

Supporting Roles in Food Culture III

The History of the *Manaita*

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In ancient Japan, meat and fish were called *mana*, which means “real food”. *Mana* was prepared and placed on a board as an offering at an altar. The board on which the *mana* was placed was known as a *manaita*. The modern *manaita* (cutting board) is an essential item in daily cooking, though its origin in Japan is not well known. In this issue, we will investigate the historical development of the *manaita*.

Manaita and Knives in the Middle Ages

The *manaita* used today are generally flat boards. The original *manaita*, however, were thick boards with short legs, similar in appearance to very low tables. From historical illustrations, it is thought that the oldest *manaita* bulged at the center. Chefs at the Imperial Court used low tables where they knelt in Japanese fashion to prepare food. Clearly, this position makes it quite difficult to cut thick meat and bones. In response, the centers of the tables were made to bulge so that chefs could apply more force even while kneeling. According to *Engishiki* (927), a Nara-period book of rules and regulations, the office in charge of the Emperor's meals kept sixteen varieties of *manaita* measuring 90.9 cm long, 51.5 cm wide and 24.2 cm high, with surfaces 2.4 cm thick. The chefs knelt at these *manaita*, differentiated by use according to the item being prepared. *Manaita* were differentiated by use with seven types of items, including dressed dishes, relishes, fish, vegetables and confectioneries. These *manaita* with legs were also used at the banquets of Heian-period (794–1185) aristocrats for preparing carp or pheasant.

We will refer to historical drawings through

the ages to study development of the shape of *manaita* and food preparation methods chronologically. We begin with a work from the late Heian period, which depicts Kii-no-kuni (present-day Wakayama prefecture) in the latter half of the Nara period (710–794) and includes an illustration of *manaita*. Among other scenes, the scroll portrays a hunter preparing deer meat on a large, flat-surfaced *manaita* with legs. Our next reference, the fifth scroll from the late Kamakura-period (1185–1333) *Matsuzaki Tenjin Engi* by Tayu Hogen Sonchi, an artist who specialized in Buddhist religious art, depicts a man cutting up a fish on a *manaita* and standing skewered



Matsuzaki Tenjin Engi 5th scroll by Tayu Hogen Sonchi, who specialized in Buddhist religious art. Property of the National Diet Library.

pieces of the fish along the edge of a sunken hearth. The *manaita* in this illustration has a bulging surface. Another scroll from the late Kamakura period portrays servants preparing food in a kitchen. One servant is cutting up a lotus root on a flat-surfaced *manaita* believed to be used exclusively for preparing vegetables. Finally, a 1351 scroll shows servants and disciples preparing for a banquet in a kitchen at Honganji Temple. One servant is cutting carp on an upswept, short-legged, square *manaita* in what appears to be a ritualized manner.

The Emergence of Knife Masters and Rituals

In the samurai society of the early middle ages (1160s to 1568 in Japan), the act of preparing poultry and meat itself became ritualized. During the Muromachi period (1394–1573), knife masters were established and preparation methods previously limited to cutting were expanded. The origins of ritualized food preparation by knife masters are thought to lie in a text on the subject from 1489. Previously, the concept of food preparation applied only to the cutting of ingredients, but with the introduction of this text, was expanded to include styles of presentation performed in ritualized manners. This led to the establishment of various schools that differed not only in manner and practice, but in the sizes of *manaita* used as well. For example, one school used *manaita* roughly 83.3 cm long, while the *manaita* used by another school were about 101.5 cm long. These knife rituals have been preserved to this day and are used on special occasions.

An illustration from 16th century Muromachi-

Please see this picture in a

Kawaguchi *Yuri-zu Byobu* is a ten-panel folding screen that depicts a bustling entertainment district at the estuary of the Kizu River shipping, as well as human events, customs and food culture. The work has been designated a cultural asset of Osaka city.

Momoyama period (1336–1573) portrays preparations for a banquet for high-ranking samurai. Three *manaita* are shown. The first shows a person plucking a bird on a flat *manaita* set up on a porch. Inside, one knife master is preparing a bird and another a fish. Both use *manaita* with legs. Beside the knife master preparing the fish is a plate on which the cleaned and prepared fish is placed. From this illustration, it is assumed that *manaita* were differentiated according to the foods—meats, fish, vegetables, etc.—prepared on them. An early 17th century work illustrates a shrine festival held in 1604. Preparations for a ritual or banquet are performed in a curtained area outdoors, and a knife master is preparing a carp on a four-legged *manaita*. This is an example of an outdoor knife ritual.

book form of "Food Culture"

The room at right has two *manaita* with legs. On one, a large fish is being prepared while some sort of root vegetable is prepared on the other. At far right on the little dock in front of the room at right, a round *manaita*-like object, similar to a round table or tree stump still seen in the kitchens of Chinese restaurants, is being used by two men to prepare a bloody bird. In the room at left, one man is preparing a paste by supporting a mortar with his foot, another is carrying a tray with cubes of some white food, a woman is carrying a water bucket, and still another man, naked to the waist, is grilling fish. This work vividly illustrates the abundance of foods available in Osaka during the early Edo period and the vitality of the culture of the common people.

in Osaka. It is a valuable work that conveys the vitality of the Edo period, portraying industries such as construction, fishing and Property of the Osaka Museum of History.

Kawaguchi Yuri-zu Byobu is a valuable mid-17th century ten-panel folding screen depicting a bustling entertainment district at the estuary of the Kizu River in Osaka. It shows various *manaita* uses and cooking methods. The entire screen shows nine scenes in which *manaita* are used, each of which portrays knife masters preparing foods for a formal banquet. The section included here illustrates food preparation in two rooms. At right, cooking staff are busy preparing foods to be served in the adjoining banquet room. As none of them are wearing samurai attire, they are certainly ordinary knife masters. The knife master in the room at left is using chopsticks and a knife to prepare a carp on a large, bulging, rectangular *manaita* with legs. As etiquette dictates, the head of the carp is cut off and stood in the corner of the *manaita*.

Manaita and the Culture of Edo Commoners

With the start of the Edo period, the town of Edo began to deviate from the more traditional Kyoto culture. Public works ordered by Tokugawa Ieyasu in 1610 caused many civil engineers, carpenters, and other craftsmen to descend upon Edo, contributing to the rise of various industries and development of the economy. In the course of Edo's transformation into a giant consumption-driven city, cooking and other aspects of food culture prospered greatly. This point is illustrated by *Ryori Monogatari* (1643), thought to be Japan's first cookbook. This book stated that cooking cannot be judged by the use of a knife, negating the need for the methods of knife rituals and knife masters established during the Muromachi period.



Onna Shorei Ayanishiki (1755), reprinted from *Manaita* by Shinichi Ishimura

Although female knife masters were previously unheard of, *Onna Shorei Ayanishiki* (1755) and *Onna Kotobuki Horaidai* (1819) seem to instruct women on the use of knives and long cooking chopsticks. The time soon came when many cookbooks targeting women were being published.

So far, the illustrations introduced here have focused on the shape and dimensions of *manaita*.



Shiki no Yukikai (1798) by Kitao Kosuisai. Property of the National Diet Library

Let's switch our focus to the utilization of *manaita* by Edo people in their daily lives and work. *Tokaido Saishoku-zuri Gojusan-tsugi Ishibe* (early 19th century) portrays a woman preparing vegetables at the Ishibe Inn near Lake Biwa. The *manaita* in this work has broad



Tsukemono Hayashinan (1836), reprinted from *Manaita* by Shinichi Ishimura

legs and is placed on top of a barrel, most likely to raise it to a more convenient height. *Shiki no Yukikai* (1789), by Santo Kyoden, is an illustration of a peddler selling the season's first skipjack tuna. A small and thin *manaita* is balanced over one of his tubs, probably to make his navigation of narrow backstreets easier. A 1799 work illustrates the fishermen of a fishing village in Tosa (present-day Kochi prefecture) going out to prepare skipjack tuna. They perform their work on legless *manaita* laid across tubs. Finally, an 1833 work by Okura Nagatsune and an 1836 work said to be by the owner of a pickle shop depict the daily lives of ordinary people through sketches of them using small *manaita* with broad legs. The *manaita* illustrated are significantly smaller than those used by knife masters.

Manaita of the New Age

Under the banner, "Leave Asia behind; look towards Europe," the Meiji government promoted westernization and the spread of western objects such



Tokaido Saishoku-zuri Gojusan-tsugi of Sumida Ward, Tokyo.

as tables and chairs. However, until the latter half of the Meiji era (1868–1912), the majority of people continued to use *manaita* while kneeling, in Japanese fashion, on the floor. Even so, this new age saw a so-called “kitchen revolution” that reduced the burden of household chores for women, thoroughly spread the concept of hygiene, and introduced a shift in the way cooking was learned—no longer daughters learning from their mothers, but rather from newly emerging cooking schools. This kitchen revolution was further expanded during the Taisho (1912–1926) and Showa (1926–1989) eras.

As discussed in "The Origins and Transition of O-zen" article in Food Culture No. 17, the spread of tables and chairs in ordinary houses caused the transition in the lives of Japanese people from sitting to standing. A similar transition

can be seen with *manaita*. Although traditional *manaita* were made of thick wood and had legs, beginning around 1965 their legs were removed, they became thinner, and wood was replaced with plastic.

The Evolution of *Manaita*

Look carefully in the kitchen utensils section of a store and you will find the latest type of *manaita*, which can be bent so that cut food is easily transferred to a pot or pan. You will also likely find small, palette-shaped *manaita* with a thumb hole that allows for a firm grip when transferring food directly to a pot or pan. These types of *manaita* have become popular with young housewives and bachelors.

In conclusion, *manaita* and knives are prerequisites for preparing the ingredients for



Ishibe by Katsushika Hokusai. Property



Shiki Ryori by Tajjiro Ishii portrays a kitchen in which the women kneel as they work. Property of the National Diet Library.



Photograph published in the August 7, 1929 issue of *Asahi Graph* shows a kitchen in which the woman stands as she works. Property of the National Diet Library.

any dish. A cutting board (*manaita*) is always necessary when a knife is used. However, *manaita* do not stand alone in the context of food preparation. They always exist in collaboration with knives, both taking important supporting roles in our dietary lives. Though *manaita* are just tools, they are essential.

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