

“Warming Rock” of Japanese Cuisine

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Abstract

In contemporary Japanese, the word "kaiseki" is written with characters for "gathering" (KAI/AU) and "seat, occasion, place" (SEKI) and commonly refers to an exquisite Japanese banquet cuisine. Kaiseki is characterized by its delicious, refined, seasonal, local, and expensive nature. A kaiseki meal typically consists of a succession of about a dozen courses, masterfully prepared from micro-seasonal local ingredients and served on spacious dishes. The presentation is an essential part of the overall experience, with dishes reflecting the season, style, and locale. With Japanese cuisine expanding into many parts of the world, the Japanese taste and style have significantly influenced the global culinary scene. Not only is sushi available practically everywhere, but we can also find "French kaiseki," where traditional Japanese forms are adapted to create a completely different banquet experience. However, few remember that the term "kaiseki" originally derives from "chakaiseki," a meal that precedes partaking of tea in a formal tea gathering. Historically, "kaiseki" referred to a warm stone that Zen monks placed inside the overlap of their meditation robes to ease hunger during meditation sessions and prevent stomach growling. This paper will trace the evolution of the kaiseki meal from the tradition of shojin ryori (vegetarian meals at Zen monasteries) to its role in a full tea gathering (chaji) and its broader influence on Japanese cuisine, transforming from a "warming rock" to a "gathering place." Additionally, the study will explore kaiseki as a culinary style and its impact on global cuisine.

Keywords: Aesthetics, Culture, Chanoyu, Mindfulness, Contemplation, Intercultural Studies, Washoku, Culinary Studies

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Introduction

In December 2013 UNESCO recognized washoku (traditional Japanese cuisine) as an “Intangible Cultural Heritage”. While it is the fifth culinary intangible cultural heritage, it is only the second after French cuisine as whole that has been recognized at this level. According to UNESCO, the “intangible cultural heritage” means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artifacts, and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity (UNESCO).

Japanese cuisine is called washoku. Shoku being “food” and Wa meaning “harmonious” and everything Japanese, such as clothing, rooms, objects etc. Food has always played an important role not only in daily lives as a mere sustenance, but it has also been an invaluable source of learning about people’s culinary habits, rituals, manners as well as a source to study people’s diets, supplies, trade, and agricultural practices. Besides the food itself we learn about how it was/is served, combined, presented, and partaken. Culinary aesthetics offer multiple bridges to art, craft, and ritual, becoming an important part of culture.

Washoku

Japanese cuisine is based on cooking with seasonal ingredients at their peak flavour and freshness. It inspires minimal interference with natural taste to preserve the naturalness of flavours by using simple cooking techniques. It is served in a small amount sparsely placed on specially selected dishes. They say that Japanese food is primarily enjoyed with one’s eyes. Presentation is just as important as the food itself. Tastes, colours, and methods are all part of washoku culture. All five senses of sight, hearing, smell, feel and taste are activated and involved in the process. Lacquer, ceramic or wooden dishes are chosen for their seasonality and suitability for a particular dish. They are filled about halfway, leaving plenty of space to enjoy the design or decoration, or just a background of a dish.

Especially formal kaiseki meals also require a particular way of partaking such a meal. There is an order and a way to enjoy each course. There are particular chopsticks that are used both for serving and for eating. They ensure gentle handling of food and can sometimes be used from either side.

Chaji

Chanoyu, commonly known as the Japanese tea ceremony provides context for many different arts and crafts as well as cuisine and culinary arts. At the heart of tea practice lies the form to which all the elements lead and to which they connect. This form is called Chaji in Japanese and is often translated as a “formal tea gathering”. Sasaki Sanmi categorizes seven basic forms of chaji and mentions fifteen other variations. (Sasaki, 1996) Given that tea can be performed on any occasion in human life or a seasonal natural phenomenon or without any reason whatsoever, there is a possibility of a tremendous number of variations. However, all chaji will follow the same basic structure. There will be two parts with an interval in between. The guests will arrive through the roji – tea garden – and enter a waiting room, where they

will gather, look at a pictorial scroll depicting particular season, and have a taste of water, which has been drawn from a well or a spring that morning and will be used for tea, garden, and cooking. There are two charcoal laying procedures, two different teas and about one hour of eating. The teas used are powdered green tea, matcha. For thick tea that is kneaded and shared between the guests from the same teabowl that is purified between the guests with a white linen cloth and reminds honey or sour cream by consistency, only the very top leaves are picked from the tea bush in May. They are picked, steamed and dried immediately to protect their bright green colour. For thin tea that is later whisked for each guest individually next down leaves are picked. Since tea is strong and quite intense, it is preceded by a freshly made okashi usually made of beans paste cooked with sugar and shaped to convey a seasonal image. These okashi are given a poetic name connected to a particular season and are not only a prelude to thick tea but also an important part of an overall narrative. Before the okashi guests are offered a meal that consists of about a dozen courses very carefully and thoughtfully prepared and served by the host. Chaji is the essence of the Chanoyu practice and kaiseki meal individually served and partaken in a particular way, is its intrinsic element that sets it aside from all the other Chanoyu forms.

Kaiseki

Kaiseki literally means rock in an overlap of one's kimono. It reminds of a warm rock that Zen monks would keep in their jacket during meditation to alleviate hunger as they only had one meal during the day. Sen Rikyu, an important chajin ("person of tea") of the 16th century, who also was a layman Zen practitioner at Daitokuji monastery in Kyoto, modified the protocols for eating in the Zen temples for use in the tearoom. Just enough of the freshest ingredients from the garden, served simply and eaten quietly. "One soup and one dish" or "one soup and three dishes" encouraged being "eighty percent full" rather than very full.

In a chaji today the host will first bring a black square lacquer tray with two black lidded bowls, carefully warmed and filled with rice and miso soup and a ceramic dish with a few slices of fresh fish. Rice takes precedence, it will be freshly cooked and will continue to be cooked for the whole hour and will be served at different stages. It will be pressed and cut in a shape reminiscent of the character for "one" (ichi) and carefully inverted into a larger black lacquer bowl on the left. It will be still steaming when the lid is opened. In a bowl on the right there will be an unseparated miso soup with a slice of a root vegetable in the middle with a touch of hot mustard on top. In a warmer part of the year lacquer bowls lids will be sprinkled with a fine "dew". Freshly moistened cedar chopsticks will be placed on the tray. The guests will partake in unison in a particular order starting with tasting the rice. After a first service of sake, they will taste raw fish with a little sauce. Rice is served three times, miso soup – twice. There are three services of sake. The main course of Japanese kaiseki is nimono or clear soup. Served in a different bowl nimono is based on dashi – stock made of a very fresh water, kombu sea kelp, and bonito flakes. Inside the bowl there will be a piece of fish, green vegetable, a mushroom, and a fragrant element – often a piece of citron rind. Guests will carefully lift the lid of the bowl to first smell the soup. Then they will taste the broth before having other elements. After that grilled dish is served and seasonal vegetables may be offered. The host will "join" the guests in a preparation room before offering a peculiar course called "washing the chopsticks". It is a digestive aimed to "calm" and purify the palette. After that a square cedar tray with a delicacy from the ocean and a delicacy from the mountain is brought in and the host will offer each one to each guest individually and accompany it with more sake, which in due course will be offered to the host by the guests.

At the very end hot water with rice kettle crust and pickles are offered. All these courses and okashi aim to help to prepare the stomach for partaking of the thick tea.

Kaiseki meal is an important element of a formal tea gathering Chaji, its presence sets it aside from all other Chanoyu forms.

Conclusions

Whether consciously or not, aesthetics in Japan often takes precedence over other cultural elements. Culinary studies are an important part of culture that allows us to better understand everyday culture as well as complex and intricate rituals still in use. Kaiseki as a system of multiple elements is a live and active source of cultural wisdom. Japanese cuisine can teach how to live a healthier and happier life and move towards a more balanced, aesthetically beautiful and mindful way of preparing, serving and partaking the food and enjoy every moment bringing beauty and mindfulness into seemingly mundane corners of every day. Main principles, culinary etiquette, and aesthetics of kaiseki are applicable to other cuisines and practices. French kaiseki is a good example of this. Cultural and culinary globalization are becoming ever more important as the world is becoming increasingly technologically developed, and mostly connected through technology. Chanoyu is preserving Kaiseki not only as a culinary form but also as an important cultural element able to transform the way we live our lives.

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