New Essays in Japanese Aesthetics

Edited by
A. Minh Nguyen

Foreword by
Stephen Addiss

(2018)

LEXINGTON BOOKS
Lanham • Boulder • New York • London

Chapter 8

Savoring Tastes

Appreciating Food in Japan

Graham Parkes

When a friend of mine saw the phrase 'savoring tastes,' he said it was pleonastic, suggesting that 'savor' already means to taste and 'taste' implies to savor. He was right, of course, but perhaps he has lived in Japan for too long, since in the United States these days, to judge from the prevalence of fast food and "preprepared meals" (another pleonasm), not so many people seem interested in tasting what they eat, let alone savoring it. This in spite of the fact that eating is one of the central, because indispensable, activities we engage in, one that any culture worthy of the name endows with ritual significance as a primary mode of social intercourse. While there are, of course, gourmets in all cultures, the artistry of Japanese cuisine provides especially rich grounds for aesthetic reflection.

The notion of taste in the wider sense is central to Western aesthetics: think of Kant's concern with "judgments of taste" in the third *Critique*. And for some thinkers, taste is germane to the project of philosophy as a whole. In one of his early, unpublished works, Nietzsche wrote that "the Greek word for 'wise' is linked etymologically with [the Latin] *sapio*, I taste, and *sapiens*, the taster"—so that the "peculiar art of the philosopher," or lover of wisdom, consists in discerning taste and tasteful discrimination.[1] Nietzsche's popularity in Japan stems at least in part from his rejection of Western religions and metaphysics that ignore the body in favor of the soul, and his counterclaims that among "the things in life that deserve to be taken seriously [are] questions of food, accommodation, [and] spiritual diet," and that "the salvation of humanity" lies more than anything in "the question of *nutrition*."[2]

For a long time it was thought that there were four "basic tastes": sweet, sour, salty, and bitter. It was only at the beginning of the twentieth century that a fifth basic taste, *umami*, was discovered—by a professor of chemistry at Tokyo Imperial University. Typical examples of *umami* are the flavors of

the broths made from *kombu* (a kind of kelp), *katsuobushi* (dried bonito), or dried *shiitake* mushrooms that serve as the basis of many dishes in Japanese cuisine.

TASTEFUL COMBINATIONS

Let's begin with the kind of meal that you find in a typical family-run eatery in Japan. The first thing you notice is how good the meal usually *looks*. Japanese cuisine is usually as much a feast for the eyes as it is a treat for the palate; even in modest eating establishments, far from the metropolis, care is taken as a matter of course concerning the aesthetic appearance of the meal. Even when the food is simple and inexpensive, the tableware is generally elegant (except where they've introduced the abomination of disposable chopsticks), as is the way the items of food are arranged on dishes of various shapes and sizes. Insofar as the ensemble of the meal provides satisfaction for the senses of sight and touch as well as smell and taste, you may find yourself eating less than usual before feeling sated. The particular sense of satisfaction experienced after a good Japanese dinner is rarely accompanied by a feeling of overfullness—perhaps because a savoring of the visual and tactile pleasures also inclines one to eat more slowly. As Roland Barthes remarks, in a slight overstatement, steamed rice is "the only element of weight in all of Japanese alimentation (antinomic to the Chinese); it is what sinks, in opposition to what floats."[3]

Whereas the standard Western meal is a mostly linear affair, served in three or more courses, in the Japanese case several smaller dishes are served at once, which affords the eater freedom to compose an aesthetic experience of greater complexity. The main course in Western cuisine (usually consisting of meat, a starch, vegetables, etc.) does offer some opportunity for enjoying differing taste sensations by combining the components in different ways, but the range of combinations is far greater in Japanese cuisine.

The first items to arrive are typically a few small dishes of pickled vegetables and some miso soup in a lacquer bowl. You drink the soup by lifting the bowl to your lips with both hands. The pleasure that ensues has been well celebrated by the novelist Tanizaki Jun'ichirō.

> I know few greater pleasures than holding a lacquer soup bowl in my hands, feeling upon my palms the weight of the liquid and its mild warmth … . With lacquerware there is a beauty in that moment between removing the lid and lifting the bowl to the mouth when one gazes at the still, silent liquid in the dark depths of the bowl, its color hardly differing from that of the bowl itself. What lies within the darkness one cannot distinguish, but the palm senses the gentle

> movements of the liquid, vapor rises from within forming droplets on the rim, and the fragrance carried upon the vapor brings a delicate anticipation.[4]

Tanizaki must have been blessed with hypersensitive palms, but even just to watch the "gentle movements of the liquid" is a joy unavailable to observers of Western soups. Miso soup when hot looks like the primeval chaos preparing to give birth to "the ten thousand things," and the continual welling up of convection currents (visible thanks to the minuscule suspended solids of soybean paste) adds a distinctive dynamism to the aesthetics of soup drinking.

Westerners used to eating meals in courses do well to resist finishing the pickles and drinking the soup right away, since they provide greater enjoyment when consumed gradually in the course of the meal. The pickles taste good alone, as the first item on the palate, and as the last, when the meal is over—and moreover, they contain probiotics that aid digestion. When eaten together with single items of the main meal they enhance the flavor, especially in combination with rice. The exhortation "Drink your soup before it gets cold," while well meant by mothers in the West, deprives us of the experience of the soup's changing taste with temperature. If you consume the soup Japanese-style, slowly and intermittently, you can not only savor a range of different tastes as it cools, but also orchestrate the combinations of these changing tastes with the flavors of the other dishes. The meal can then be appreciated as a multilayered experience offering a vast variety of tastes.

At the next level of sophistication (and price), the options become more numerous and the visual appearance more aesthetically pleasing. Barthes compares the large tray on which the pricier Japanese restaurants serve dinner with a painting, a frame containing numerous small containers and dishes. But the beautiful order of the presented work is destined to be disrupted by the act of eating.

> What was a motionless tableau at the start becomes a work-bench or chessboard, the space not of seeing but of doing—of praxis or play; the painting was actually only a palette (a work surface), with which you are going to play in the course of your meal, taking up here a pinch of vegetables, there of rice, and over there of condiment, here a sip of soup, according to a free alternation.[5]

Whatever may be lost in the disturbance of the perfection of the presentation is more than compensated for by the pleasure to be gained from dealing with the various components through the medium of hands and chopsticks.

The care with which the food has been prepared and presented invites corresponding care and attention in the handling and eating of it. Since the ingredients have already been cut down to a manageable size, there is no need to set

upon the food with anything as weapon-like as a knife or fork. What is called for is simply selection, then transfer from dish to mouth—tasks for which chopsticks are the perfect implement. In spite of their long and pointed shape, Barthes sees in "the gesture of chopsticks ... something maternal, the same precisely measured care taken in moving a child." Western languages appear to lack an appropriate term for the action of picking up and holding items of food with chopsticks. Barthes remarks that 'pinch' is too aggressive. 'Grasp,' 'grab,' 'seize,' 'grip,' 'clutch' are all too forceful, and 'caress' or 'embrace' too soft. By contrast with the knife and fork, chopsticks are, according to Barthes,

> the alimentary instrument which refuses to cut, to pierce, to mutilate ... They never violate the foodstuff: either they gradually unravel it (in the case of vegetables) or else prod it into separate pieces (in the case of fish, eels), thereby rediscovering the natural fissures of the substance.[6]

The discovery of "natural fissures" is just right: the ancient paragon here is the famous cook in the Daoist classic *Zhuangzi*, who dismembers ox carcasses with such finely attuned precision that he never has to sharpen his knife. But such discovery comes less from any kind of "prodding" with the chopsticks than from practicing the reverse of the pincers movement: an insertion of the joined points of the chopsticks at just the right place, followed by a separating that divides the item in two parts. This operation takes a fair amount of practice and requires paying careful attention until you get the knack. Then the point would be to hold that careful attention and expand it to the rest of the eating.[7]

The slender chopsticks used in Japan don't work well with rice from China or other Asian countries (where the chopsticks are thicker), but they are perfect for Japanese rice, which is short-grained and slightly glutinous. Once again Barthes finds *les mots justes* when he describes it as somehow "a contradiction of substance":

> It is at once cohesive and detachable; its substantial destination is the fragment, the clump, the volatile conglomerate; ... it constitutes in the picture a compact whiteness, granular (contrary to that of our bread) and yet friable: what comes to the table, dense and stuck together, comes undone at a touch of the chopsticks, though without ever scattering, as if division occurred only to produce still another irreducible cohesion.[8]

In a more lyrical vein, after a lament over the way excessive illumination spoils the visual effect of most Japanese foods, Tanizaki writes of how the whiteness of rice shines forth in a shadowy dining room.

> A glistening black lacquer rice cask set off in a dark corner is both beautiful to behold and a powerful stimulus to the appetite. Then the lid is briskly lifted, and

> this pure white freshly boiled food, heaped in its black container, each and every grain gleaming like a pearl, sends forth billows of warm steam—here is a sight no Japanese can fail to be moved by.[9]

The philosopher Nishitani Keiji amplifies this point in an essay titled 'The Experience of Having Eaten Rice,' invoking the Buddhist notion of "the non-duality of soil and body." He writes of the joy of eating Japanese rice again after being in Europe for several years, and suggests this is because constituents of the soil pass into the rice and thence into the body. He also notes the archaic aspect to this process, insofar as it has been going on for millennia, such that the body one inherits from one's ancestors is already configured by certain elements from the soil. This doesn't mean that you can't move to a different country and establish a relation with the soil there by eating locally grown food, but it does explain the special relationship people feel with land that their forebears have farmed for ages.[10]

Tanizaki and Nishitani have been criticized for making such politically incorrect remarks—bad examples of *Nihonjinron* discourse or "theory of Japanese uniqueness." Indeed, many people have suggested that Japan ought to defer to American exceptionalism and the dictates of free trade, and acknowledge that strains of Japanese rice grown in California are every bit as good as rice grown in Japan, quite apart from their being much cheaper even when imported. So why do the Japanese insist on continuing to grow their own, even though it's more expensive and still can't fully meet domestic demand? Well, because it tastes better—and what's wrong with that?[11]

The high point of Japanese cuisine is *kaiseki ryōri*, which is said to derive from the kind of food originally served with the tea ceremony. It is certainly a consummate example of the Zen aesthetic in its least ascetic aspect. *Kaiseki* consists of a beautifully arranged and carefully orchestrated series of a dozen or so small dishes, chosen according to the season and presented with ultimate attention to the meal's visual appearance: a magnificent feast for the eyes, as well as the nose and the palate. It is usually served at a pace that allows for the successive overlapping of several dishes at a time, so that one can play with combinations of flavors, textures, and temperatures. Traditional *kaiseki* is unfortunately expensive, but well worth the price. For one thing, it can inspire some Zen-style experimentation at home.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

From the Zen perspective as explicated by Dōgen Zenji, arguably the most profound thinker in the tradition, the distinction between *haute cuisine* and simple cooking with fresh, natural ingredients is merely conventional.

He advises the head cook in the monastery not to "arouse disdainful mind when you prepare a broth of wild grasses" or "arouse joyful mind when you prepare a fine cream soup."[12] The preparation and eating of both kinds of food equally are an opportunity for enlightened practice. Nor does it make sense to separate the eating of food from the purchasing of it—nor, ultimately, from everything else we do in our lives. We enact such a separation by imposing a means-end structure on our activities: by treating the buying and cooking of the ingredients as a means to the end of eating and enjoying the meal. But this attitude condemns us to drudgery by turning the shopping and preparing into a series of chores that have to be discharged before we can get down to the main business of eating.

Dōgen recounts how he learned this life lesson from the head cook in a monastery in China, who had visited a ship he was staying on in order to buy some mushrooms from Japan. Dōgen asked the old man why he didn't delegate the buying of mushrooms to a younger subordinate so that he, as head cook, could concentrate on his zazen practice. It was only later that Dōgen came to realize the import of the cook's reply: that the buying of mushrooms, and everything else connected with eating, is itself, like zazen, a practice that can be profoundly enlightening.[13]

Dōgen thus recommends paying close attention, as well as respect, to everything that we use in preparing the meal: not only the ingredients, but also the utensils and other pieces of tableware. We need to ensure that everything in the kitchen is in its appropriate place and is kept clean, and that we "select chopsticks, spoons, and other utensils with equal care, examine them with sincerity, and handle them skillfully." He invokes the Buddhist idea of "kind" or "parental mind," which naturally gives rise to a concern for the welfare of others: "You should look after water and grains with compassionate care, as though tending your own children."[14]

What is crucial here, from the Zen perspective, is that we *pay attention* to what we're doing, that we *tend* those people and things with whom and with which we interact. If we say nowadays that it's good to pay attention to what we eat, we're recommending a healthy diet and warning against consuming too much junk food. But it can also be an encouragement to become more aware of the actual act of eating, so that we taste more fully what we're ingesting and thereby enjoy it more—with the happy consequence that we don't need to eat as much. There is, however, a problem here, which is that eating is not only a necessity of life but also a social activity that's imbued with cultural values. To the extent that we enjoy eating with others, and because meals are an occasion for convivial intercourse with family, friends, and acquaintances, we tend to be less aware of how the food actually tastes. If we are guests in someone's home, or at a restaurant, we'll want to pay attention to the taste of the food so that we can say sincerely to our hosts that it's

delicious; but the more interesting the conversation around the table, the less likely we are to fully enjoy the food.

Since eating habits tend to reduce our attention, it's good to have them disrupted by travel—unless you prefer to resist the opportunities for exploring different cuisines. (Japanese tour groups are notorious for trundling around with them suitcases packed with instant ramen.) Traditional Japanese food is as healthy as it is tasty, which is no doubt a major factor behind the long life expectancy in Japan. But even for a foreigner who loves the food, what to eat for breakfast can be problematic. While the traditional Japanese breakfast is delicious—miso soup, pickles, rice, dried seaweed—it's very similar to Japanese lunch and dinner. This poses a difficulty for those looking to start the day with something different, especially since it's hard to find good bread in Japan, and most foodstuffs that Japanese marketers imagine as "Western" breakfast are oversweetened with sugar. But if we think of how Dōgen's broth of wild grasses might taste, we can find a solution that's applicable in any place where fresh ingredients are available.

Fruit in Japan is generally excellent, because it's sold and eaten according to the season. Imagine, then, a breakfast in winter, where one could begin with a satsuma tangerine, which is native to Japan and plentiful there. The color: orange—indeed, the perfect example of orange color—like the rising or setting sun in the cold season. A blessing, at this darker time of year with its abundance of root vegetables and their generally muted colors, to enjoy a burst of bright orange as a reminder of sunnier times. The texture is smooth to the touch and malleable, caressable like soft flesh. The fragrance somehow sweet, but indefinable—except by the word 'tangerine.' It's a good idea to sit down and relax, for if you eat the satsuma "on the run," or while preparing some other items of breakfast, you're likely to miss the richness of the experience.

The tangerine is easier to peel than an orange, since the skin lies more loosely on the flesh. A shallow bite with the incisors is a good way to start, and provides an appetizing foretaste that's slightly bitter, thanks to the flavor of the rind. The sound of the rind tearing and coming away from the flesh inside is a unique delight: a subdued crackling as the inner spheroid is gradually revealed, sometimes accompanied by a puff of fragrant mist. There are twelve segments typically, easily pulled apart. The teeth sink gently through the skin and into the succulent flesh, releasing a soft burst of juice and flavor, a little on the tart side but also somehow sweet. The taste turns slightly tarter as you swallow the flesh and chew the remaining skin and pith: the balance in taste between the sweeter flesh and tarter pith reflects the way something in the pith counteracts the acid of the juice.[15]

Now for a piece of toast (a necessary expedient if the bread is mediocre) and, to go with it, an apple and a dried persimmon. When cutting crisp fruit

like an apple, the sharper the knife, the more enjoyable the experience—and the more likely one will pay careful attention to the activity. Traditional craftsmen sometimes talk of "becoming friends" with their tools, and this is an especially sensible idea in the case of a well-sharpened knife. A keen blade is unforgiving to the tender flesh of those who handle it carelessly. Once you learn the basics of safe chopping with a sharp knife, you can enjoy paying attention to the interplay between holding-hand and chopping-hand. With increasing expertise, certain rhythms begin to inform the interactions, and the eye-hands coordination becomes a kind of dance, in which eight fingers and two thumbs twirl and flip the segments of fruit. You can see a similar dance with certain professional chefs, who in Japan often work right behind the counters where the food is served. Not those *teppanyaki* operations like Benihana of Tokyo, with their Las Vegas-style showmanship, but rather the modest display of spectacular dexterity that can be enjoyed in the humblest of eating places in Japan.

A freshly toasted slice of bread affords a special textural pleasure when you apply a little butter while it's still hot. Again there's a characteristic and unmistakable sound to the preliminary, rather like an amplified version of the tearing of the tangerine skin, as the knife scrapes the melting butter lightly over the crisply toasted surface. As with many foods, much depends on the contrast between outer and inner, and on the different levels of resistance as one's incisors slice though the crust to the increasingly yielding interior.

In the chewing phase, the dance that the tongue performs in distributing the food to the molars for crushing is an amazing operation, but we usually don't notice. The coordination between chomping molars and undulating tongue and inner cheek surface is extremely complex, which makes it all the more amazing that it hardly ever goes wrong. You only rarely bite your tongue while chewing, even though you perform innumerable chomps in the course of a lifetime. And listen to the mastication! The sounds gradually change from crunching the crisp surface to softer thudding and crushing as the contents of the mouth are progressively ground and liquefied. Since they're amplified through the jaws on their way to the ears from the inside, these sounds can easily be enjoyed in the privacy of one's own skull without disturbing those around us. Attention to these aesthetic dimensions of chewing affords greater enjoyment of the activity, and so tends to prolong it—with obvious benefits for digestive health.

The modest combination of toast, sliced apple and dried persimmon clearly displays the pleasure that can be derived from chewing. Start with a bite of apple to clear the palate, followed by a bite of toast to be savored on its own. Then some toast accompanied by a piece of sliced apple: the juice of the apple immediately transforms the experience of chewing the toast, as the different

levels of crispness contrast and the flavors intermingle. Now introduce the dried persimmon, which is softer than dried fig, but with a pleasing contrast between chewy skin and succulent interior. A bite of toast together with a bite of persimmon offers a novel blend of flavors and less contrast between textures than with a bite of apple.

Next, you can play with the timing, by partially chewing a piece of toast *before* biting the apple—an interestingly different experience from biting the apple first and then the toast. Introducing similar delays between biting toast and persimmon, and vice versa, gives rise to a whole different range of tastes. Both the toast and the fruits will be finished before you can embark on the many other combinations that are possible when varying the timing between the ingestion of toast and apple *and* persimmon.[16] And if boredom should threaten, you can substitute pear for apple, or banana for persimmon, or whatever is locally available and in season. Rich and diverse enjoyment of innumerable taste combinations can be had for a very modest price indeed. Such an enjoyable breakfast is possible because seasonable fruit in Japan is generally tasty: in spite of a high level of industrialization, the country is fortunate to have a good deal of small-scale agriculture around towns and near urban centers, so that fruits and vegetables can be eaten fresh and close to the source.

If you add to the routine a cup of tea or coffee, this multiplies the taste combinations immeasurably. Green tea requires a little more care to prepare than black tea, since the water needs to be boiled then allowed to cool a little before the infusing, but the elegance of the taste and the beauty of the color make it well worth the extra effort. The flavor of a hot beverage like tea or coffee changes as it cools down—think of the difference between coffee hot from the pot and at room temperature, or iced. A mouthful of tea or coffee tastes different if you've eaten something just before taking it, and likewise a bite of food tastes different if you've just drunk tea or coffee. So, intersperse sips of tea or coffee—gradually changing in flavor as it cools down—between the bites of toast, apple, and persimmon, and you greatly amplify the delight.

If you're ever meant to savor a taste, it's in the Japanese tea ceremony. As the host serves the tea, or the guest admires the bowl, these activities express an awareness that here are two human beings who have come together under the heavens and on a particular piece of the earth, and in the context of a unique configuration of the elements of fire and water, wood and metal, in order to partake of a delicious and vitalizing beverage. Sipping the tea in this context, you can really savor the taste. Just as in Zen, the awareness that accompanies sitting meditation (zazen) is to be extended throughout one's waking life, so the atmosphere of the tea ceremony optimally comes to pervade the practitioner's entire being, so that every meal and all other waking activities may become occasions for experiencing the ultimate context of emptiness that is the womb of all human possibilities.

There is an echo of this sensibility in the relatively prosaic custom operative in the drinking of beer or *sake*, whether with an exquisite *kaiseki* dinner or an ordinary meal. In a public place or a private home, you may find the host proffering a bottle, the neck tilted forward. The appropriate response is to lift your glass a little off the table so that the other person can fill it. The roles are often reversed on the second round. Of course, we clink glasses in the West and thank someone who pours a drink for us; but in Japan, where the bottle is shared, there's something special about the physical act of lifting one's glass, or sake cup, in response to a sign from the pourer. The custom may allude to the tea ceremony in its function of bringing to awareness the uniqueness of the human situation in which the participants find themselves. You and I, here together for the first and last time—if we were here before, or will be here again, it's a different situation and we will have changed as people—drinking something that we can never drink again.

So, here's to the flourishing of the field of Japanese aesthetics!

NOTES

1. My translation from Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die Philosophie im tragischen Zeitalter der Griechen*, §3 (Berlin: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2013), accessed July 24, 2015, http://www.zeno.org/Lesesaal/N/9781484049655?page=12.

2. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo: How to Become What You Are*, trans. Duncan Large (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 95, 19. Nietzsche actually felt a special affinity with Japan; he once wrote to his sister, "I would like, simply in order to attain greater serenity, to emigrate to *Japan*." Friedrich Nietzsche to Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche, Nice, France, December 20, 1885, in *Friedrich Nietzsche, Sämtliche Briefe: Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, 8 vols. (Munich, BY: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1986), 7:127. English translation is my own.

3. Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 12.

4. Jun'ichirō Tanizaki, *In Praise of Shadows* (New Haven, CT: Leete's Island Books, 1977), 14–15.

5. Barthes, 11.

6. Ibid., 16, 18.

7. For the central role of attentive practice in Chinese and Japanese philosophy and aesthetics, see my essay "Awe and Humility in the Face of Things: Somatic Practice in East-Asian Philosophies," *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 4, no. 3 (2012): 69–88.

8. Barthes, 12, 14.

9. Tanizaki, 16–17.

10. *Nishitani Keiji chosakushū* (*Collected Writings of Nishitani Keiji*) (Tokyo: Sōbunsha, 1990), 20:202.

11. For a comprehensive discussion of the Japanese love of their own rice, see Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney, *Rice as Self: Japanese Identities through Time* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

12. Dōgen, "Instruction for the Tenzo," in *Moon in a Dewdrop: Writings of Zen Master Dōgen*, ed., Kazuaki Tanahashi (New York: North Point Press, 1985), 56.

13. Ibid., 59–60.

14. Ibid., 55, 65.

15. One's enjoyment of this noble fruit may be enhanced by knowledge of the wealth of nutrients and other healthful substances it contains: various vitamins and acids and enzymes and fiber, and above all "nobiletin," a phytochemical that's been found to have antioxidant, anticancer, anti-inflammatory, and cholesterol-lowering properties, to reduce obesity, counteract memory loss and dementia, and help prevent heart disease, diabetes, and stroke. How wonderful that something that good for you should also taste so delicious.

16. Admirers of Samuel Beckett's *Molloy* will appreciate how much simpler this method is than the stone-sucking of that notorious complicator.