

From Meibutsu To Washoku Food In Asia And The Pacific

In recent years, there has been a growing fascination and appreciation for Japanese cuisine worldwide. From sushi to ramen, Japanese food has become a global sensation, and Japan has gained a reputation as a culinary powerhouse. However, Japanese culinary traditions didn't just emerge overnight; they have a long and rich history that dates back centuries.

In this article, we will delve into the journey of Japanese cuisine, from its origins as humble meibutsu to its evolution into the revered washoku cuisine we know today. We will explore the cultural influences, regional variations, and sustainable practices that make Japanese food unique and appealing to food lovers across Asia and the Pacific.

The Origins of Meibutsu

Meibutsu refers to local specialty products that are unique to a particular region in Japan. These products gained popularity during the Edo period (1603-1868) when regional lords were required to present their best local products to the shogun as a means of gaining favor. The shogun's courtiers, in turn, would bring these meibutsu back to their hometowns, sharing them with others and creating demand for these specialty products.

Branding Japanese Food: From Meibutsu to Washoku (Food in Asia and the Pacific)

by Katarzyna J. Cwierka (Kindle Edition)

★★★★☆ 4.2 out of 5

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During this time, the concept of omiyage, or souvenirs, also emerged. Travelers would purchase meibutsu from different regions as gifts for their loved ones, further spreading the fame and reputation of these unique products.

One example of a meibutsu is Yatsushashi, a traditional Japanese sweet hailing from Kyoto. Made from glutinous rice flour and flavored with cinnamon, Yatsushashi has become synonymous with Kyoto and is a popular souvenir for visitors to the region.

The Rise of Washoku Cuisine

As Japan embraced modernization during the Meiji period (1868-1912), the country underwent significant changes, including a shift in its culinary landscape. Western influences began to shape Japanese cooking, with an influx of foreign ingredients and cooking techniques making their way into the country.

However, this integration of foreign flavors did not overshadow traditional Japanese cuisine. The Japanese people, recognizing the value of their culinary heritage, sought to preserve and promote their traditional dishes. This led to the establishment of the washoku movement, which aimed to elevate Japanese cuisine to an art form.

Washoku, which means "harmony of food," refers to traditional Japanese cuisine that emphasizes using seasonal ingredients, achieving balance in flavors, and preserving the natural essence of the ingredients. The washoku philosophy revolves around the concept of "ichiju-sansai," which traditionally consists of one soup and three dishes, including a main dish, a side dish, and a pickled dish.

Regional Variations and Cultural Influences

Japan's diverse geography and climate have given rise to a wide variety of regional dishes, each with its own unique flavors and cooking styles. From the seafood-rich cuisine of Hokkaido to the bold flavors of Osaka's street food, Japanese regional cuisine offers a delightful journey for the taste buds.

International influences have also played a significant role in shaping Japanese cuisine. For instance, the Portuguese introduced tempura, a deep-fried dish, to Japan in the 16th century, which became a staple of Japanese cuisine. Similarly, the use of soy sauce by the Chinese in the 7th century revolutionized the flavor profile of Japanese dishes.

Furthermore, Japan's historical connection with neighboring countries like Korea and China has resulted in a cultural exchange that has influenced their respective cuisines. For example, Japan's love for ramen can be traced back to Chinese noodles. Over time, these culinary influences have been adapted and transformed into uniquely Japanese dishes.

Sustainability and the Future of Japanese Food

In addition to its rich culinary heritage, Japan is also at the forefront of promoting sustainable food practices. The focus on using local, seasonal ingredients aligns with the principles of sustainability, reducing the carbon footprint and supporting local farmers.

Waste reduction is another area where Japanese cuisine excels. The Japanese practice of "mottainai," which means "do not waste," promotes the utilization of all parts of an ingredient and encourages the repurposing of food waste.

Moreover, Japan's unique food aesthetics, where equal importance is given to the visual presentation of a dish, have led to innovative and sustainable plating techniques. Attention to detail and precise craftsmanship result in minimal food wastage and aesthetically pleasing dining experiences.

The future of Japanese food lies not only in its continued popularity across Asia and the Pacific but also in its potential for global appreciation. As more people explore and embrace Japanese cuisine, the traditions and techniques that have been passed down through generations will continue to thrive.

Japanese cuisine has come a long way, evolving from meibutsu to washoku, gaining recognition and fame worldwide. Its regional variations, cultural influences, and sustainable practices make Japanese food a captivating and unique culinary experience.

As you embark on your own culinary journey, don't miss the opportunity to savor the delights of Japanese cuisine. From traditional meibutsu to the refined art of washoku, this diverse and flavorful cuisine is sure to tantalize and captivate your taste buds.



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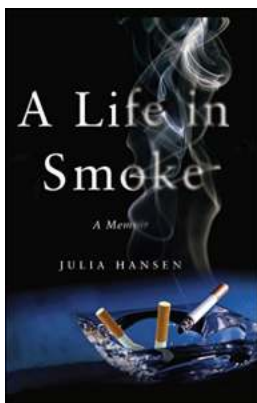


Branding Japanese Food is the first book in English on the use of food for the purpose of place branding in Japan. At the center of the narrative is the 2013 inscription of “Washoku, traditional dietary cultures of the Japanese, notably for the celebration of New Year” on UNESCO’s Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. The authors challenge the very definition of washoku as it was presented in the UNESCO nomination, and expose the multitude of contradictions and falsehoods used in the promotion of Japanese cuisine as part of the nation-branding agenda.

Cwierka and Yasuhara argue further that the manipulation of historical facts in the case of washoku is actually a continuation of similar practices employed for centuries in the branding of foods as iconic markers of tourist attractions. They draw parallels with gastronomic meibutsu (famous products) and edible omiyage (souvenirs), which since the early modern period have been persistently marketed through questionable connections with historical personages and events. Today, meibutsu and omiyage play a central role in the travel experience in Japan and comprise a major category in the practices of gift exchange. Few seem to mind that the stories surrounding these foods are hardly ever factual, despite the fact that the stories, rather than the food itself, constitute the primary attraction. The practice itself is derived from the intellectual exercise of evoking specific associations and sentiments by referring to imaginary landscapes, known as utamakura or meisho. At first restricted to poetry, this exercise was expanded to the visual arts, and by the early modern period familiarity with specific locations

and the culinary associations they evoked had become a fixed component of public collective knowledge.

The construction of the myths of meibutsu, omyage, and washoku as described in this book not only enriches the understanding of Japanese culinary culture, but also highlights the dangers of tweaking history for branding purposes, and the even greater danger posed by historians remaining silent in the face of this irreversible reshaping of the past into a consumable product for public enjoyment.



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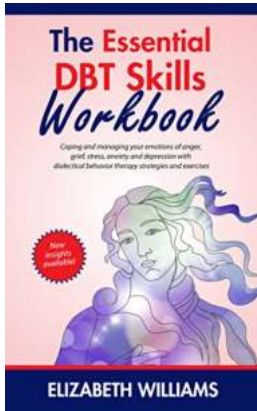
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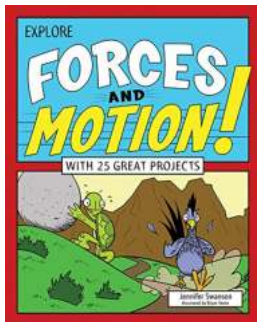
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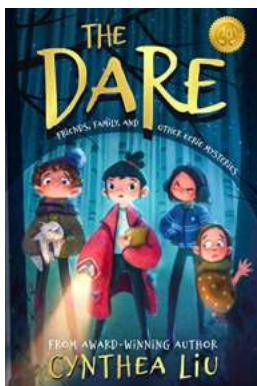
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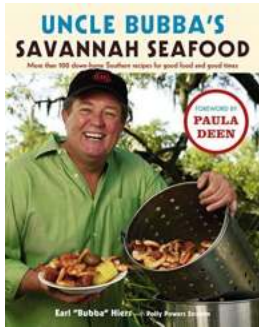
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