

The Japanese in the Netherlands and Their Foodways

Katarzyna J. Cwiertka Ph.D.
Leiden University, the Netherlands



Katarzyna J. Cwiertka, Ph.D.

Katarzyna J. Cwiertka is a researcher at Leiden University in the Netherlands. She graduated in 1990 from Warsaw University's Asian Studies Institute, where she received her M.A. degree in Japanese Studies; in 1994 she received an M.A. from Tsukuba University's Regional Studies Course. Dr. Cwiertka received her doctorate in 1999 from Leiden University, Center for Japanese and Korean Studies. Her most recent articles in English include "Culinary Globalization and Japan," *Japan Echo* (1999) vol. 26 no.3; and "A Note on the Making of Culinary Tradition—An Example of Modern Japan," *Appetite* (1998) no. 30. Other writings include "How Cooking Became a Hobby: Changes in Attitude Towards Cooking in Early Twentieth Century Japan" in *The Culture of Japan as Seen Through Its Leisure* (S. Fruhstuck & S. Linhart, eds.), SUNY Press, 1998.

Like air and water, food is essential to life. It plays the same crucial role in sustaining life in humans as in animals. In addition to its essential biological function of maintaining health and vigor, food is part of many other aspects of human culture. People display their aesthetic tastes, for example, through the arrangement and serving of dishes, and they observe taboos with regard to eating that reflect traditional customs and beliefs. The way in which food is produced, prepared and consumed clearly reveals the social dimensions of food. In all societies—as aptly expressed in the Japanese saying, "eating rice from the same pot"—food plays a role in fostering a sense of camaraderie. Food thus brings a social significance to people's lives, which vividly symbolizes their cultural identity.

Most people are unaware of the psychological aspects of food and the role that diet plays in maintaining balanced mental and physical health. People take it for granted that the food they eat is similar to that eaten by those around them; they are often not conscious of the social importance of food. This attitude toward food, however, changes as soon as people move away from the environment to which they have been physically and psychologically accustomed. Ordinary aspects of everyday life to which they had previously never paid attention take on greater importance; long-somnolent sensations are now keenly aroused. The taste of familiar foods they once thought plain and ordinary becomes special and nostalgic, acquiring the quality of symbols of a lifestyle that has been left behind.

This essay reports on the findings of a study on the dietary customs of Japanese living in the Netherlands, away from culturally familiar surroundings. Based on a survey carried out in the autumn of 1996, this study recorded and analyzed the experiences of 75 Japanese

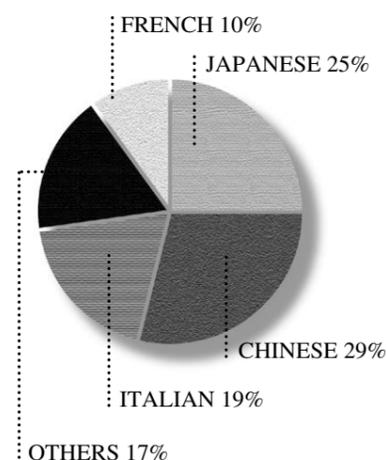
women living in that country.*

In 1996, there were 5,812 Japanese registered at the Japanese Embassy as residents of the Netherlands. Over 80 percent were persons assigned to jobs in Holland by their employers; they consisted of employees of Japanese companies, students, researchers, and Japanese civil servants on overseas postings and members of their families. Japanese company employees and their families accounted for the largest group, making up 70 percent of the total. The nearly one thousand other Japanese registered with the embassy were long-term residents, most of them Japanese women married to Dutch men. There may be other Japanese residing in the Netherlands who are not registered with the embassy, but that number is likely to be small.

The majority of Japanese in the Netherlands live in and around Amsterdam, the capital, where the Japanese school and Japan Culture Club are located, thus forming the heart of the Japanese community. Accordingly, this study was carried out mainly in Amsterdam. The age of the 75 Japanese women who participated in the study varied from those in their twenties to those in their fifties, and can, therefore, be regarded to a certain extent as representative of the Japanese residents in the Netherlands. Generally speaking, women with families have to prepare meals more often, and for the purposes of research on the daily diet, it was considered that they would represent the most suitable research subjects; this study therefore surveyed only married women.

Of the 75 women in the study, 44 were temporarily living in the Netherlands with husbands who had been posted there in connection with their work; in this study, these women will collectively be referred to as Group A. Another 31 were permanent residents of the

Restaurants patronized by Japanese residing in the Netherlands.



Netherlands, the majority (22) of whom were married to Dutch men; these women comprised Group C. The remaining nine were women whose husbands were Japanese but who had not been posted to the Netherlands on assignments; these couples had come to the Netherlands of their own accord, and the husbands' place of employment included Japanese companies, Dutch companies, universities and other organizations. These women made up Group B.

Japanese Home Cooking in the Netherlands

Most of the 75 women participating in this study responded that their diet had changed since coming to the Netherlands, mainly because the ingredients they needed to cook Japanese-style meals were not available. They made fewer dishes using fresh seafood and more using meat; this was especially true among Group A respondents. Some women had also switched from Japanese-style to Western-style methods of cooking.

"The fish is not fresh." (Respondent #1, Group B) "It's difficult to obtain ingredients. Even if they are available, they're expensive and not fresh." (Respondent #2, Group A) "We eat more meat than fish at home now." (Respondent #3, Group A) "We don't eat fish much any more, especially small fish [eaten whole]." (Respondent #4, Group A) "We eat more Western-style dishes now." (Respondent #5, Group A) "I use oil often; cooking deep-fried dishes more often." (Respondent #6, Group A) "We eat oily or rich foods much more often now." (Respondent #7, Group B) "The amount of animal fat in what we eat has greatly increased." (Respondent #8, Group A)

Many respondents commented that foods they had eaten on a daily basis in Japan were not available in the Netherlands. Some women expressed their disappointment at the lack of seasonal variety.

"I've hardly eaten any tofu or *natto* at all since I came here."

(Respondent #9, Group A) "We don't eat as much fish any more. Fewer vegetables (such as parboiled spinach) too." (Respondent #10, Group A) "We find it harder to get fish and various types of mushrooms, so we don't eat them much here." (Respondent #11, Group A) "We don't eat grilled fish any more." (Respondent #12, Group A) "There are fewer opportunities to enjoy the foods traditionally eaten in particular seasons in Japan (e.g. young bamboo shoots in the spring, *sanma*, or Pacific saury, in the fall)." (Respondent #13, Group C)

Many Japanese women felt that there was less variety in their diets while living in the Netherlands, and expressed their dissatisfaction with this.

"In Japan, we always had fresh greens and, [in summer] corn on the cob. No fresh greens or corn on the cob are sold in the Netherlands. There are no seasonal fruits and vegetables; I feel as if I am eating the same thing all year round." (Respondent #12, Group A) "There is a wide variety of Japanese dishes that are fish- or tofu-based, so I knew how to prepare various dishes, but here the ingredients available are so limited that I always end up making almost the same kinds of things." (Respondent #2, Group A) "It seems as if the only methods of cooking available are those using oil. In Japan, for example, you can grill fish, but here I have to fry it in butter most of the time. Another problem is that there are no fish here we can eat as sashimi." (Respondent #14, Group A) "Ingredients here are different, so I can only make certain dishes. It's difficult to make *nimono* [dishes prepared by simmering root vegetables in a soy sauce-based flavoring]. I tend to make the same foods over and over." (Respondent #15, Group A) "I don't know how to use vegetables that are not found in Japan, so that limits the kinds of vegetables I can use in simmered dishes and for stir-frying. We end up eating the same things all the time." (Respondent #16, Group A) "One thing different from Japan is the vegetables. I don't care for their taste, although that may be because I don't know how to prepare them. The water is different too, so even though I might make the same thing [as in Japan], it tastes different. Boiled rice doesn't taste good, and I really don't feel like eating the fish raw. The beef is not tasty, and spinach doesn't taste good either." (Respondent #17, Group A) "I end up using familiar ingredients or ingredients that I can obtain, and even though what I really want to eat is Japanese-style food, I end up eating rich foods." (Respondent #18, Group C)

The above comments are typical of the many Japanese women who were dissatisfied with the diet available in the Netherlands, but others were more positive, saying they were enjoying themselves.

"Wine here is delicious and inexpensive, so I drink more wine than before, and have cheese as a snack with it. Here, my husband doesn't work overtime, as he would in Japan, so we can enjoy leisurely dinners and the pace of life is more relaxed. I've gained quite a lot of weight." (Respondent #19, Group A) "There are many vegetables here that we don't see in Japan. We travel a lot to

neighboring European countries, and I've started preparing Western-style dishes using ingredients not found in Japan." (Respondent #20, Group A) "In the Netherlands, various foods—for example berries, cheese, cuts of beef and so on—that are expensive and hard to obtain in Japan, are easy to get." (Respondent #21, Group A)

This study showed that the majority of Japanese families in the Netherlands ate a Japanese-style evening meal, consisting of rice, *miso* soup and side dishes. Even though their surroundings were very different, Japanese housewives attempted to carry on providing a Japanese diet and made various efforts toward that end.

For example, some women grew their own *shungiku* [garland chrysanthemum], *shiso* [perilla] and *mitsuba* [Japanese wild chervil] in their gardens. Many women who had never practiced pickling when they lived in Japan, began making their own pickles after coming to the Netherlands. Many also developed Japanese-style dishes by improvising with locally available ingredients.

"I have learned to design menus without expensive ingredients or those that are difficult to acquire in the Netherlands." (Respondent #22, Group C) "The range of vegetables available is limited, so I'm forced to use some other vegetables as substitutes." (Respondent #9, Group A) "Since coming to the Netherlands, I've begun making my own *udon* and *somen* noodles, and the wrappers for Chinese-style meat dumplings. I also make my own dried fish." (Respondent #15, Group A) "I now try as much as possible to prepare meals using ingredients sold in ordinary supermarkets. It's fun to try out new ideas from recipes I hear about from friends, too." (Respondent #9, Group A) "I've learned now how to clean and dress fish myself." (Respondent #23, Group B) "Some dishes are impossible to make, because of the ingredients they require, so I look for substitute ingredients. But they don't turn out the same as when I made them in Japan. Preparing meals here also seems to take more time." (Respondent #24, Group A)

The majority of Japanese dishes prepared by Japanese women in the Netherlands were made from ingredients most easily obtained. And as this study shows, they therefore included many meat or Western vegetables as the principal ingredients. The following list gives, in descending order of frequency, the dishes prepared by questionnaire respondents.

1. *Nikujaga* [simmered meat and potatoes]
2. Stir-fried vegetables (sometimes with meat or squid)
3. Grilled fish
4. Marinated seaweed and cucumbers
5. Curries with rice
6. Hamburgers
7. Spaghetti
8. Simmered vegetables
9. Simmered meat and vegetable dishes
10. Stews
11. Salads
12. Simmered *hijiki* [a type of seaweed]
13. Tempura
14. Deep-fried pork cutlets
15. Stew-type dishes cooked at table
16. Croquettes
17. Fish meunière-style
18. Marinated sliced cucumber
19. Sushi (rolled sushi, *inari-zushi*,

20. Simmered taro potatoes (*sato-imo*)
21. Soups
22. Omelets
23. *Gyoza* [Chinese-style meat dumplings]
24. Grilled meat
25. Simmered fish
26. Cabbage rolls
27. Potato or macaroni au gratin
28. Deep-fried chicken
29. *Oden* [hodgepodge, a variety of ingredients put to simmer in hot stock]
30. *Udon* noodles
31. *Daikon namasu* [vinegared slices of giant white radish]
32. *Kiriboshi daikon* (simmered dried strips of giant white radish)
33. *Kimpira* [Sautéed vegetables flavored with soy sauce, sake and sugar]
34. *Yakisoba* [fried noodles]
35. *Okonomiyaki* [vegetable and meat "pancake"]
36. *Domburi* [rice served in a large bowl with various ingredients placed on top]
37. Steak
38. Simmered giant radish
39. Ginger-flavored fried pork
40. Sautéed meat
41. Sukiyaki

Japanese Dining Out in the Netherlands

As described above, home-style cooking among Japanese living in the Netherlands differs somewhat from that in Japan because of the limited availability of ingredients. In households where both spouses are Japanese, although Western-style side dishes may be included, the evening meal almost always follows the Japanese meal pattern consisting of rice, *miso* soup, pickles and side dishes. It takes time and effort to prepare such a meal in the Netherlands and inevitably, there is relatively less variety in the side dishes served, compared to meals in Japan. The difference in the culinary circumstances between Japan and the Netherlands becomes even more pronounced when it comes to eating out. Figure 1 indicates the types of restaurants that Japanese in the Netherlands patronize regularly, and the following statements describe the character of change in their eating-out behavior.

"We hardly ever went out to restaurants in Japan, and when we did, we ate spaghetti or Chinese food. Here we [usually] go to restaurants serving Western-style food." (Respondent #12, Group A) "In Japan, I often went out to a pub or bar to drink, but since I've come here I more often go to a Chinese restaurant." (Respondent #16, Group A) "Since coming here we go out more often for Chinese food." (Respondent #26, Group C) "In Japan, we would go out for sushi, *udon* or *soba* noodles and so on. Here, I look for restaurants that serve meals that contain rice (Chinese, Spanish, etc.)." (Respondent #27, Group B) "My husband and I both love *ramen*, Chinese noodles, and that's not easy to get here." (Respondent #28, Group A) "When we lived in Japan, we often ate out at American-style or traditional Japanese-style restaurants. In the Netherlands we've started going to Chinese or Italian restaurants, because the food is good and relatively inexpensive." (Respondent #20, Group A) "All the Chinese and Italian food is authentic and delicious, so we eat that kind of food more often here than we did in Japan." (Respondent #2, Group A)

Predictably, respondents felt that the biggest problem

was the low standard of Japanese restaurants in the Netherlands.

“We don’t eat at the Japanese restaurants (they’re expensive and the food is poor).” (Respondent #21, Group A) “It’s more difficult with Japanese food (because of the [limited] number of restaurants and the [high] prices).” (Respondent #25, Group C) “In Japan, the most common types of restaurants are *ramen* noodle places, and restaurants serving Chinese food or Japanese-style meals. In the Netherlands, restaurants that serve Italian, Spanish, Indian or other food are common; those restaurants are plentiful and cheap, so we don’t eat Japanese food.” (Respondent #18, Group C) “In Japan, we might choose Japanese food even when we ate out, but here you almost have to eat at Western-style places.” (Respondent #29, Group A) “In Japan we tried many different kinds of restaurants, but here in the Netherlands [the only variety of Japanese food] we eat [away from home] is sushi.” (Respondent #30, Group A) “Where restaurants are concerned, I’m more interested in something with an international flavor, rather than Japanese food (because I want satisfaction relative to the amount of money I pay).” (Respondent #31, Group B)

Interestingly, although respondents did not have a very positive opinion of Japanese restaurants in the Netherlands, some families ate out at Japanese restaurants more frequently than when in Japan.

“When eating out at restaurants, we have Japanese food more often than Western-style food.” (Respondent #3, Group A) “We used to eat Western-style when we went out, but lately we’ve been eating at Japanese restaurants more often.” (Respondent #32, Group A) “In Japan, there were frequent opportunities to eat at Western-style restaurants, but since we’ve been in the Netherlands, we eat more often in Japanese-style restaurants (when the whole family goes out to eat).” (Respondent #33, Group B) “Now when we go out to restaurants, we eat dishes, like sashimi or sushi, that we cannot prepare easily at home.” (Respondent #34, Group C) “We don’t eat at Western-style restaurants any more.” (Respondent #35, Group A) “We eat Japanese food more often now, when we go out to eat.” (Respondent #36, Group A)

Another difference between Western-style restaurants in Japan and in the Netherlands is that in Japan today, families with children regularly eat at American-style “family restaurants” like Denny’s or Skylark. In Europe, however, American-style restaurant chains have made few inroads except in the fast-food industry, and because of this, Japanese might have more difficulty adjusting to life in the Netherlands than to that in the United States.

Westernization of Eating Patterns

The trend that emerged most clearly in this study was the Westernization of eating patterns, and the greater variety of Western foods that Japanese living in the Netherlands had adopted.

“The cheese here is delicious, so we eat it often now.”

(Respondent #19, Group A) “The amount and variety of fruit I eat has suddenly increased. I’m also eating cheese more often.” (Respondent #5, Group A) “In Japan we only ate white bread, but here we’ve started eating brown bread.” (Respondent #38, Group A) “In Japan, the only thing we put on our toast was butter, but here we’ve started having meat with it, like ham, roast beef and so on.” (Respondent #40, Group C) “I eat croissants and baguettes (French bread) now.” (Respondent #26, Group C) “There are many different kinds of good-tasting bread, and we enjoy the cheese, salami, and various kinds of ham.” (Respondent #31, Group B)

This trend was especially marked in Groups B and C, a finding that suggests that Japanese women residing in the Netherlands permanently tend to move further from the traditional Japanese type of diet than those whose husbands have been temporarily transferred to the Netherlands by a Japanese company.

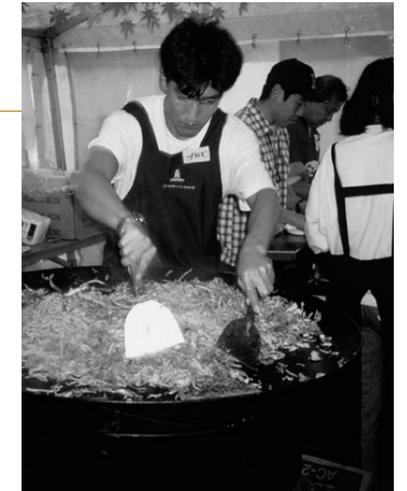
“I rarely serve only Japanese-style dishes for a meal.” (Respondent #18, Group C) “Our Japanese-style meals are not authentic; they lack pickles or the number of side dishes is limited.” (Respondent #41, Group C) “In Japan, I made mainly Japanese food, but here, our meals are mainly based on things like potatoes, spaghetti or macaroni.” (Respondent #27, Group B) “I cook potatoes almost every day. I cook rice less often nowadays.” (Respondent #42, Group C) “The ingredients are different, naturally, but I also use Dutch preparation methods, and we eat boiled vegetables more often. I don’t know if it’s because of the weather, but I find that I’m cooking more with butter now, rather than preparing light-tasting foods.” (Respondent #25, Group C) “We hardly ever eat Japanese-style food at home. We eat international-style.” (Respondent #26, Group C)

It seems that Westernization of eating patterns among women in Group C is due mainly to the preferences of their Dutch husbands and children, who were born and raised in the Netherlands.

“My husband is Dutch, so we can’t have Japanese-style food for the evening meal. The same goes at restaurants.” (Respondent #43, Group C)

In every society, the husband’s food preferences have a strong impact on the family diet. In Group A, a great many women prepared Japanese food because their husbands insisted on it. For example, a look at the food diaries (or kitchen diaries) kept by women in Group A revealed that they prepared pasta and other Western dishes, rather than the Japanese-style meals, when their husbands were away on business trips. In Group B, the family’s diet was either more Japanese or more Western, depending on the husband’s tastes.

“My husband prefers Japanese food. In other words, he likes a Japanese-style breakfast, and lunches on his days off have to be Japanese-style too.” (Respondent #31, Group B) “My husband likes to eat Western-style, so we eat more meat now. Right now, I serve Japanese food twice a week, but on other days, it’s Italian, Chinese, Dutch or French (not authentic, but I do my best).” (Respondent #44, Group B)



The Japan Women’s Club holds its annual Japan Festival each autumn; Japanese food is one of the major attractions.

Concluding Remarks

Japanese began to travel abroad in increasing numbers from the late 19th century. Some who went to Taiwan, Korea or Manchuria under the government’s colonization policies worked there temporarily. Others, such as those who emigrated to Hawaii or Brazil, found a new home overseas. In the years following World War II, particularly during the years of Japan’s rapid economic growth, more Japanese moved abroad on long-term or short-term stays. In the 1980s, the “bubble economy” years, that number continued to grow as Japanese companies expanded and assigned employees to foreign posts, and a greater number of Japanese studied overseas or chose marriage partners from other nationalities.

Many Japanese left Japan and experienced living in unfamiliar surroundings, but until recently little study has been done on the impact such experience has had on their lives. While “internationalization” has become an often-used catch-phrase in Japan, little interest has been shown in the lives of Japanese living abroad. Today, however, there is growing interest in Japanese communities overseas, and more research is being done on this subject. Beginning with the issue of Japanese returnee children, the influence that living abroad will have on Japanese society in the future is now being scrutinized from many different perspectives. This study focused on the foodways of Japanese living in the Netherlands, in order to examine the ways in which their diet has changed as a result of living outside Japan, and changes in their perceptions of Japanese food.

Based on analysis of the data collected, two observations can be made. The first is that Japanese and their families living in the Netherlands can be classified into three groups displaying distinct differences: Japanese white-collar worker families, posted abroad by Japanese companies (Group A); Japanese families living in the Netherlands but having no connection with Japanese companies (Group B);

and families where the wife is Japanese and the husband Dutch (Group C). There is a tendency in Japan to think that Japanese everywhere are much the same, but the existence of these groups offers evidence that such a stereotype is not valid.

Eating patterns among all three groups changed as a result of their moving to the Netherlands, and it was clear that many women worked hard to prepare Japanese-style food. The second observation that can be made from the data collected is that for Group A, the bond with Japanese food was especially hard to break. Naturally, there are differences in individual families, but generally speaking, attitudes toward Japanese food among Group A women were very different from those of the women in the other groups.

Japanese in Group A, who had very limited contacts with the local community, tried to re-create their own familiar Japanese world within the circumstances imposed by local conditions. To these people, Japanese food is not merely a means of sustenance and pleasure in daily life, it is a confirmation of their “Japaneseness” and forms the basis of their cultural identity. In contrast, the Japanese in Groups B and C are forging new identities as they gradually loosen their ties to Japanese food. They consider Japanese food more a sensory and emotional pleasure than a tie reinforcing their identity. The daily experiences of the three groups presented in this study may be considered representative of the living patterns of Japanese in other parts of the world. These patterns are also bound to be similar for any ethnic minority community.

(Note)

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