

Background of Some Japanese Expressions about Food (4): “*Atsu-atsu*”, “*Yawarakai*” and “*Aburakkoi*”

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Summary

The Japanese language has numerous expressions about food properties. Descriptive food terms not only describe food properties; they also provide insights into any given society or culture. In this article, I would like to explain a little about the historical, cultural and social background of some Japanese descriptive food words that are used frequently in winter.

“*Atsu-atsu*” means very hot. It is applied to *oden* (Japanese hotchpotch boiled in kelp-based broth seasoned with soy sauce), *udon* (Japanese wheat noodle) and gratin, etc. It has been used ever since the Muromachi era. The *atsu-atsu* dish stimulates our appetite in winter. It might be good medicine for patients when it is cold.

“*Yawarakai*” is equivalent to “soft” or “tender”. The origin of the word might be “*Yowai*” (weak). Kunio Yanagita who is a famous Japanese folklorist pointed out that the teeth and jaws of modern people have become weaker and weaker since the Meiji era because they have always eaten soft and/or tender foods. On the other hand, Shiki Masaoka who is a famous haiku poet enjoyed *yawarakai* (soft) bread even though he was on his deathbed. Although *yawarakai* (soft or tender) food helps patients to obtain nutrient, eating *yawarakai* (soft or tender) food every day is not good for the healthy individual. As the origin of the word shows, “*yawarakai*” (soft or tender) might be related to “*yowai*” (weak).

“*Aburakkoi*” corresponds to “oily” or “greasy”. It has been used since the Heian era. We often use “*Aburakkoi*” in our daily lives. “*Aburakkoi*” is used for various foods with a wide range of lipid content, and are related to several food properties such as the appearance, taste and texture.