest and most relevant of them, and have managed to keep the traditional and modern cuisine separate.

Most Asian countries have rice as a staple food. But the Japanese grow and consume about twenty thousand varieties of rice that they prepare and cook in about two hundred different ways. The Japanese sure love their rice. But they are also fanatical about their beef, or more precisely, beef cattle breed.

Wagyu beef is the most revered, best tasting and most expensive beef on the planet. Raised in luxury organic state-of-the-art farms, a single animal fetches auction prices up to a million dollars. The texture is unique, the marbling of the fat between the meat turns to butter in the mouth, and it's considered blasphemy to put that meat in a sandwich or burger.

Then there is the experience that is Teppanyaki and Hibachi. You have to visit an upscale restaurant where you are usually afforded the luxury of your own room or stall. The master chef enters with his cooking station. You choose among the best produce, from lotus stems to

zucchini, and the best cuts of meat and sea food, and the super chef prepares your meal right in front of you, according to your specific palate, tastes and preferences.

The word Teppanyaki comes from teppan, the metal plate on which it is cooked, and yaki, which means grilled, broiled or pan-fried. All this while, the chef shows his skills, from chopping vegetables thin and precise with superhuman speeds, to tossing raw eggs in the air that land perfectly on the edge of the knife to make you a tornado omelette.

Hibachi (fire bowl) is a more modest affair, where everything is cooked on a grill instead of a metal plate. But that doesn't make it any less of an experience or taste and flavour. In Hibachi, you know exactly what you want, whereas in Teppanyaki, you have more variety that also caters to your idiosyncrasies.

If finesse and subtlety is what you are looking for, you can take a walk on the philosophical and spiritual lane that is the Japanese Tea Ceremony.

It's not a shop to buy tea over the counter. You have to be invited by the patrons only if they felt that you are worthy enough and not waddling over tea-bags and instant coffee. In fact, even today there are rarest of rare tea with rumored healing and rejuvenating power limited to the ceremonial and medicinal needs of the elite.

But even the mundane cup of tea has to literally achieve perfection. The timing and the grace of every move; from the unfurling of the mat, to the setting out of the cups, and the sifting of the green leaves, is a beautiful harmony itself. A master tea maker has to pay attention to the composition, behavior, aroma, flavor, and type of tea leaves, the tea pot, the quality of the water, the season, the temperature, and even the humidity, to brew the perfect cup.

As Okakura Kakuzo put it, way back in 1906, the whole ceremony is precipitated on the principle that 'Those who cannot feel the littleness of great things in themselves are apt to overlook the greatness of little things in others.' In fact, this maxim forms the very fulcrum on which Japanese art, including their culinary ones, and even their way of life pivots. No philosophy, thought process, presentation and attention to the tiniest of details pervades the Japanese culture as uniquely and thoroughly as any other. No other culture has as much

eneration for the extreme and the subtle as the Japanese soul, and that is something the whole world can take a cue from.

One thing that we have to keep in mind is the fact that tea is the most consumed beverage in the world after water. Shared among friends, families and associates. The whole elevated affair is reserved in Japan only for religious and ceremonial gatherings that have remained practically unaltered for ages.

But modernity is more and more infiltrating the soul of the Japanese mores and their customs. Patience, excellence, tradition and veneration are fighting a losing battle. But hope sustains, and a few passionate youngsters are stepping in fortify the ranks and spirits. Trace their roots and restore the traditional. Ironically, they are using technology to document and restore the old ways, where nature was not a separate entity to humans, like it is now.

## Conclusion

Balance of modernity and tradition is a way of life that's indelibly etched in the minds of every Japanese, and is a tacit understanding between them brethren.

Even their kitchen tools are a work of art and science. Although Ginsu knives became fashionable only in the eighties, Japanese knife-making has evolved through the centuries to the point where that are the only ones that the greatest chefs in the world will even touch. A single hand-made Japanese knife, often made of tamahagane steel, from which samurai swords are forged, can take up to six months to make, sometimes forged and refolded over more than a thousand times.

If the Japanese are so fervid about their kitchen tools, imagine their mindset when they are actually cooking!

But the new Japanese generation are progressively turning their back on their own heritage, to the point of even mocking them.

Hence all those revered skills, techniques and philosophies are becoming more and more a

disappearing art and a lost cause. So take your next vacation to Japan before the irreverence completely wipes out the purity of purpose and tradition. But given the tenacity and love of the people for their culture and way of life, we are still hopeful that many of the youngsters are realizing their cultural and culinary greatness and the sacrilege of their descent. They are showing maturity enough to venerate their heritage. They are becoming the defenders of the faith, their cuisine taking centre stage among the pantheon of cultural rules and ceremonies they have to preserve, safeguard and resurrect.

Arigato and Sayōnara folks. See you in the the land of the midnight sun.

### **About the Author**

Ms. Jayashree Bhattacharjee is a writer, lecturer, blogger and has worked as visiting faculty in the Regional Engineering College (REC), Durgapur, (presently NIT).

