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Miso is a national treasure for the people in Japan

In December 2013, Washoku, traditional Japanese cuisine, has been added to UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage list. Washoku is getting attention from people all over the world as healthy food. Not only in the western countries but also in south-east Asia, more people are enjoying it.

Miso is an ingredient that has a history of more than one thousand and three hundred years in Japan as one of Washoku's basic seasonings. Tracing back the history, it is said that Miso came to Japan from mainland China by way of Korean peninsula. During the Nara and Heian periods, miso was a luxurious product that was beyond the reach of the commoners. In the Heian period, seemingly there were times when the salaries of high-ranking officials were paid by miso. There is a record that shows tax was also paid by miso. Miso soup didn't appear until the Kamakura period. Miso became easier to be dissolved in water, and that led to the invention of miso soup. However, only certain people such as bushi (samurai) could eat miso.

It is during the period of Kamakura bushi, that a typical meal of "ichi-ju issai" was formed. Ichi-ju issai consists of rice, miso soup, and a main dish. Now, "ichi-ju issai" became a synonym for a frugal meal, but at that time, bushi and monks who could eat miso soup were the privileged classes and it is not until the Muromachi period that miso soup became common to ordinary people. During the Muromachi period and Warring States period, miso was used as food in the battlefields. That tells us how miso or miso soup energized the people. Finally in the Edo period, miso became a food item for ordinary people.

There are various episodes that tell how healthy miso is. For instance, Ieyasu Tokugawa was known to have lived a long life because he had been eating miso, but it is said that the real secret for his longevity is that he was eating miso soup with 5 vegetables and 3 roots every day. Miso soup with five kinds of leafy vegetables and three kinds of root vegetables is a perfect meal even from modern nutrition standards. You can say miso is an ideal and well balanced food because of its nutrition, cancer preventing effect, hypertension inhibiting effect, anti-aging effect, etc. Ordinary people embraced miso as a healthy food saying, "one does not need a doctor if he eats miso." The best known guide book on food in the Edo period, "Honcho Shokkan (Mirror of food in our country)" tells us in the "miso" section that miso "relaxes the inside of the stomach, vitalizes blood, and discharges various poisons from your body. It goes into the stomach and helps digest food, brings energy into your body, and improves the circulation of blood. It soothes pain and increases appetite, treats nausea, stops diarrhea, blackens hair, and moistens skin." The book introduces miso as medicine with

many benefits and as a cure-all.

Since ancient times, miso took root in the Japanese people's diet as an ingredient peculiar to Japan and became indispensable in our meals. But the Japanese people's eating habits have changed greatly in the recent years. Bread replaced rice and there are lots of western ingredients like meat, and we have access to almost everything. These are the reasons why there are days without miso soup on our tables. How many times a week do we see miso soup in our meals? We used to eat it every morning, or three times a day. Now, it seems that miso soup, a dish the Japanese people loved through the ages, is no longer welcome to the Japanese people, who prefer everything in their lives to be quick and easy. It must be because people feel that preparing dashi (soup stock) is troublesome, or have a misunderstanding that miso soup has a high salt content.

These days, there are many dashi that do not contain chemical condiments or salt. Before, there were many dashi that contain plenty of salt for the strong taste, but nowadays, we can obtain dashi with no additives at supermarkets. Thus, by boiling water in a pot, putting dashi and ingredients like vegetables, and dissolving miso into it, you can easily make a tasty and healthy miso soup. However, people don't seem to realize that.

If you eat miso soup with tofu or deep-fried tofu in it, it's a dish full of good soy protein. Soy is called "meat of the field", but it actually contains more protein than meat. Vegetables that contain lots of potassium have the effect of discharging sodium from a person's body.

Also, miso, which is a fermented food, has lots of nutrition, minerals, and essential amino acid which our body cannot produce. Many food researchers say that miso is "perfect food".

The fact that Washoku was added to UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage list also means that it became something we have to preserve. When people abroad consider miso a healthy food, it is a pity if the Japanese people forget the benefit of it.

We should take this opportunity to take another look at the excellence of Washoku and rediscover the health effect and the great taste of miso.

Miso is the food that contributes to the health and longevity of the Japanese people and its taste is woven into our DNA. Miso is a wonderful treasure of the Japanese people.

(Ryosuke Suzuki, General Manager, Japan Miso Promotion Board)
(translated by Keiko Hori, IAC)

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Understanding the culture of Latvia through Food

One of the best ways to connect people and various cultures is through learning more about each other's cuisine.

Latvian cuisine is largely based upon meat and locally available crops, and has been influenced by cuisine from neighbouring countries. Latvia is located in a temperate climatic zone with fairly long and cold winters and warm, short summers. Dishes tend to be hearty and filling – which they need to be when the thermometer plummets.

Along the coast, fish forms a bigger part of the diet – smoked fish is a particular speciality, and herring, pickled and served cold, is often eaten. Potatoes, sauerkraut and other vegetables are traditional accompaniments. There are a number of very tasty, distinctive soups. Many of the ingredients are seasonal – with mushrooms, berries, nettles and the like being picked at certain times of the year.

Due to the harsh climate Latvians have always worked hard to provide food for themselves and their families. Food has thus always been assigned great value by Latvians.

Although our countries are divided by a geographically large distance, we consider ourselves close to Japanese mentally. We also share similar attitude to food. For example, similar as the rice in Japan, bread has a special place in the Latvian consciousness, and respect for it is encouraged from early childhood.

I really enjoyed participating at the Latvian cooking class led by Ms. Momoko Takata. It was very well organized, and I was very much impressed by her skills and knowledge about Latvian cuisine, particularly of making our traditional cheese with caraway seeds.

I look forward to the next opportunity to participate at the event, introducing Latvian cuisine in Japan.

Warm regards,

Dana Rudaka
Deputy Head of Mission, Embassy of Latvia in Japan

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Hello, dear embassy vol.19 special edition.**It's like travelling around the world while living in Tokyo.**

In the series, "Hello, dear embassy," where we report about our strongest partners, embassies in Japan, we have introduced total of 20 countries.

(We featured Serbia for the first time in 2009 and again in 2014 after the big flood, so the actual number is 19.) In the "Furyu vol.18 (issued in 2011)", we printed a summary of the first ten issues. In this issue, Mr. Yamashita, who writes this series, offers his thoughts about the countries we featured from the 11th country to the 20th country.

Since I first wrote "Hello, dear embassy," for Furyuu, Serbia, the country we featured in the latest issue, became our 20th country to be on the page of Furyu. I once wrote a summary for the first 10 countries, and Ms. Kanaya asked me to write my thought since then.

Usually, we visit an embassy of a country with small population and little connection with Japan. So most of the time, I don't know much about the country. When we make an appointment to visit a certain embassy, we send the list of the questions beforehand. For that, I always gather information of the country in a very short time. I look at the website of the embassy and Japanese foreign ministry, or read guidebooks, to make a list of things I want to know.

From Côte d'Ivoire, the country we featured in "Furyu vol.19" to Serbia on "Furyu vol.29", I wrote about 10 countries in total. The other countries I wrote about are; Armenia, Tanzania, Afghanistan, South Africa, Mauritania, Poland, Burkina Faso, and Azerbaijan. Out of these 10 countries, Poland is the only country that I have actually visited. However, as I do research on a country, visit its embassy and talk with the people there, and write an article about that country, I feel as if I had travelled the country. Sometimes I feel that I could understand the various nuances of the country that no television program can tell us. Every time I write for "Hello, dear embassy," I always think, "I can travel around the world without getting on an airplane!"

I cannot speak fluent English, so most of the embassies arrange interpreters for us. But some of the ambassadors have a very good command of the Japanese language. They are Armenian Ambassador (then advisor) H. E. Dr. Grant R. Pogosyan and

Azerbaijani Ambassador H.E. Mr. Gursel Ismayilzada. Although Dr. Pogosyan has an aptitude for science and is teaching computer science in a Japanese University, he is also good with languages and speaks fluent and precise Japanese. H.E. Mr. Gursel Ismayilzada became interested in Japan and its language because his father was a researcher of Takuboku Ishikawa, a Japanese poet. I wonder why research of Takuboku Ishikawa is done in Azerbaijan. It seems even mysterious to me that someone in Azerbaijan would study Takuboku Ishikawa's tanka poems.

Every country wants to export its specialty products to Japan. Côte d'Ivoire exports cacao and Mauritania exports octopus to Japan. In Japan, Cacao from Ghana seems to be more famous, and Côte d'Ivoire is trying to make its cacao more popular and to increase the amount of exports. Octopus from Mauritania is served in many sushi restaurants in Japan, but "Japanese people don't know that the octopus they are eating is from Mauritania, and they don't know much about the country of Mauritania (according to the embassy staff)." They are hoping that, "the Japanese people become more familiar with Mauritania."

In the process of producing this article, the person who is making the greatest effort is Ms. Kanaya, who makes appointments with the embassies. She has to take into consideration the ambassador's schedule and the difference between the national holidays of two countries along with other things. It must be difficult to fix appointments. Also, Mr. Fujikura, who takes photographs, and Ms. Hori who translates my article into English, are working very hard to create a good newsletter.

(Yasunori Yamashita, IAC)
(translated by Keiko Hori, IAC)

Come
join
us!

Shopping and cooking @ Tsukiji Market #1 "Hina-matsuri (girls' festival)"

Date:Tue. 3rd March , 2015

Schedule:

8:45 Meet at the "Tsukiji 4-chome" crossing

8:45 ~10:00

Part 1: Shop at Tsukiji Jogai Market.

10:00~11:30

Part2: Cook dishes for "Hina Matsuri" and enjoy them.

Instructors:Hiromumi Morita and Momoko Takata

Cost: ¥ 2,500 for IAC members, ¥ 3,500 for non-members

To apply for the tour,

please contact IAC (International Artists Center)

Email: info@iactkyo.jp phone:03-5426-2047

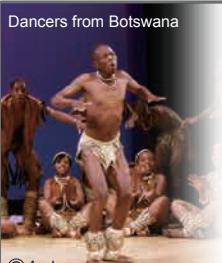


photo by Momoko Takata

"Tsukiji market" is a place where you can find seasonal food products. Let's enjoy shopping at the Tsukiji outer market, using the special tips from Tsukiji chefs regarding where to shop and how to choose good food products.

Then, we will cook several dishes to celebrate "Hina Matsuri (Girls' Festival)" with professional instructions.

Dancers from Botswana



International Artists Center (IAC) is a non-profit organization. It was established in 1960 and has been doing its activities in the aim to contribute to the international understanding and the world peace through cultural exchanges programs.



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