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How the World Eats

By Bryan Walsh

Originally the food of emperors, the cuisine known as *kaiseki* is the pinnacle of Japanese eating—and few restaurants serve a more refined menu than Kikunoi, in the former imperial capital of Kyoto. The experience begins before a single plate is served, with the setting: a tatami-mat room, bare save for the tokonoma, the alcove in the corner that displays a single scroll of calligraphy and a seasonally appropriate flower, today a lily. Then the food begins to flow, course after course of carefully trimmed portions, delivered by a kimono-clad server: a single piece of sea-bream sushi wrapped in bamboo leaf, a tiny grilled ayu fish with water-pepper vinegar, fried prawns and bamboo shoots with an egg-yolk-and-cream sauce. *Kaiseki* dining is the product of centuries of cultural evolution, but though Kikunoi is high-end—as the bill will indicate—its cuisine is meant to be a grand elaboration of the basic Japanese home meal: rice, fish, pickles, vegetables and miso soup, artfully presented in small, healthy portions.

"I believe that Japanese cuisine is something embedded in Japanese people's DNA," says Kikunoi's owner, Yoshihiro Murata. That may be true, but it's a legacy under assault, increasingly crowded out by fast, convenient, Westernized food. These days, Murata says sadly, his college-age daughter doesn't see much difference between cheap restaurant food and the haute cuisine he makes. "I think that in Japan, people should eat good Japanese food," he says. "But they are far away from it."

Japan is not alone. Food and diet are the cornerstones of any culture, one of the most reliable symbols of national identity. Think of the long Spanish lunch followed by the afternoon siesta, a rhythm of food and rest perfectly suited to the blistering heat of the Iberian peninsula in summer. Think of the Chinese meal of rice, vegetables and (only recently) meat, usually served in big collective dishes, the better for extended clans to dine together. National diets come to incorporate all aspects of who we are: our religious taboos, class structure, geography, economy, even government. When we eat together, "we are ordering the world around us and defining the community most important to us," says Martin Jones, a bioarchaeologist at Cambridge University and author of the new book *Feast: Why Humans Share Food*.

Even the traditions we learn from others we adopt and adapt in ways that make them our own. Japan received chopsticks from China and tempura from Portugal. Tomatoes, that staple of pasta and pizza, arrived in Southern Europe only as part of the Columbian Exchange (so-called because of Christopher Columbus' journeys to the New World, where tomatoes originated). "A lot of what we think of as deeply rooted cultural traditions are really traceable back to global exchange," says Miriam Chaiken, a nutritional anthropologist at Indiana University of Pennsylvania.

In an era of instant communication and accelerated trade, those cultural exchanges have exploded, leading to something closer to cultural homogenization. That's bad for not only the preservation of national identities but the preservation of health too. Saturated fats and meats are displacing grains and fresh vegetables. Mealtimes are shrinking. McDonald's is everywhere. From Chile to China, the risk of obesity, diabetes and heart disease is on the rise as the idiosyncratic fare that used to make mealtime in New Delhi, Buenos Aires and Sydney such distinctive experiences is vanishing. This, in turn, is leading to a minimovement in some countries to hold fast to traditional food culture, even as their menu grows ever more international. Says Jones: "With every change there's nostalgia for what's gone before."

Such longing for what was may be only natural, but before we get too misty over the way we used to eat, it's important to remember that the first purpose of food is to keep us alive—something that used to be a lot harder than it is today. For thousands of years, humans were chiefly agrarian, which meant that you ate only what you could grow or slaughter yourself or trade for locally. Geography was culinary destiny.

Africa, which strains under so much political and economic hardship, is the place where this ancient reality is in greatest evidence today. Throughout much of the continent, people remain tied to the land and therefore dependent on it. Most meals are keyed around a single calorie-rich starch—in East Africa, it's often cornmeal or flour made into a stiff porridge—with extra food added if available. Meat remains a rare indulgence, something reserved for holidays and feasts. Even relatively well-fed populations like the Iraqw of Tanzania, who typically eat three full meals a day, must brace for periods when that is impossible. "In times of food insecurity—right before a harvest—or in a bad year, they will reduce this to two or one meals," says Crystal Patil, an anthropologist at the University of Illinois in Chicago. "If there are several bad years in a row, it can be devastating." Often, the only sure foods are largely useless ones, those sloshing over from the well-fed world outside. "I've never seen a village where you couldn't find a Coke," says Chaiken.

All human cultures may have started out with this kind of day-to-day, harvest-to-harvest existence, but the better environmental hand that people of other regions drew—richer soil, fewer droughts, milder temperatures—allowed them to tame their land, meaning that the food they ate and the lives they lived could evolve together. In agrarian, preindustrial Europe, for example, "you'd want to wake up early, start working with the sunrise, have a break to have the largest meal, and then you'd go back to work," says Ken Albala, a professor of history at the University of the Pacific. "Later, at 5 or 6, you'd have a smaller supper."

This comfortable cycle, in which the rhythms of the day helped shape the rhythms of the meals, gave rise to the custom of the large midday meal, eaten with the extended family, that is still observed in pockets of Southern and Western Europe. "Meals are the foundation of the family," says Carole Counihan, an anthropologist at Millersville University in Pennsylvania and author of *Around the Tuscan Table*, "so there was a very important interconnection between eating together" and cementing family ties.

Since industrialization, maintaining such a slow cultural metabolism has been much harder, with the long midday meal shriveling to whatever could be stuffed into a lunch bucket or bought at a food stand. Certainly, there were benefits. Modern techniques for producing and shipping food led to greater variety and quantity, including a tremendous increase in the amount of animal protein and dairy products available, making us more robust than our ancestors. In contemporary China, where tens of millions were starving less than 50 years ago, meat has become far more common, and Chinese youth are on average 2.4 in. taller than they were just three decades ago. "China has gone from a sparse diet to a point where it's got almost too much," says James Watson, professor of Chinese society and anthropology at Harvard University. "As a nutritionist, you have to be outraged. As a historian, you have to consider it one of the biggest success stories on the planet."

Yet plenty has been lost too, even in cultures that still live to eat. Take Italy. It's no secret that the Mediterranean diet—with its emphasis on olive oil, seafood and fresh produce—is healthy, but it was also a joy to prepare and eat. Italians, says Counihan, traditionally began the day with a small meal called *colazione*, consisting of light baked goods and coffee. The big meal came at around 1 p.m. and included a first course of pasta, rice or soup; a second of meat and vegetables; a third, fruit course and, of course, wine. In between the midday meal and a late, smaller dinner came a small snack, the *merenda*. Today, when time zones have less and less meaning, there is little tolerance for offices' closing for lunch, and worsening traffic in cities means workers can't make it home and back fast enough anyway. So the formerly small supper after sundown becomes the big meal of the day, the only one at which the family has a chance to get together. "The evening meal carries the full burden that used to be spread over two meals," says Counihan.

South Americans are struggling with similar changes. John Brett, a nutritional anthropologist at the University of Colorado at Denver and Health Sciences Center, says that many Latin Americans too prefer a large family meal at midday, heavy on starchy grains like quinoa or plants like yucca. But migration from the country to the cities has made that impossible. "They don't have the luxury of two hours of lunch," says Brett. "The economy moves on." Not only do these changes add stress for families, but nutritional quality declines as well. "They tend to eat whatever is cheap and quick," says Chaiken.

Paradoxically, the thing that has contributed the most to the deterioration of food culture may be one of the very things that has helped turbocharge countries in so many other ways: the presence of women in the workforce. "If women are working, they can't shop and cook and prepare a meal," says Counihan. "In the old days, you might have had the grandmother doing it, but family size is shrinking." And the less exposure younger generations have to the food their grandparents ate, the less they develop the sensitive palates that allow them to appreciate it. In

Latin America, says Jeffery Sobal, a professor of nutritional science at Cornell University, "parents complain that they make [traditional] dishes, but the kids won't eat them. They want the things they see on television."

It shouldn't be surprising that the societies that have been most successful at retaining food cultures are the ones that have also resisted the pull of Westernization—for better and worse. In many Middle Eastern countries, extended families still live together, and women stay in the home preparing the kinds of traditional meals that women elsewhere no longer can. Diets in the Middle East also show the influence of religion; besides widely observed taboos on pork and alcohol, the fasting month of Ramadan alters Middle Eastern eating habits. While Muslims fast from sunup to sundown, Ramadan nights are marked by calorie-heavy indulgence. "The level of food consumption during Ramadan is much higher than during ordinary months," says Sami Zubaida, co-author of the book *Culinary Cultures of the Middle East*. Ramadan is "the fasting month that is really a feasting month," Zubaida says, hence the tendency for Ramadan weight gain.

Outside the most conservative nations in the Muslim world, it has proved difficult to hold on to the pleasures of traditional eating. But that's not to say that people don't long for the old ways all the same—inspiring movements in some nations to rediscover how Mom used to prepare a meal. In Europe, Asia and the U.S., the Slow Food movement—a kind of alimentary Greenpeace—campaigns against fast food while championing traditionally prepared meals. Bolivians regularly hold food fairs that celebrate South American staples even as they develop ways to speed up the time-intensive preparation of native meals so that Bolivians can enjoy the dishes of the past at the pace of today. Yet while we might—indeed must—clean up the worst of the fast-food excesses, trying to preserve the diets that keep us both culturally and physically healthier, no one pretends we're ever going to turn back the clock entirely. "Nobody has time anymore," laments Harvard's Watson. "Not even the French."

Nor do the harried Japanese, although there are exceptions. At a trim home in northwest Tokyo, where commuter trains rumble just outside the window, homemaker Estsuko Shinobu, 60, prepares a proper Japanese lunch, using fresh ingredients she bought that morning at the nearby supermarket. The mother of two grown children pads around the kitchen in slippers and a violet kimono, chopping Japanese radishes and carrots, carefully packing a sushi cake with tuna and vinegared rice. She serves dishes arranged on an individual tray just so, down to the direction of each set of chopsticks. She looks happy, even serene as she works, but when asked whether she has passed these skills on to her daughter, she sighs. "Of course not," Shinobu says. "She's far too busy for this."

—With reporting by Elisabeth Salemme/New York, Toko Sekiguchi/Tokyo, Ishaan Tharoor/Hong Kong and Christopher Thompson/London

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