What is the importance and role of food in modern Japanese society?

Why is Japanese food classified as world heritage and what makes Japanese food stand apart from the food culture of other countries?

Ritgerð til BA / MA-prófs í Japónsku máli og menningu

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Abstract.

In Japanese society, a meal goes beyond the food and eating it. It is known that Japanese food was influenced by China and Korea due to the geographical proximity. Traditional food is an important aspect of the culture and it is considered a world heritage. Thus, a traditional meal is not only aiming for the taste, but also aiming to protect the nature and transmit knowledge to future generations. The climate in Japan varies considerably, which allowed each city to develop their own traditional dishes representing the area. This has encouraged culinary tourism, where people travel throughout Japan to experience different flavours. Culinary tourism benefited Japanese culture and economy by supporting local villages and smaller communities. A convenient way to experience dishes from different regions, is by buying *ekiben* (lunch boxes sold at the train stations) while riding the train from one city to another.

Seasonal food is important for society, because the diet is based on each season of the year. To stay healthy throughout the year, Japanese children learn important values and skills such as cooperation, teamwork and responsibility in their school lunches during elementary school. *Bento* boxes (lunch boxes) influenced, to some extent, the personality of Japanese children either by helping them to socialize easier with their classmates or excluded them out of a group. A meal in Japan is very important to society, because there is more to just eating the food; there are several rules and etiquettes to follow. A meal in Japanese society goes beyond food, because through a meal people can socialize, build stronger bonds, cooperate, work in teams and help society to develop. It is also a way to thank gods in rituals. Traditional food in modern society is very important to keep the culture. Without these traditions and all the varieties of foods available in Japan, the Japanese culture would probably not be the same as it is today.
# Table of Contents

Introduction .................................................................................................................................................. 4

The Roots of Japanese Food Culture ........................................................................................................ 6

Japanese food as a world heritage ............................................................................................................. 7

Regional Foods according to Season, Culinary Tourism ........................................................................ 9

  Seasonal Importance ............................................................................................................................. 12

Dining Etiquette .......................................................................................................................................... 15

The Importance of Food in Japanese Society and Culture ........................................................................ 18

  “Bento” boxes ....................................................................................................................................... 18

  School Lunches ...................................................................................................................................... 18

  Festival Culture .................................................................................................................................... 21

Conclusion ................................................................................................................................................... 22

Bibliography ............................................................................................................................................... 25

Videos ......................................................................................................................................................... 28
Introduction

During my exchange year in Japan, I realized just how large a role food plays in culture and that people tend to identify themselves with their food. I also came to realize that Japanese food changes considerably between seasons and there is a wide variety of flavours, colours, aromas and dishes that you can eat every day. It drew my attention that Japanese cuisine respects and responds to nature by having their diet based on each season of the year and having rites to wish for good harvest or festivals to thank the nature for the harvest. Furthermore the colours and flavours tend to change considerably between seasons. While living in Japan I was able to travel and I saw that a lot of Japanese people were traveling within Japan with the main focus on tasting the local food of each city. The tourism in Japan emphasizes that people try different traditional dishes from each region, city or even towns. Food is a way for people to gather in order to make bonds and socialize with each other, the most common way that I saw was through festivals and events such as Hanami (flower viewing) as most often this involves people gathering in order to drink and eat together. Another interesting way that I observed is that after work or a long day, it is very common to see Japanese people go to socialize and build bonds by going to restaurants or izakayakas (bars/eateries). During my exchange year I was lucky to have had the chance to visit a Japanese elementary school where the importance placed on food was tangible and that the lunch boxes had shapes and figures I had never seen before. Thus I became really interested in investigating the roots of Japanese food and its function in society, the daily lives of people.

Thus the questions posed in this thesis will be why is Japanese food classified as world heritage, what makes Japanese food stand apart from the food culture of other countries and what is the importance and role of food in modern Japanese society?

The thesis will be divided into five chapters. The first chapter will cover the roots of the Japanese food such as geographical and religious impacts. The second chapter will cover Japanese food culture as a world heritage. It will also discuss the intangible heritage as well as the importance of seasonal and regional food, such as Japanese people traveling around Japan just to try the local food of each city. The third chapter is related to regional and seasonal food, the four chapter will cover etiquette of Japanese dining.
The last chapter will focus on the importance of food in modern society, a brief history of Bento boxes, the impact that school lunches have during elementary school and festival food culture. Through this thesis I attempt to explain that a meal in the Japanese culture and society goes far beyond being only food.
The Roots of Japanese Food Culture

It is important to understand the historical and geographical background of food in order to understand the roots of the food culture. Food has always played an important role for humanity, during the prehistoric times (around 10,000 B.C) it is estimated that the average lifespan of humans was only between 20 and 40 years old. The main factors that reduced the lifespan were extreme temperatures, food poisoning, as well as general malnutrition. Fishing and hunting were the first methods used humans to survive. However it wasn’t until fire was discovered that the lifespan of humans increased noticeably. Since heat helped to release protein and carbohydrates as well as break down fibre, food increased their nutritional value and made it easier to consume. Later in the beginning of the Neolithic period the domestication of animals began; thus making it possible to obtain more food sources as well as regular food. During that period the human race was able to experiment with cooking and it has been argued that cooking was one of the most important factors in leading the primitive human into a more fully developed human (Tannahill, 2002).

Japanese food has been greatly influenced by Chinese and Korean food cultures due to their geographical proximity. Japan also has a lot of small islands and the closest island to Korea is only about 100km away. Therefore during prehistoric times people migrated to Japan bringing with them utensils and food that helped to develop Japanese cuisine. For example, the use of chopsticks and bowls came from China. Rice that is typically eaten in traditional Japanese food is considered to have its roots from northeast Asia and did not properly spread out until the Yayoi period. The specific origin of rice is unknown, however the first written record of rice cultivation dates to China around 2800 B.C. Hence it is a high possibility that rice came to Japan via China (Konish, 1990). Fish used to be preserved inside fermented rice when fish was transported from one city to another and later on the rice was discarded. This method first originated in China and was called narezushi, where the word zuishi meant fermented fish. When merchants from Japan were getting raw fish inside fermented rice, people from the fifteenth and sixteenth century thought that throwing the rice was a big waste and instead of throwing the rice away, started consuming it
with the fish and that’s the beginning of sushi (Umeda & Mamoru.N.D). Tofu and Japanese sweets are known to be influenced by China as well. During the Nara period, tea was also introduced (Sosnoski 1996). In other words during prehistoric times migration mainly from China and Korea helped to develop a more complex cuisine in Japan.

Another factor to consider is religion. Japan has maintained and practiced Buddhism and Shinto where both religions share the ideas of naturalism, purity and elaborate offerings of food. Due to this idea, Japan has created many dishes based on freshness and balance (Ashkenazi & Jeanne.2000. p.38-42). In addition Japanese culture is known to borrow food from other countries and make it their own creating a new style. For example tempura was introduced in the late 16th century and is from Portugal. (Sosnoski 1996. p30). Tonkatsu (Japanese pork cutlet) also has its roots from Indonesia (Richie1985.p26). It was a custom in Japan to eat two meals and between meals to eat fruits as a snack. However during 645-781 (in the Nara period) which heralded the introduction of Buddhism into Japanese culture, via China, various foods such as ground grains or soybeans, salted and fried in oil (precursors of wagashi (Japanese sweets)) were introduced. It was during the same period that it is believed that a Chinese Buddhist priest named Ganjin introduced sugar in Japan. However it was only available to the high class or for medical reasons.

During the Mamoyama period (1573-1615) European sweets were introduced by Dutch and Portuguese traders who mainly entered Japan through Nagasaki. Those sweets were known as namban-gashi (southern barbaria sweets) (Tsuji. 1980).

In others words Japanese food developed through time by the influence of other countries such China, Korea, and some European countries. Religion play also an important role to developed the idea of naturalism, purity and elaborate dishes.
Japanese food as a world heritage

Intangible heritage refers to traditions that were inherited from our ancestors that were passed between generations, person to person. Rather than monuments intangible heritage focuses on the amount of knowledge and skills that were passed from one generation to the next one for example these can be oral expressions (charms, prayers, chants) festivals, folk customs, traditional learning, practices related to nature, traditional handicrafts or rituals. In order to recognize these, it has to be approved from the community or society that created it. It has to have been maintained and to be transmittable to future generations (Laurajane & Natsuko 2009). The main purpose is to promote multiculturalism, recognize other ethnic groups and their cultures. That way UNESCO aims to encourage deeper respect between cultures as well as within each culture. UNESCO provides financial support to protect cultural heritage based on case by case and these vary greatly, for instance in 2001 UNESCO donated $20,000 to Kunquopera (one of the oldest Chinese operas). UNESCOs mission statement is that without protection, intangible cultural heritage could easily be lost in modern day society. However the government for each country is the one responsible to protect it, invest in it and to promote it (Minjie.2007.p7-16).

According to Yukikazu Nagashima Japanese food was recognized as Intangible Cultural Heritage. Up until now, it is the fifth culinary heritage added by UNESCO, however only France and Japan hold the honour of having their food culture as a whole country recognised, while elsewhere it has only been traditional dishes that received this honour, for instance dishes of Mexico and Turkey have been also added to UNESCO. Elements that contributed to successfully being added as a world heritage were: “various fresh fruits from the mountains and seas due to geographic diversity,” “presentation that capitalizes on the beauty of nature,” “close relationship between the New Year and rice planting”. In other words, traditional Japanese food doesn’t focus only on the taste and target of protecting nature; it also keeps a good nutritional balance and conserves it simply and fresh. As reported by the newspaper Japan Today other factors that contributed to Washoku (traditional Japanese food) being added to the list of UNESCO, were traditional utensils used for the preparation and consumption of specific dishes such as sushi and okonomiyaki (roughly translated as a Japanese pizza) (Nagashima, 2014).
Traditional Japanese food encourage future generation to respect the nature and the food also transmits skills and knowledge to the next generation hence traditional Japanese food must be protect as an important part of Japanese culture

Regional Foods according to Season, Culinary Tourism

The Japanese climate varies greatly from region to region, from subarctic Hokkaido to subtropical in Kyushu and Okinawa, giving rise to a vast variety of different cuisines. Many cities around Japan have their own specialities, therefore Japanese people highly recommended that while traveling within Japan to eat local food. The fact that food varies so greatly plays an important role in Japanese tourism because this attracts attention from a lot of people, leading them to travel to many different regions where they can eat local traditional food (Liaw & Thompson 2013). Culinary tourism can sometimes be the highlight of a travel trip, because cuisines are most of the time related to the culture and region. One of the purpose of culinary tourism is to educate and inspire travellers to learn about the food history, different techniques of eating and cooking the food, stories about the regions, and local tales related to a dish. Culinary tourism encourages tourists to try all types of food such as local food from farmers, fishermen, brewers, etc. Even though food is sometimes not the main focus of ones travels, it is considered that cuisine is a memorable experience for travellers. The most common meals to try are wine, beer and food festivals around the globe (Myryam, 2004).

Hokkaido is well known for its cold weather during the winter and it has a reputation of the best salmon and herring in all of Japan. In the winter time the Japanese enjoy fishing in a frozen lake in order to catch wakasagi (pond fish). Its best known dishes are ishikari-nabe that refer to hotpot that mainly contain sake (salmon) or ikura (salmon roe) and a mixture of fresh vegetables. The dish is flavoured with traditional karakuchi kome-miso (light brown and salty rice miso) which belongs to the Hokkaido area. Ruibe is also a dish considered from Hokkaido that refers to frozen raw fish. The last most popular dish in Hokkaido is Munini imo. This is from the Ainu people
and is basically a pancake made from potato flour (Liaw & Thompson, 2013). (Kotsu Kosha 1999).

Sushi is considered to be an iconic dish from Japan and it is well known around the world. Many people are unaware of the fact that sushi in itself varies a great deal between regions. The bizen bara sushi from Okayama is an example of this. This type of sushi is a mixture of a lot of vegetables into sushi rice however it is not wrapped into seaweed such as the “common type of sushi” (Aya N.D). The oldest form of sushi documented in Japan was the funa-zushi that used a carp from the lake Biwa in Shiga prefecture, however the rice was discarded as had been custom from the beginning. Preparing funa-zushi can take between two months to a year, due to the process of fermentation. This type of sushi is still available to consume in Shiga prefecture, but it was not until the nineteenth century that the Edo style sushi or the commonly known sushi style was invented (Omae & Tachibana. 1988).

Tokyo is said to have been the first city to introduce sushi. At the end of the Edo period (1603-1868) sushi became really popular, therefore the most recognized sushi dish is nigirizushi which means hand pressed sushi in an oval shape which is one of the most recognized sushi shapes around the world (Aya N.D). Another traditional dish from the Edo period is Unagi no kabayaki. This eel fish is grilled over charcoal while brushed with thick soy sauce and is typically served with steamed rice (if it is not served with steamed with rice it is called nagayaki) (Azahara 2013).

A cheap and convenient way to try some of the local specialities is to buy ekiben. There are lunches that come in boxes that are sold on trains and at railway stations. The first train in Japan started to operate in 1872 from Tokyo to Yokohama (a distance of around 29km). It did not take a long time until railways were around all of Japan. In 1885 the first Ekiben was sold on the Ueno-utsonomiya line and it consisted of only few pickles and rice balls wrapped in bamboo leaves. It wasn’t until 1920 that ekiben started to actually spread around Japan. However after the outbreak of World War Two, rice and other main ingredients were sparse, thus the ekiben was at the time only available with potatoes and noodles. Between 1950 and 1960, ekiben started to be produced again with more ingredients and it was accessible to more people than before. Encouraging people to experience local foods in a visually pleasing container.
The introduction of the bullet train and the Olympic Games inspired many new designs and new menus around Japan. Now there are over 1600 different types of *ekiben* (according to Aya Umeda there are around 3000 different types of *ekiben*) and prices vary from cheap to moderately expensive. *Ekiben* can be purchased on the departure or arrival station, however it is highly recommended to buy it on the train. Some regions in Japan are known for the mountains while other areas might be known for the ocean therefore each station in Japan has their unique *ekiben* varieties and flavours. *Ekiben* goes far beyond being a simple lunch box, it has to represent the area it comes from, even part of each city, and all the ingredients are expected to come from local producers and to be season appropriate in order to make it special.

Even the wrapping of the lunch box contains information about the local area, its produce or even regional folklore. It is a representation of simplicity yet intricate visual aesthetics. Shape and colours vary, for example most of the lunch boxes come in a rectangular shape therefore the ingredients must be in a circular shape in order to give it a better personality. The Ingredients must have a balance of the colours in order to make it more appealing. Most of the time lunch boxes are served cold in order to give it a fresh taste. Although some areas also serve self-heating boxes that will instantly boil or warm the appropriate foods. Another challenge is the limited space on board a train. Exemplary bento boxes are supposed to be in a shape that allows the costumer to hold it with one hand yet with enough food for the person to be satisfied. *Ekiben* is considered to be the food to encourage consumption of national products and help the local economy. (Theodore, 1987: Umeda.2016).
Seasonal Importance

Seasonal food varies a lot in Japan and directly influence in Japanese diet. It is really rare and uncommon in Japan to eat winter food when is summer or summer food when it is spring. Summer in Japan is known for its humidity and heat which can lead to a range of health problems such as natsubate (summer fatigue) which has common symptoms such as feeling tired, lethargic, irritated or digestive problems. In order to avoid that or reduce it, it is highly recommended to exercise, dress according to the weather and the key factor consume summer dishes (Morelli, 2012).

The most traditional summer dishes are soba, udon, somen noodles that are served cold and hiyajiru (cold miso soup poured over cold rice). The main reason is that these noodles are known to be rich in B vitamins and B vitamins help the body to convert the food into energy. Summer vegetables are tomatoes, eggplants and cucumbers because they contain antioxidants that help protect against ultraviolet light. Local summer fruits are also highly recommended such as suika (watermelon) and nashi (pears) because those fruits are rich in potassium and magnesium that help people recover from exhaustion. (Otake, 2007). An iconic summer snack is kakigori, shaved ice that is topped most of the time with syrups made from green tea or kinako (toasted soybean flour) however the main difference from a snow cone is that the ice used for kakigori is shaved ultra-thin rather than the normal crushed ice. This gives a result of a fluffy, airy ice that doesn’t clump up. Kakigori has become so popular in summer that a custom to indicate that summer has arrived is to hang a colourful banner called hyoki (ice flag) outside stores. Japanese associated winter with cold weather hence the idea of eating ice during winter it is uncommon thus during summer ice cream is a really popular snack. This banner displays the character of kori (ice) with blue waves and flying birds in background. (Itoh, 2012).

During winter time, temperatures in japan often get below freezing and in order to get through the winter, people tend to consume hot pot dishes or nabe. Abundant ingredients in Japan such as clean water, plenty of fish and vegetables helped to developed hot pot cuisine that started around six or seven thousand years ago, according to Buddhist religion meat was forbidden therefore fish and vegetables were the main ingredients for any type of nabe. It was not until the 17th century that meat was added and hot pot cuisine became more popular around Japan. Seasonal
ingredients are the key element to having a great nabe hence this is why there is a wide variety of nabe around Japan. For instance during winter time in Hokkaido, the far north, the most popular nabe dish is ishikari nabe that consists of miso flavoured broth, tofu, potatoes, corn and Hokkaido salmon. In Akita area the regular nabe dish is kiritanpo nabe that is made of rice cake called tanpo. The rice cake is cut in thick pieces added to a miso broth along with local mushrooms, Japanese leek and herbs. While in the Tokyo area the typical nabe is dojo nabe which consist of loaches blanketed in a sweet soy broth (Abe 2016). There are various types and flavours of hot pot dishes all around Japan. However the most common one is available during the winter and most regions in Japan have oden. Oden is one of the oldest fast food in Japan and the predecessor of oden was miso dengaku (the main ingredients were squares of skewered tofu and topped with a miso sauce). Oden pot also varies from each region in Japan and oden commonly used regional vegetables and ingredients however the essentials ingredients are whole, hard-boiled eggs, thick pieces of daikon radish, tofu and neri-karashi (Japanese style mustard). During winter time oden can be found in convenience stores, restaurants or special establishments all around Japan. Having this winter dish stimulated communication and encouraged people to gather because this hot pot dish is commonly served in the middle of the table and it is expected to be shared. This helped build a connection between family members, friends, co-workers, etc. (Itoh 2017).

A popular winter drink is amazake (sweet sake). Amazake has been produced for more than 1000 years. It was a popular hot drink during winter time even during the Edo Period (1603-1868) because allowed the body to warm up during cold temperatures and now it is possible to drink it cold during summer time to combat head-induced fatigue. Traditional Amazake is a non-alcoholic drink. However now it is possible to drink with alcohol. This drink goes beyond warming up the body, the amino acids on the drink help digestion, eliminate toxins, sources of minerals and vitamins such as iron, zinc, potassium, calcium and vitamin B (Itoh. 2016).

Spring in Japan is best known for the cherry blossom festivals and it is considered the beginning of many activities such as the start of the school year, business year, entrance ceremonies held by companies and even the fiscal year begins in April. Japanese people consider spring a great season to start new ideas and activities.
During the spring time there is a tradition of gathering around and under the cherry blossom trees in order to enjoy the view while eating, drinking and chatting together. The most common dishes during spring time are takenoko (bamboo shoots), fresh vegetables such as nanohana (rapeseed), cherry blossom snacks and strawberry is the fruit that represent the Japanese spring (Gonzalez, 2016). Fresh bamboo shoots are so common during spring that they are accepted as a seasonal word known as kigo. One of the typical dishes that use bamboo shoots is takenoko gohan (rice with bamboo shoots), bamboo shoots mixed with rice and mushrooms. Bamboo shoots are a great source of dietary fibre, rich in minerals like manganese and copper, rich in vitamins such as thiamine and niacin (Itoh, 2014). Nanohana (rapeseed) is a typical vegetable that is consumed during spring time. Nanohana is one of the oldest vegetables cultivated in Asia and the best way to consume it is in a side dish known as ohitashi. Ohitashi consists of cooked nanohana served in a small bowl with soy sauce or dashi stock and on top a little bit of katsuobushi (bonito flakes). This dish is a great source of vitamin C (Itoh, 2013). Cherry blossom snacks are very common during this season, that are found in drinks such as tea, frappes, chocolates with sakura flavour, breads and more (Yamada, 2014). Autumn in Japan is popular for momijigari which is the viewing of autumn leaves that turn yellow and red, typically the autumn season starts in mid-September in Hokkaido and goes down all the way to the south. (Phro. 2013). It is a common activity to also enjoy the view of autumn leaves while eating. The most popular places to enjoy the view are in Kyoto such as Daitoku Temple or mount Arashiyama however it is also really popular to visit Tokyo and make the famous walk "The Gold Road" in Meiji Jingu (Hull, 2015). Autumn also have their seasonal food and September is famous for nasu (eggplant), satsumaimo (sweet potato), sanma (pacific saury) and shinmai (new rice). Japanese consider eggplant a great side dish for cooling off from the hot summer into the chill autumn, eggplant is also a great source of fiber that benefits the digestion. Pacific saury fish is so popular that it is consider one of the most popular dishes to consume during autumn time, this is mainly because pacific saury fish migrates from the northern area down to south in masse hence it is easier to catch them, in additional during autumn season this type of fish is at their peak maturity and have double the amount of meat and fat that they had during the summer time. Shinmai (new rice) is rice that was harvested in autumn therefore batches of new rice are sell in all the grocery store which a red label that indicate that is the freshest rice, japanese think that the
new harvest rice have more moisture making them softer, stickier, better fragrant hence the taste is stronger which is consider a better taste for most Japanese. (Wilson, 2016)

**Dining Etiquette**

According to Michael Kinski the main function of etiquette is to help build a modest and stable environment in order to get a better interaction with each other (Kinski 2010, p42-43). For instance in most Japanese restaurants guests are greeted by the staff upon entering and then receive a small damp towel known as *oshibori* with their meals. The main purpose of this damp towel is for customers to clean their hands before and during the meal. This is the equivalent to the napkin, however people are not expected to put it on the lap as it is commonly done in Western society. It is considered rude to wipe your face, neck or blow your nose into the towel (Burbank, 2008. p119).

Another important criterion to keep in mind is the proper use of chopsticks. It is unknown when Japanese people started using chopsticks. It is believed that Japan was influenced by China during the 7th century but it was not until the 8th century that chopsticks become popular in Japan. 30% of the world population use chopstick to eat, but mainly Japan, China and Korea. However Korea and China also use spoons and knives to eat other types of food such as soup. While in Japan most of the food can be eaten with chopsticks, while soup is expected to be brought to the mouth and drunk. Knives or a sort of blade were considered to be used only to cut the meat or the food in different portions. A kind of fork was used to plate the food to each person individually. It was considered rude to have weapons on the table (knives were considered a sort of blade or weapon) therefore the Japanese used to eat with their fingers and chopsticks were inspired by their fingers that way they avoided touching the food with their fingers and started to use chopsticks.

Chopsticks in Japan are not only used for eating. *Saibashi* are long chopsticks and the purpose of them is to use them to cook, pick vegetable easier and mix the ingredients. Some chopsticks have different textures depending on the texture of the
meal in order to make it easier to pick and eat while other chopsticks are used for rituals. Chopsticks play an important role in Japanese cuisine because most of the dishes in Japan are made and arranged in a way to make it easy to be consumed by chopsticks. The size of the food in Japan is served in the right size to be picked by chopsticks therefore it is really important to be familiar with the right way to use them. Chopsticks must be picked with the right hand first and then held correctly. Three aspects to keep in mind is that the thumb must always keep contact with the upper chopstick (hold it like a pencil), the second chopstick on the bottom must not move and should rest in your index finder and keep the arm relaxed to form a gentle curve (Hattori, 2016).

It is recognized as bad manners to wave the chopsticks around, to point with them, to use them to pull dishes towards you or to pass food between chopsticks (APA Publications – 2000 p73). There are four names given related to the bad manner of using chopsticks. Mayo-bashi is the name given to the wave of the chopstick around the food trying to figure out what to take next. Sashi-Bashi is the use of chopsticks to spear or insert food in the chopsticks and Yose-bashi is related with the action to pull dishes to you using the chopsticks. Chopsticks can be customized as a plus for fancy dinners and it is common to have personal chopsticks. Utsuri-bashi is the name given when the chopsticks are placed on a dish and then moved to a different dish without getting any food from the first dish.

There are also accepted rules when it comes to properly handle dishes and these play a key role in Japanese etiquette. It is important to lift the dish to you when eating rice or soup yet not to the mouth unless you’re drinking soup. Use the chopsticks to bring the food towards you rather than bending over the table. It is expected that everyone finish the bowl of rice, to the last grain. When you have finished eating the chopsticks should be placed in the same spot as to where they were before the meal (Travel Bureau – 1997. p174-179).

It is expected that people follow these etiquettes while eating traditional Japanese food. A few customs that are common sight in Japanese restaurants outside of Japan, such as eating sushi mixing wasabi and soy sauce, is considered faulty in Japan. The correct way should be placing the wasabi on the piece of sashimi (raw fish) and then dip the piece of fish on the soy sauce. Many people tend to put empty clam shells in different bowls, which is considered impolite in Japan. Diners should leave the shell
inside the bowl it was served in. Another common mistake is to use the bowl as a chopstick rest, instead the chopsticks must be places on a chopstick rest known as *hashioki* or if this is not available then the wrapper of the chopsticks should be used. Another mistake, is while drinking alcoholic beverages. The person that pours the drink first pours it in the other members’ glasses while holding the bottle with both hands. If you are the one to receive the drink then you must hold the cup and then immediately offer to pour for the person that just served you. Also sticking your chopsticks on the rice while eating is consider rude because it is the way a bowl of rice is offered to the spirit of a dead person.

Before eating, everyone will express the words *itadakimasu* which in fact has a deep meaning of appreciation and gratitude to the nature and people that made the dish and signals that the person is about to commence eating. Once the meal is finished, one is expected to say *gouchisousama deshita* which again shows respect to the person that made the dish (Lynn, 2013).
The Importance of Food in Japanese Society and Culture

“Bento” boxes

They say that a Chinese dish you eat by taste, a Western one you eat by aroma, and a Japanese one you eat by color. When you make a bento, it has to be tasty of course. But more than that, the bento has to be beautiful in color so that by only looking at it you will have appetite – (Mikuriya 1952,p 19).

Lunch boxes or Bento is a culinary tradition that was established after Japan’s Kamakura period (1185- 1333) (Salyers.2008, p 1-4). However according to Tomoko Onabe, Bento tradition came from the Meji period (1868-1912) and the main focus of a traditional bento was the nutritional balance rather than the color and attractiveness. In fact bento boxes were used for religious purposes such as Buddhist ceremonies. It wasn’t until the 1970’s when Japan experienced an economic growth and color television was introduced that character lunch boxes became popular (Onabe.2010.p202-207). Character lunch boxes are well known due to the arrangement that resemble popular characters from TV shows, mangas (comics), movies, etc. Character lunch boxes can be any figure or shape, for example arranged the food in a shape of hello kitty face will be consider a character lunch box. Bento Boxes with characters on them increases the likelihood of children wanting to eat their lunch more than if the boxes didn’t have the characters on them, also character lunch boxes are a crucial part in children society because it helps them to improve social standings during school, having a great character lunch boxes allowed the children to socialize easily thus increase their self-stem, likewise having bad ones indicates that they have bad parents.(Salyers, 2008. p1-2).
School Lunches

The first Japanese school lunch was considered to be served in Tsuruoka city, Yamagata prefecture in 1889. The idea came from a Buddhist monk that noticed that the children normally didn’t have a packed lunch from home. The first school lunch typically consisted of two rice balls, grilled fish and pickles. During the early years of this idea, school lunches spread around neighbouring schools and cities. However with the outbreak of World War Two, most of the lunches were cut due to local wartime food shortages. Even though the war ended in 1945 it wasn't until 1947 that the children again received school lunch. The United States of America donated powdered milk and bread to Japanese schools. This is where milk became a standard component in the lunches of Japanese schools. It wasn’t until 1954 that school lunches were implemented in all the schools (Rogers, 2015).

School lunches are commonly about 45 minutes long; however these 45 minutes go beyond only eating. Students generally eat in their classroom. It is considered part of the education and the primary target to inculcate children about nutrition and make them aware of what is beneficial for their bodies by assigning children to choose and balance the ingredients. Children are expected to announce to their classmates the menu of the day and give brief information of the benefits of the meal. Children are taught to not waste food and only consume what their bodies need. In some elementary schools students harvest their own ingredients such as potatoes and vegetables. Schools commonly purchase and consume from locals and farmers. In this way the system promotes self- sufficiency in Japan. In additional students cooperate to serve the meals and are expected to clean their own place and separate their garbage. In this way, children learn how to work in teams, help each other, socialize, recycle, responsibility and production of food (Yamada & Ishizuna, N.D).

On the other hand school lunches have faced some problems. In December 2007, 18 children and 5 teachers from Tochigi prefecture showed symptoms of food poisoning due to expired food. The food caused a virus to form and spread among the food which the children and teachers consumed (Oogane, H. et al., 2008).
Another case of food poisoning was in 2001 where 96 elementary and pre-school children were affected by Salmonella. It is believed that the reason was contaminated desert buns (Matsui, Suzuki, Takahashi, Ohyama, Kobayashi, Izumiya, Okabe. 2004). Nonetheless the most recent incident of food posing was in 2014 where 900 students from 14 elementary schools experienced massive food poisoning. The reason is still unclear but is believed it was due to the school lunch (Mann.2014). The school Lunch Act promoted diet and nutrition in accordance with the needs of local communities and children focusing on keeping high hygiene standards. In 2011 over 3,853 nutritionist along with dentist, were assigned to schools all over the country to provided extensive information and support to families about nutrition (This researched involved around 10 million schoolchildren and 32,400 schools). This had a positive impact in term of health and dietary habits among children. The law can be considered a success and great benefit to the Japanese society (Tanaka&Miyoshi, 2012).

School lunches can be consider a way for children to learn important skills that they will use through their entire life. Children learn from a young age how to work in team and how to cooperate.
Festival Culture

Festivals in Japan are so popular that it is commonly said that you will always find festivals at any given time somewhere in Japan. Some festivals are well known all around Japan however there are also a number of local festivals only known in specific regions in Japan. Japanese festivals are aimed at celebrating the gods, the seasons or a specific historical event. Japanese festivals are performed by many volunteers therefore festivals encourage people to work together and cooperate. Japanese festivals are also known as a good excuse for family and friends to get together in order to eat, drink and chat (Tomomi, 2016).

_Hanabi_ which literally means fire flowers, is a good example of such a festival. During summer, fireworks have the same appeal as cherry blossoms in the spring. Fireworks are considered to have the same beauty that Japanese see in things that bloom and fade away in a flash. During the summer time, hundreds of fireworks festivals take place across Japan and thousands of spectators attend the events, to observe the fleeting views, but also to eat with the family, friends or co-workers (Kamiya, 2010). Another popular is _hanami_ which means flower viewing. It has been celebrated for many centuries and holds a very prominent position in Japanese culture. Cherry blossom viewing celebrates the seasonal spectacle of blooming that takes only a couple of days during spring time. Cherry blossom viewing is easy. Simply enjoy the intensity of the many blossoming trees by looking at a group of trees. The purpose of _hanami_ is not only to observe the trees but also to gather with friends and to enjoy picnics in the park. These picnics is well appreciated by Japanese which consider this event one of the events that most Japanese wait for all year long in order to gather with family and friends in order to eat and drink while enjoying the view of the trees (Tsuchido, 2014). Festivals in Japan are a way people have in order to thank nature, the gods or specific events however most festivals require a lot of people participating in lengthy preparations and rehearsals therefore before, during or after the festivals people will gather to enjoy meals together. This idea encourages people to socialize and build stronger bonds with the society around them (Tomomi, 2016).
Conclusion

To summarize, Japanese food is not only considered a meal but an important aspect of culture and modern society, it is important to review some key points. During prehistoric times, food and cooking was a significant evidence for humans to survive and develop into a more complex society. During prehistoric times migration, mainly from Korea and China, benefited Japan to acquire new dishes and ingredients that had an influence in traditional Japanese food. Later food was not only a meal to be meant to be consumed, but also to get a source of energy. It was also a way for people to thank gods or for rituals. It came to a point that food was a way for people to identify themselves with their culture and their roots. This had a positive influence in society that encouraged each generation to transmit to future generations certain traditions, knowledge and respect towards food and nature. Hence this helped Japanese food to be considered an essential component of their culture, therefore it must be protected as a world heritage. Dishes in Japan vary a lot from region to region. Every city in Japan encourages to have their own traditional food as a way of recognition. Each traditional dish reassure that ingredients must be local and must represent their origin and in some cases like ekiben, provide information or a representation of local folklore. That way each meal benefits the consumption of national products, promotes culinary tourism, hence local economy is benefited from it.

Seasonal food is an important aspect in Japanese cuisine. The Japanese diet is basically based on the seasons. The purpose to have the diet based on seasonal food, is important to staying healthy, during each season of the year, and to encourage people to socialize. For example, summer in Japan is hot and humid, thus it is common to suffer fatigue, digestive problems and feel lethargic. During summer Japanese people highly recommend eating summer seasonal food such as hiyajiru (cold miso soup poured over rice), tomatoes, cucumbers, watermelon, etc., to reduce summer fatigue. In the winter season, temperatures drop below zero, thus it is highly recommended staying warm by consuming hot pot dishes that allow the body to
warm up. It also encourages people to socialize, because hot pot dishes are known to be consumed by a group of people. During spring time, it is common to gather together to eat while enjoying the view of the cherry blossom trees. Spring time highlights the consumption of bamboo shoots and strawberries; while in autumn it is a great example to show that traditional Japanese cuisine respects the nature and environment by eating pacific saury fish. This is because they are abundant and at their peak maturity allowing them to grow and reproduce during the rest of year.

Japanese food influences the personality of the Japanese from a very young age. Japanese children are taught certain skills in their school lunchbreaks. The school lunch is not only aim to eat but to learn about nutrition, recycling, responsibilities, how to cooperate, work in teams and food production. School lunches also promote the consumption of local food; hence self-sufficiency is promoted in Japan. In addition, bento boxes (lunch boxes) play a key role in Japanese children’s personalities. The lunch boxes were created for religious purposes, later become an attractive way for children to eat their meal. However, bento boxes are now a crucial aspect for children to socialize, having a great character on the lunch box during lunch allows the children to gain a status among their friends. Having an attractive lunch box helps children to socialize easier, thus having a positive influence in their self-esteem. However, on the other hand not having an attractive character lunch box could lead to bullying, which might decrease their self-esteem and make them have a difficult time to socialize. This can lead to have permanent consequences in their future.

In order to have a pleasant meal with co-workers and have a better status in their life, it is important to be familiar with the etiquette of Japanese dining and know how to properly handle the dishes, the chopsticks and how to eat certain meals. Festivals and food have a strong connection that also play an important role in Japanese society. During festivals people gather to meet one another and on most festivals food is an important aspect either to gather to eat before the festival or afterwards. For example, during Hanami festival the main purpose is to reunite with family or friends, eat and drink together while enjoying the view of cherry blossom tress. During summer Hanabi is a special event where the idea is basically the same as the Hanami festival, but instead of enjoying the view of the tress, people gather to eat together to enjoy the fireworks.
Food in Japan is not only a meal to be meant to be eaten, it is also aimed to help society to develop. A meal allows people to have a great time with friends and their family. A meal allowed people to socialize easier and to meet new people that might have an influence later in their lives. A great meal can also help build stronger connections with loved ones. It is a way for people to use food in rituals and to thank gods or to wish for something. Traditional Japanese food is very important in Japanese culture and without all these different traditions of the food, and the cooking, the Japanese culture would not be the same.
Bibliography


**Videos**


