

Educating Eater

In the first of a four-part series on food and drink in Japan, **Tony McNicol** looks at recent concerns about food safety and at efforts to promote "Food Education."

For three days this March at Tokyo's Makuhari Messe convention center, Foodex Japan 2007 offered visitors a veritable cornucopia of culinary delights. Nearly 10,000 people came to take in an array of food and drink from sixty-four countries. In the Mexican section of the international food exhibition, a young woman wearing a gigantic sombrero was advertising Mexican pork. In the Japanese section, two middle-aged Japanese ladies were ladling out bowls of noodles to a line of hungry visitors. Another company had set up a stall displaying a range of cherry-blossom foodstuffs. The French area was well stocked with France's finest wines. Spain had sherry and hams. Brazil had brought its coffee, Scotland its whiskey, Belgium its beer. There was Korean kimchi, Greek olives, Tunisian dates; there were chestnuts from China and jellybeans from the United States.

As the exhibition demonstrated, in the last few decades, Japan's rich native cuisine has been supplemented by a banquet of imported foods from around the globe. It is the latest step in a process that began long ago with tempura from Portugal, ramen noodles from China—even proto-sushi from Southeast Asia. However, while consumers have more choice than ever, it is not all good news for gourmands. The average Japanese diet is becoming increasingly unhealthy. And at the same time, consumer trust has been shaken by domestic food safety scandals and global food scares.

Although the Japanese diet is still heavily reliant on fish and rice, Japan also now rivals the nations of the West in its appetite for fatty, high-carbohydrate food. Curry, pizza, and steak are regulars on the

nation's dining tables, and burger joints are ubiquitous on the nation's streets. At a time when other developing countries fret about "super-sized" calorific portions, during four days in January 2007, McDonalds Japan sold 3.3 million "Mega-Mac" four patty 754-calorie burgers (a Big Mac is 547 calories).



PHOTOGRAPHS BY TONY MCNICOL

The prevalence of fast food restaurants and propensity to eat bigger portions are two of the more obvious features of the Japanese dietary transformation.

The Japanese Government has been so worried about changing eating patterns, and the implications for the nation's health, that last year the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare issued a "Food Education" white paper. The document details some unpalatable statistics on the state of the nation's diet and health.

Between 1976 and 2004, the number of families eating together everyday has shrunk from 36.5% to 25.9%. Likewise, in 2004 over a third of men in their twenties and over a tenth of fifteen- to nineteen-year-olds were skipping breakfast. According to the white paper, around 30% of Japanese men between the ages of thirty and sixty are overweight. Conversely, one in five women in their twenties are underweight. Not surprisingly, so-called lifestyle related diseases are on the rise. The white paper states that one in ten of the population is at high or significant risk of developing (obesity-linked) type-two diabetes.

The government has proposed a number of counter-measures, such as encouraging food manufacturers to put detailed nutritional information on packaging. One key concept in the government's strategy is "*shokuiku*," or "food education": teaching people, particularly children, how to eat healthily and safely. "Food education should start in the home, but there is also an important role for schools to play," explains Kawano Miho, a deputy director in the Cabinet Office for Food Education Promotion.

Kawano stresses that food education is not just for the very young, either. "Although it is not so easy to change adult eating habits, food education is also necessary for adults; they are the ones already suffering from obesity, diabetes, and lifestyle-related diseases." She points out that relatively few Japanese people would be classified as obese by international standards (a BMI of over thirty), but says that even moderately overweight people are at risk of health problems.

Food Safety

For the public, another major concern in recent years has been food safety. A series of scandals has deeply shaken consumer confidence in both domestic and foreign foods. Probably the biggest issue in recent years has been the import ban on U.S. beef imposed in December 2003 after BSE was found in U.S. cattle. The ban was finally lifted in July 2006. Bird flu has reached Japan too, with sporadic outbreaks among poultry farms.



Korean booths at Foodex 2007. The increased availability of foreign foods is another feature of contemporary Japanese food culture.



And early this year, confectioner Fujiya Co. was embroiled in a major scandal after admitting that it had used out-of-date ingredients in its products. Some incidents dated back seven years, and the case evoked disturbing memories of the 2000 Snow Brand milk scandal when over 13,000 customers were made ill by out-of-date milk.

"Consumers need to become more aware," stresses Sunada Toshiko, a food and health journalist and member of the government's committee on food education promotion. However, she does see recent scandals as a good sign, in the sense that since the 1990s consumers have become more ready to demand their rights, and the media more ready to investigate.

A positive effect of such scandals has been to prompt consumers to demand healthier and safer food—a trend that has even reached Japan's convenience stores. From August 2001, market leader Seven-Eleven stopped using food additives and artificial food colorings in its own food line.

Another effect of healthy eating and food safety concerns has been to nourish Japan's budding organic farming sector. At present, only about a tiny 0.5% of Japan's farms are producing organically, but consumers are beginning to show interest. "Since BSE and a series of food scares, Japanese people have become more willing to pay a little extra for organic food," says Kaneko Yoshinori, who has a three-hectare organic farm in Saitama prefecture. He started organic farming thirty-six years ago, when knowledge of the concept was scant to say the least. "People thought I was mad," he recalls. "They didn't even know what the word 'organic' meant."

Back to Basics

So what else can Japan do to maintain its relatively low levels of obesity and safeguard the almost unrivalled longevity of its citizens? Return to its traditional "healthy" diet? Well, for a start, the dichotomy between healthy traditional Japanese food and unhealthy foreign food is not a very fair one, says Katarzyna J. Cwiertka, lecturer at Leiden University in the Netherlands and author of a history of Japanese food culture, *Modern*

dustrialized societies [including Japan] face is not the meals as such, but rather the over-consumption of snack food," says Cwiertka. The point is rather that much of the developed and developing world faces similar problems—not least the obesity epidemic that has been dubbed "globesity."

Cwiertka believes that people can and do change their eating habits, though they need a "very good reason" to do so. "In Europe, we are moving closer to the



The pink of health? A booth selling cherry blossom products at Foodex 2007.

Japanese Cuisine.

"It is definitely partly justified," she says. But it depends on what you mean by 'foreign foods.' Junk food, yes, but what about pasta and salads? We tend to forget that the introduction of foreign food—and that includes yogurt and fruit—has also made the Japanese diet healthier.

"I think the main problem that all in-

idea of a fat and sugar tax, which would make such foods as chocolate bars and potato chips more expensive," she says. "At the moment, an apple in our university cafeteria costs more than a Mars bar."

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