

Tasting Change: Discovering Modern Japan, One Bite at a Time

Kelly Jones

52 Lime Street, Newburyport, MA 01950, USA

Summary

In the fall of 2004, thanks to a generous fellowship grant from the Japan Society of New York, I spent 10 weeks gathering oral histories about how globalization, Westernization and modernization have affected culinary past-times in both rural and urban Japan. I am a radio reporter by training, so I took my microphone and tape recorder everywhere I went, capturing the sounds and voices of places as diverse as bustling *depachika* and typhoon-ravaged rice farms. Three experiences in particular left large impressions on me and helped me form my understanding of the current state of the Japanese mealtime. The first was a chic, very international picnic with busy Japanese urbanities in Tokyo's Shinjuku Park. That experience underscored how global a village urban Japan has become. With its lush offerings of French breads and cheeses and Italian meats and sweets, it also made me wonder just how far to the West the Japanese diet would lean in coming years, and at what cost to cherished Japanese culinary past-times and foods. The second experience was a journey north of Tokyo to Iwate Prefecture, where, in Towa-cho, I learned how rice farmers are coping with the combined pressures of natural disasters, globalization and a sagging local economy. I learned that even remote, rural areas are not immune to the downside of a global economy. The third experience took me into vast department store food emporia known as *depachika*. The range of foods sold and the kinetic energy of the places were themselves somewhat startling, but what I found most revealing was the edible evidence of Japanese innovation by way of imitation. Green tea éclairs and squid ink baguettes are just two examples of the way that Japanese chefs have fused the East and the West in a single dish that is, by way of its very inventiveness, uniquely Japanese. My many hours spent in *depachika* made me appreciate the peculiarly Japanese ability to preserve tradition by shaking it up. It also gave me hope that no matter how great a stake foreign influence claims on the Japanese palate and the Japanese table, the most innovative chefs and home cooks, farmers and artisans will always figure out a way to preserve their food's essential "Japaneseness."