

European Influence on the “Culture of Food” in Nagasaki

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Eating may be viewed simply as a biological function based upon physical and physiological needs, but when it comes to eating habits and the content of meals, a variety of factors must be considered. For this reason, I coined the phrase “shoku no bunka shi” (the cultural history of food) and began to publish on this topic in 1960, arguing that diet changes according to regional climate, politics, history and customs, and that it displays distinctive characteristics from one region to another. In particular, I paid special attention to the culture of food in the Nagasaki region as it is quite unique in Japan and provides a keen insight into the city’s colorful history of international exchange.

The Opening of Nagasaki Harbor and the Culture of Food

The person who opened the door for the introduction of Western culture and Christianity in the Nagasaki region was the feudal lord Nagasaki Sumikage, a vassal of the daimyo Omura Sumitada. In May 1563, Omura and twenty-five of his vassals (including Sumikage) were baptized in the port town of Yokoseura, which the previous year had been visited by the annual Portuguese ship. After the baptism, Sumikage returned to Nagasaki. Omura Sumitada’s baptism meant that everyone who resided in his domain had to convert to Christianity.

At this time, a Catholic church was built in Yokoseura, and bread (pan, from the Portuguese word pao) and wine were provided for use in the Mass. The word pan was already well known among the Christian population in Japan.

In August 1563, the town of Yokoseura was attacked by anti-Christian forces and everything in the town, including the church, was burned down. As a result, both Sumitada and his Portuguese guests had no choice but to look for another port within the domain to replace Yokoseura.

In 1567, Cosme de Torres, the head of the Jesuit mission in Japan, sent Luis de Almeida to Nagasaki for the purpose of propagating Christianity. Almeida thus became the first Portuguese to visit Nagasaki. Two years later, the first church, Todos os Santos, was built here on a summit overlooking the town, which at the time was little more than a fishing village huddled at the head of the bay in what is now Shindaiku-machi. While in Nagasaki, the Jesuits admired the fine harbor and reported it later to the Portuguese traders.

In the early summer of 1572, the first Portuguese ship entered Nagasaki Harbor. By this time, almost all of the people in the area were Christians and a new church and Jesuit headquarters was being constructed at the tip of the cape projecting into the harbor—the “long cape” from which Nagasaki gets its name. Portuguese sailors could walk freely about the town, and the traders could take up residence wherever they wanted. During the following months and years, houses and churches were built one after another on and around the cape by the Portuguese and Japanese residents of Nagasaki.

When Omura Sumitada transferred jurisdiction over Nagasaki and its environs to the Jesuits in 1580, large numbers of Japanese Christians poured into Nagasaki, transforming the former fishing village into a “little Rome.” Given such a background, it is not surprising that the culture of food in Nagasaki gradually came to resemble that of a European city.

Nagasaki and European Customs

To learn about the Japanese diet prior to the opening of Nagasaki Harbor, a good reference is the Portuguese Jesuit Luis Frois (1532-1597). Let me cite several of his observations: 1) Europeans prefer food such as hen, quail and pie. On the other hand, the Japanese prefer wild dog, crane, cat and raw seaweed. 2) Europeans like dairy products, such as cheese and butter, and bone marrow, but the Japanese dislike all of these. The Japanese say they give off bad odors. 3) Europeans do not eat dogs, but they do eat cows. The Japanese do not eat cows, but they eat dogs for medicinal purposes.

The traditional Japanese diet in Nagasaki, however, gradually adopted European elements. The following are reasons as to why this may have occurred: 1) When the Portuguese started to live in Nagasaki, their servants and Japanese wives prepared European dishes for them; 2) the Catholic priests, who were revered by Japanese Christians, ate European food; 3) people of the day found European culture quite advanced; and 4) the Japanese developed a taste for European dishes through prolonged and intense contact.

Before the arrival of the Europeans the Japanese rarely ate beef. This was due to the influence of Chinese culture and Buddhism, not to mention the fact that cows were considered valuable work animals. But the taboo on beef-eating gradually disappeared after the Europeans established themselves in Japan. Let me cite one example. Avila Giron came to Nagasaki for the first time in 1594 and subsequently visited quite frequently for extended periods of time. In his book, *Nippon okokuk*, Giron related how the price of beef had skyrocketed over the years. He claimed that the reason for the high cost was that all the citizens of Nagasaki had begun to eat beef.

In addition to this book, there are Japanese accounts which relate how the eating of beef gradually gained popularity throughout the country. A representative work is *Nagusamegusa*, written by Matsunaga Teitoku, a famous linked-verse poet of the early sixteenth century. Matsunaga says that “Around the time when Christianity was introduced to Japan, even people in the Kyoto region referred to beef as *waka* and ate it as a highly prized delicacy.”

Waka comes from the Portuguese word *vaca*, meaning “cow” or “beef.” Portuguese words were fashionable during the late sixteenth century, as were numerous other aspects of Nanban (“Southern Barbarian”) culture. The Nagasaki dialect still includes a considerable number of Portuguese words from that era, such as *banco* (*isu* in Japanese, “chair” in English); *vidro* (*garasu* in Japanese, “glass” in English); *gibao* (*juban* in Japanese, “undershirt” in English); *capa* (*kappa* in Japanese, “raincoat” in English); *raxa* (*rasha* in Japanese, “woolen cloth” in English); *frasco* (*furasuko* in Japanese, “flask” in English); *copo* (*koppu* in Japanese, “cup” in English); and *tobaco* (*tobako* in Japanese, “tobacco” in English).

A number of Portuguese words referring to foods and sweets also remain to this day, and although used throughout Japan, they still elicit associations with Nagasaki for most people. Portuguese words for sweets are especially well-known: *bolo de Castella* (*kasutera* in Japanese, “sponge cake” in English); *bolo* (*maruboro* in Japanese, “small round sponge cake” in English); *pao* (*pan* in Japanese, “bread” in English); *zamboa zabon* in Japanese, “shaddock” in English); *tempora* (*tempura* in both Japanese and English); *alfeloa* (*aruheito* in Japanese, “toffee” in English); *bis-coito* (*bisuketto* in Japanese, “biscuit” or “cracker” in English); and *abobora* (*kabocha* in Japanese, “pumpkin” in English).

In Nagasaki churches, a variety of European dishes were prepared. In 1618, the Jesuit priest

Matheus de Couras, who was stationed at a church in Nagasaki, wrote about the meals of the circuit priest Viela. In the account, we find dishes like sirloin steak and chicken, as well as desserts such as pears pickled in sugar. The families of influential townsmen in Nagasaki undoubtedly enjoyed European-style dishes such as these, a supposition that is supported by the recent excavation of eating utensils and other sixteenth-century European paraphernalia from construction sites in the old neighborhoods of Nagasaki. The people of Nagasaki also enjoyed European wine and were the first Japanese to use glasses to drink.

Western Food in the Tokugawa Period

The prohibition of Christianity in the early seventeenth century brought about drastic changes in the field of Western cooking. These changes included prohibitions against the eating of beef (since it was associated with Christianity) and the making of bread (which symbolized the flesh of Christ). Because of this, people came to fear Western food. The residents of Nagasaki did not forget, however, the taste of food brought by the Portuguese, such as sugar, pickled vinegar dishes, fried foods, desserts and oven-baked dishes. Some of these dishes have been handed down to this day, although the original ingredients may have been replaced with other more readily available foods (such as fish for beef) and the names of the dishes have often changed.

In 1641, the Dutch were ordered by the Tokugawa government to move from Hirado to the man-made island of Dejima in Nagasaki Harbor. However, since residents of Nagasaki were not allowed to enter the island freely, Dutch-style cooking had very little influence on the average Japanese household. Three Japanese cooks were employed in the Dejima kitchens, but this was hardly enough to cause a boom among the people. The Dutchmen ate beef, but the prohibition on the slaughter of Japanese cows for food made it necessary to bring cows to the trading post once a year from Batavia (in modern-day Indonesia). As a result, the Dutch preserved most of their beef by pickling it in salt.

The sight of the Dutch eating meals was a oddity to the Japanese, and it became a favorite subject of woodblock prints and other Japanese illustrations of the Edo Period. Many of these prints contain the sight of a cooked cow's head on a large platter, a feature probably added to emphasize the strange eating habits of the komojin ("red-haired people").

Although not allowed to eat Japanese beef, the Dutch were permitted to buy domestic goats, chickens, pigs and fish. These they prepared skillfully and included in a variety of dishes.

However unusual, Dutch cooking was held in high regard among eighteenth and nineteenth-century Japanese because it was thought to have medicinal value. Dishes cooked in butter were thought to be the best medicine of all.

Western Food in the Modern Era and Nagasaki

Japan ended its national seclusion policy in 1859, and began to conduct open commercial exchanges with many countries. From this time on, the Japanese began to find something fresh in the Western manner of living. Many of the people who played a significant role in Westernizing Japanese meals came from Nagasaki.

Merchants from the United States, Britain, Prussia and various other countries were flocking to Nagasaki. The foreign quarter, which had previously been limited to Dejima, was expanded to

include the little valley of Oura flanked by the two hillsides of Higashiyamate and Minamiyamate. It was here that foreigners employed Japanese carpenters to build the Western-style houses and office buildings that marked the first meeting of Japanese and Western architectural styles.

Many of the wealthy foreigners brought Chinese servants and employees from the continent because of their English ability, but soon Japanese people replaced the Chinese in these positions and began to master both foreign languages and Western cooking methods. Kusano Jokichi (1840-1887) was one of them. In 1863, Kusano opened Japan's first Western-style restaurant, called "Irabayashi-tei," on the hillside near his home below Irabayashi Wakamiya Shinto Shrine in Nagasaki. There were initially very few customers, as one can tell from a sign at the restaurant which read: 1) Those who come to eat should let us know one day in advance due to the preparation time needed, and 2) We cannot accommodate more than six customers at a time. Although the sign said that customers needed to let the owner know a day in advance, this was difficult, since there were of course no telephones at the time and the restaurant was inconveniently located. To make things worse the price of an average meal was considerably higher than a Japanese meal at one of the city's old ryotei restaurants. This suggests that the Nagasaki residents who did eat Western-style food were very well off.

Still the flow of customers had increased significantly by 1865, and with the support of the Nagasaki commissioners and other well-heeled customers, Kusano changed the name of his restaurant to "Jiyu-tei." Then in 1877, he opened a new Western-style restaurant, this time in the center of Nagasaki, and among his many customers here was former American President U.S. Grant who visited Nagasaki on a tour of the world in 1879. Kusano also demonstrated the popularity of Western food in other parts of the country by opening Western-style restaurants in Osaka (1863) and Kyoto (1876). He died in Osaka in 1887, a pioneer in the restaurant and hotel business in Japan.

Other Nagasaki residents who had learned to cook Western food went to the open ports of Yokohama and Hakodate and established the first Western-style restaurants in those cities. Also, in 1865, a resident of Nagasaki named Matsuo Kiyobe traveled to Beijing via Shanghai and there studied French cooking. After coming back to Nagasaki, he opened the first French restaurant in the city.

Although it was widely acknowledged by Japanese people that Western food was nutritious and medically beneficial, there were still many who opposed the consumption of beef. The national attitude changed considerably, however, on New Year's Day 1872, when the media reported that the Emperor and the Empress ate beef.

Conclusion

In 1976, the building housing Kusano Jokichi's "Jiyu-tei" was dismantled and reconstructed at Glover Garden in Minamiyamate. A monument erected in front of the restaurant says, "The Cradle of Western Cooking in Japan." Nagasaki may not have been the first place where European cooking was prepared and eaten, but it was certainly the center of Christianity during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries when the lifestyle of its residents revolved around the town's many churches. And even after the prohibition of Christianity in the early seventeenth century, Nagasaki remained the only place in Japan open to European influence. During these years the people of Nagasaki, while viewing Western food as a rarity and a luxury, continued to eat it and pass it down from generation to generation. In this way, we find a deep relationship between the lifestyles of Nagasaki and the culture of food in Europe.

The situation in Japan changed drastically and the entire nation began to absorb European culture after the opening of the country's doors in 1859. The culture of food in Nagasaki gained nationwide recognition, leaving no doubt that the development of Western-style cooking in Japan owed much to the contributions of Nagasaki and its residents.

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