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Consuming Culture: Effects of Globalization in American Japanese Restaurants

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Consuming Culture:
Effects of Globalization in American Japanese Restaurants

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2016

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Introduction

Americans have a love affair with restaurants. More specifically, ethnic restaurants. That is, restaurants serving cuisine that has roots in another culture. Looking at the span of American history, this would encompass nearly every food. However, Americans typically consider only "foreign" foods to be ethnic cuisine. That is, foods that lie outside the purview of America's earliest European settlers. These foods, although foreign to the lands of North America when they arrived, are what the history books encoded as true American cuisine. If we fast forward a few hundred years, America is a land blended from many different ethnic backgrounds and the modern restaurant scene reflects that.

How did we get to where we are today? Ethnic restaurants are a prime site of globalization. Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai lays out a theory for how today's global cultural economy operates in an overlapping, disjunctive manner.¹ He describes a series of "scapes" that work with and against each other to create flows that negotiate the relationship between cultural homogenization and heterogeneity that lead to a modern, globalized world. Ethnoscapes are constituted by people who move around the world and, in doing so, create a constantly shifting sphere of influence.² Ethnic restaurants often crop up to feed immigrant communities comprised of these moving people groups. Yet, the food served at these restaurants is also shaped by the local conditions of where in the world it is served, thus showing how indigeneity is always at work. This is not merely a modern phenomenon, but it is now able to happen much more quickly than it ever has in the rest of human history due to advances in technology and communication.

Technoscapes and mediascapes work together to enable this process. Technoscapes comprise the global system of both mechanical and informational technologies that cross vast

¹ Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," *Theory, Culture, and Society* 7, no. 2 (1990): 296.

² Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference," 297.

spaces at increasingly high speeds. These technologies, in turn, connect global economies in complex, multifaceted ways, referred to as finanscapes.³ In other words, technology has connected every country in the world to some degree and their economies have used these connections to affect each other's growth and development. Global capital now quickly travels through these finanscapes due to the development of technoscapes.

Mediascapes, in turn, affect ethnoscapen, technoscapes, and finanscapes. Mediascapes provide large, complex collections of images and narratives that travel throughout the world.⁴ Through this, commodities, politics, and news mix and blur the lines between fiction and reality. Audiences around the globe come in contact with media in some form and this media, in turn, shapes their perceptions of the people and places in the rest of the world.

Understanding how various scapes of globalization overlap and interact allows consumers of different cultures to better understand how their actions may affect people in other parts of the world. Thus, customers at ethnic restaurants in America play a small role in globalization every day. Ethnic restaurants often arise due to immigrant communities who share a certain food culture. These groups maintain a cultural connection to their country of origin which is often reinforced through various methods of communication and transportation. These technologies also allow for trade and other forms of material exchange to take place. In the case of ethnic restaurants, trade goods take the form of food items and other cooking materials and techniques. However, it is not just material items that get passed between countries and cultures. The various scapes of globalization also propagate ideas about cultures and how they should be perceived. So, although Appadurai's technical terms may not be explicitly used, the concepts they embody clearly affect how the globalizing world interacts in various ways.

³ Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference," 298.

⁴ Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference," 299.

When cultures meet and mix, it can result in something entirely unique to both. This is often the case with ethnic restaurants. The cuisine developed in the country of origin changes and evolves when it is imported into a new culture. Yet, people's experiences in ethnic restaurants often colors how the entire native culture is perceived. Globalization shapes these restaurant experiences and the perceptions that result from that, in turn, shape how those two cultures interact in other ways. Understanding the history of how people, culture, and food are globalized informs how people perceive and consume that culture today.

This paper explores this phenomenon through a study of Japanese restaurants in the United States. Japanese restaurants are consistently ranked as the fourth most popular ethnic restaurant cuisine in America.⁵ What makes this particular ethnic cuisine unique is its relative high status and how its foreignness is framed as a positive trait. Historically, American restaurants have reserved these privileges for French cuisine. However, Chapter 1 explains how Japanese food came to occupy this privileged position among ethnic restaurants in America. Chapter 2 then shifts the focus back on Japan and provides case studies of two of the most popular Japanese restaurant foods in order to analyze how the history of these foods informs how consumers, both Japanese and American, interact with them today. Chapter 3 explores how the effects of consumer perceptions affect how these Japanese foods are understood and consumed in the context of American restaurants. Chapter 4 then frames environmental and cultural implications of these globalized networks and perceptions. Overall, the study of Japanese restaurant cuisine will provide a greater understanding of how cultures mix through sharing food and, instead of falling victim to either cultural homogenization or heterogeneity, show how globalization can create something entirely new.

⁵ Dora Mekouar, "Top 10 Most Popular Ethnic Cuisines in US," *Voice of America*, May 18, 2015.

Chapter 1: History

The history of the United States is a history of immigration and culture mixing. It is commonly referred to as the "Great Melting Pot." So, in a sense, the history of the United States is a history of globalization. People moved there from all over the world at various points in history, both willingly and forced. These people all brought different cultures and ideas about food. Some became homogenized into one American culture and some maintained distinct connections to a home culture somewhere in the world. As transportation and communication technologies improved, the perceptions about these people, cultures, and food grew ever more complex. The history of the development of so-called ethnic restaurants reflects these changing perceptions and connections between cultures and shows how different ethnic cuisines, particularly Japanese cuisine, have changed due to these forces.

Early American history is primarily the story of Europeans and Native Americans. Due to the fact that Europeans looked down upon Native Americans as a savage Other, they never considered their traditional dishes to be part of the dominant culture.⁶ However, the colonists did adopt corn, a Native American staple, into their diet.⁷ This food, called "Indian corn" by early colonists, overcame its "savage" origins and was instead prized for its utility in nourishing English bodies. The earliest colonists did eat Native American foods like corn to survive, but only because the more familiar English foods were not available in the New World. The seeds the settlers brought from England such as wheat, rye, oats, and barley, did not grow as well in the parts of the continent that they settled. The colony quickly learned that the unfamiliar crop called maize was a much better option for farming in their new environment.

⁶ Jennifer Jensen Wallach, *How America Eats*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013), 15.

⁷ Terry L. Sargent, "The Importance of One Simple Plant," *Learn NC: UNC-Chapel Hill School of Education*, reprinted from *Tar Heel Junior Historian* 38, no. 1 (Spring 1984): 11.

The Puritans disavowed elaborate foods.⁸ They believed that simplicity was key and were very wary of not gorging themselves on ostentatious foods. In this way, the simple one pot meals the colonists prepared were actually very similar to the food eaten by the Native Americans.⁹ However, the Puritans also believed there was a direct connection between the food they ate and the spiritual character they exhibited. Thus, eating unfamiliar "savage" food could have potentially disastrous consequences on the soul.¹⁰

Restaurants in the United States, defined as places which only served meals, came into being in the late eighteenth century.¹¹ Before this, people would eat meals out of the home in pubs, taverns, inns, or from sellers on the street. Restaurants elevated the experience of dining out and made it an end unto itself. Americans did not use the word "restaurant" widely until the nineteenth century, when such establishments were concentrated only in the country's largest population centers. As America expanded after the mid-nineteenth century, so did its restaurants. Growing suburban areas and a growing middle class who could afford restaurant dining helped bolster this spread. The first fine dining restaurant in the country was Delmonico's, opened in 1833 in New York City.¹² By 1876, New York had up to six thousand such establishments. Thousands of such establishments opened across the country, as well. The post-Civil War era brought about an explosion of new wealth and conspicuous consumption.¹³ The presence of the old elites and the nouveau riche made fine dining restaurants a prime location for status competition and showing off wealth. This restaurant cuisine was nearly all French, featuring elegant multiple course meals consisting of such things as champagne and cr me brulee. Indeed,

⁸ Wallach, *How America Eats*, 26.

⁹ Wallach, *How America Eats*, 28.

¹⁰ Wallach, *How America Eats*, 1.

¹¹ "Early Restaurants in America," *UNLV University Libraries*, accessed December 6, 2015.

¹² Krishnendu Ray, "Ethnic Succession and the New American Restaurant Cuisine," in *The Restaurants Book: Ethnographies of Where We Eat*, ed. David Beriss and David Sutton (Oxford: Berg, 2007), 98.

¹³ Ray, "Ethnic Succession," 99.

fine restaurant cuisine was nearly all English before the 1870s and nearly all French after. It could be seen as the first ethnic restaurant cuisine to take America by storm.

The restaurant paradigm shifted once again in the period between WWII and the Vietnam War.¹⁴ The names of the fine dining restaurants were still mostly French in nature but a more rustic home-cooked style was replacing the expensive, elegant food previously served. Knowing the prevalence of rustic Italian food in American cuisine today, one might think that this period saw the birth of Italian food's popularity. However, Italian people were still predominantly poor and derided during this time, and thus so was their food. Today, however, Americans have embraced Italian food to such a degree that foods such as spaghetti and pizza are thought of as practically American.

How did this happen? It all comes down to status, specifically economic and immigration status. At the end of the twentieth century, the demand for new restaurant cuisine was growing rapidly.¹⁵ However, the number of high status French chefs to work in haute cuisine restaurants was dwindling. The French economy had since recovered from WWII and there was less emigration. Thus, upscale chefs began training people of different ethnic backgrounds to help fill this void. The Italians took great advantage of this opportunity. They were still European and looked no different than a French chef, yet there were many more Italians in America to fill these positions. Many American fine dining restaurant goers of the twentieth century maintained a preference for French haute cuisine but by the end of the century Italian people owned and operated many of those French restaurants.

¹⁴ Ray, "Ethnic Succession," 99-100.

¹⁵ Ray, "Ethnic Succession," 110-111.

Historical factors helped Italians in other ways, as well. Italy became a hotspot for haute couture and thus Americans viewed Italian people more favorably.¹⁶ Additionally, Italian food gained status due to its proximity to southern France, which was a popular food destination. It combined the ever-popular French cuisine with the newly popular food trend towards rusticity. The growing number of Italians in the American restaurant business, the growing status of Italians due to fashion, and the proximity of Italy to the south of France all contributed to Italian food being "rediscovered" and growing wildly in popularity.

Today, Italian food is consistently in the top three most popular ethnic restaurant foods in the United States.¹⁷ The others are Chinese and Mexican, with Japanese coming in fourth. If Italian food had such difficulty overcoming an ethnic bias, how did these non-European, non-white foods become so popular?

One very important historical moment in the rise of these ethnic foods was the Civil Rights Movement.¹⁸ Not only did the movement result in more rights for African Americans, it also led to more rights for immigrants.¹⁹ The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, also known as the Hart-Cellar Act, ended immigration bans that excluded Latin Americans, Asians, and Africans from immigrating to the United States.²⁰ It abolished the national origins quota system and replaced it with a preference system focusing on immigrants' skills and family relationships with citizens or residents of the U.S.²¹ This Act opened the door for many Asian and Latino migrants to immigrate to the United States and bring their food influence with them.

The Civil Rights Movement as a whole also opened the door to the possibility, and even

¹⁶ Ray, "Ethnic Succession," 110.

¹⁷ Mekouar, "Top 10 Most Popular Ethnic Cuisines in US."

¹⁸ Ray, "Ethnic Succession," 110.

¹⁹ Scot Nakagawa, "Three Things Asian Americans Owe to the Civil Rights Movement," *Race Files*, July 31, 2013.

²⁰ "Immigration and Nationality Act," *U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services: Department of Homeland Security*, accessed February 21, 2016.

²¹ "1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, a.k.a. the Hart-Cellar Act (An Act to amend the Immigration and Nationality Act, and for other purposes)," *US Immigration Legislation Online*, accessed February 21, 2016.

pleasures of, cultural miscegenation. The idea of mixing white and nonwhite cultural elements became more acceptable and food was no exception. The days of America celebrating purely European restaurant cuisine were numbered.

In recent years, American interest in Japanese food and culinary traditions has grown remarkably.²² However, Japan, as a country and a culture, is still less well known to American consumers than culinary powerhouses France or Italy. Japanese food is still less mainstream and less prevalent than the top three restaurant foods of Italian, Chinese, and Mexican. Although, there have also been significantly fewer Japanese immigrants in American history. The first consumers of a cuisine are typically immigrant communities from that cuisine's culture of origin, so fewer immigrants typically results in fewer restaurants.²³ In the case of Japanese food, restaurants often appear when large Japanese owned businesses arrive.

Japanese business is prevalent in the United States and there are historically-rooted reasons for this. After the Gentlemen's Agreement of 1908, the government restricted Japanese immigrants to a certain demographic of more educated, wealthier individuals who came to the United States for business or education. Earlier waves of immigrants in the 1890s brought many agricultural workers who played a significant role, especially in California.²⁴ However, after 1908, no more lower class workers were allowed to immigrate. With these measures in place, the demographic of Japanese people in the United States began to change and Americans' perceptions of Japanese people and their culture shifted upwards along with it. So, since nearly

²² L. Pierce Carson, "Japanese Cuisine has Increasing Appeal for American Palates," *Napa Valley Register*, November 30, 2010.

²³ Denver DeRozario, "The Effect of Immigration on the Tastes & Preferences in Food of the Native-Born Consumer," *Advances in Consumer Research* 29 (2002): 242.

²⁴ Masao Suzuki, "Selective Immigration and Ethnic Economic Achievement: Japanese Americans before World War II," *Explorations in Economic History* 39, no. 3 (2002): 260-263.

the beginning of their relations, the global networks connecting Japan and the United States have been predicated on a higher status, business-based model.

It is important to acknowledge that relations have not always been good, though. The militarism of the 1940s was a particularly dark time in the history of Japanese-U.S. relations. In 1942, President Roosevelt signed an order requiring all Americans of Japanese ancestry to be relocated to concentration camps.²⁵ The fear and hostility that led to this decision did not dissipate quickly after the war ended and relations were not good for many years afterward, which impacted all aspects of Japanese culture in the United States, including the food. However, as the postwar Japanese economy was rebuilt in close conjunction with the United States, business relations began to be viewed positively once again. This trend continued until the booming Japanese economy of the 1980s became perceived as a threat to American business.²⁶ When the Japanese economy hit a downturn in the 1990s, the threat to American business was allayed and Japanese restaurants began to truly boom in popularity. As Japan has grown as a major economic and cultural power with ties to the United States, the popularity of Japanese food has risen in the U.S.²⁷ Thus, Japanese food is an interesting case study for the exploration of how ethnic cuisine in America has changed in relation to changing global connections and influences.

²⁵ "Japanese-American Internment," *U.S. History: The Independence Hall Association*, accessed April 5, 2016.

²⁶ Jim Impoco, "Life After the Bubble: How Japan Lost a Decade," *The New York Times*, October 18, 2008.

²⁷ Ray, "Ethnic Succession," 103.

Chapter 2: History of Japanese Food

Due to increasing globalization, Americans today are familiar with and frequently consume a wide variety of easily accessible Japanese foods, such as tofu and edamame. However, the most popular Japanese restaurant food in the U.S. is still probably sushi. Yet, from a Japanese perspective, sushi does not necessarily hold the same place that it does in the American restaurant scene. Although sushi restaurants in Japan are still undoubtedly popular, ramen shops also enjoy a huge popularity. Understanding the history of these two foods in particular helps us to better understand their rise to popularity in Japan, how they came to be eaten in America, and why there may be differences in how they are perceived and consumed globally.

Ramen

To understand the rise of ramen in Japan is to understand the history of Japanese food's evolution. There is a persistent myth about Japanese cuisine that it is a homogenous, continuous food culture that has always existed.²⁸ This is far from the truth. Like any cuisine, it has gone through an evolution over the long history of the culture. Tracking the history of ramen in Japan makes this progression clear.

Today, ramen is a central food in Japan. In fact, there are over 80,000 restaurants in Japan serving ramen, with almost half being specialty ramen shops.²⁹ There is also a large pop cultural following of ramen in the country. It makes its appearance in comedy shows, comic books, music, museums, theme parks, and entertainment.³⁰ There are even self-proclaimed ramen fanatics. While there are of course other restaurants in Japan, ramen shops are always a standby

²⁸ Barak Kushner, *Slurp! A Social and Culinary History of Ramen: Japan's Favorite Noodle Soup* (Leiden: Global Oriental, 2012), 9.

²⁹ George Solt, *The Untold History of Ramen: How Political Crisis in Japan Spawned a Global Food Craze* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 4.

³⁰ Kushner, *Slurp! History of Ramen*, 232-242.

for a late night snack, quick lunch, or whenever a person is hungry. While some ramen shops are filled with rules and expectations of proper etiquette, for the most part ramen is a very accessible food, which is part of its popularity.³¹

However, ramen is not historically native to Japan and some purists could question its status as a traditional Japanese food.³² Yet, when looking through the history of any national cuisine, "traditional" is difficult to define. No culture exists in a vacuum, even those supposedly closed to outsiders, and cross-cultural exchange of food and ideas has always taken place to some degree. Ramen is fully a product of this phenomenon and many consider it one of the most Japanese foods there is today, even though in many ways it diverges from the historical tastes of Japanese cuisine.³³ According to the myth of homogenous Japanese cuisine, traditional Japanese food is centered on rice, mostly vegetarian, lightly seasoned, and often fish based. Ramen, on the other hand, contains no rice, uses springy alkaline noodles developed in China, and has a rich, oily, often meat based broth.

So how did this come to be? As mentioned, all Asian food has gradually influenced the creation of more regionally specific items.³⁴ Ingredients such as noodles and broth did not arise out of only one place at one time. However, it is almost certain that they did not arise in Japan first. Since its most ancient times, Japan has struggled with famine.³⁵ It is an island with limited resources. Even more limited considering much of it is mountainous, rocky, and poor for agriculture. Thus, for much of Japan's history, its people have struggled to find enough food for survival, let alone food deemed delicious.

³¹ Kushner, *Slurp! History of Ramen*, 249.

³² Sophie Brickman, "The History of the Ramen Noodle," *The New Yorker*, May 21, 2014.

³³ Kushner, *Slurp! History of Ramen*, 6.

³⁴ Kushner, *Slurp! History of Ramen*, 21.

³⁵ Osamu Saito, "Climate and Famine in Historic Japan: A Very Long-Term Perspective," in *Demographic Responses to Economic and Environmental Crises*, eds. Satomi Kurosu, Tommy Bengtsson, Cameron Campbell (Tokyo: Reitaku University, 2010), 272.

Today we think of Japanese cuisine being centered around rice, but most Japanese could not afford to eat meals of rice for most of the country's history.³⁶ Yet the elites who could afford to eat meals of white rice were often less healthy than the peasants who grew it. White rice has few vitamins and nutrients and when not supplemented with other foods, its eaters can suffer from beriberi, a disease resulting from lack of thiamine which causes muscle weakness, enlarged heart, and swelling of the legs.³⁷ If not treated, it is often deadly. The introduction of a more varied diet from abroad was literally a lifesaver for rich Japanese people.

Ancient China, in stark contrast with Japan, was dedicated to delicious food.³⁸ China had access to a wide variety of food and food technologies, both from within its own borders and from central Asia. Many sources believe China was the birthplace of noodles as we know them today, citing evidence of 4000 year old noodles found in an archaeological dig.³⁹ In the early Kamakura period, Buddhist monks and scholars from China brought this noodle making technology, including the ability to grind grain into flour, to Japan.⁴⁰ After the introduction of such technology, temples became the primary transmission grounds for spreading new foods, especially noodles.⁴¹ In the medieval period, a large population of Chinese people immigrated to Japan, fleeing the fall of the Ming dynasty.⁴² These immigrants spread farther into Japan than the monks and, in the process, brought a taste for noodles to western Japan and set the stage for ramen's eventual rise to popularity.

³⁶ Naomichi Ishige, *History of Japanese Food* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 18.

³⁷ "Beriberi," *MedlinePlus*, U.S. National Library of Medicine, accessed January 14, 2016.

³⁸ Kushner, *Slurp! History of Ramen*, 17.

³⁹ Bin Xiao Fu, "Asian noodles: History, classification, raw materials, and processing," *Food Research International* 41, no. 9 (2008): 889.

⁴⁰ Kushner, *Slurp! History of Ramen*, 37.

⁴¹ Ishige, *History of Japanese Food*, 76.

⁴² Kushner, *Slurp! History of Ramen*, 45.

While modern Japan touts a unified cuisine based on rice, simplicity, and natural flavors, historical Japan had no real consensus on what constituted Japanese taste.⁴³ There were regional and class-based allegiances to particular ideas of Japanese cuisine, but Japan was not a unified nation in many ways. Historically, Japan was never far removed from famine and the lower classes had to continually scrounge for what food they could.⁴⁴ Taste and sophistication were still far-off luxuries for most Japanese. After the Chinese introduced noodles, the upper classes were still the primary consumers. Additionally, the Japanese government tried to confine different cultures and their potentially dangerous foreign ideas to specific cities in Japan.⁴⁵ This made widespread transmission of different food cultures difficult.

Although the Japanese government largely feared foreign ideas, there was still a fair amount of interaction with the outside world. Portuguese ships landed in Japanese harbors in 1543.⁴⁶ It was a fortuitous time for foreigners, as Japan was in the midst of a war and eagerly set up trade relations with the Portuguese who possessed firearms. However, the Portuguese merchant ships also carried Christian missionaries who began to spread their religion with some success. The final unifier of Japan during this war-torn time managed to establish enduring peace but in doing so banned Christianity in 1587 and secluded his country to the outside world to ensure stability. However, a Dutch ship arrived in 1600 and the captain managed to win the confidence of the shogun, setting up trade relations that would last nearly 250 years. Additionally, Americans sailed into Japanese waters in the 1853 demanding Japan open up trade networks, which it eventually did. So, although Japan has technically been secluded from outside contact, it has never fully shielded itself from foreign influence. All of these contacts, however

⁴³ Eric Rath, *Food and Fantasy in Early Modern Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 13.

⁴⁴ Kushner, *Slurp! History of Ramen*, 44.

⁴⁵ Kushner, *Slurp! History of Ramen*, 53.

⁴⁶ Dieter Wanczura, "The Dutch in Nagasaki," *Artelino Japanese Prints*, last updated April 2013.

strictly controlled by the Japanese government, still managed to subtly influence Japanese culture, including food, from a very early time.

This era of seclusion, however permeable, fully ended with the Meiji Restoration in 1868 which brought about the end of the shogun's rule and restoration of the emperor to power.⁴⁷ This revolution resulted in significant political, economic, and social change which triggered rapid modernization and Westernization of the country. This revolution also caused a significant rethinking of food. When Japan decided to formally open its borders to the outside world, it created treaty ports that concentrated foreign influence.⁴⁸ These treaty ports had many Chinese restaurants and opened the door for Chinese food to really spread across the island in a significant way for the first time.

However, Japan was still largely ignorant of the conditions in the rest of the world and this showed clearly when it began making contact with other foreign powers.⁴⁹ Banquets were a popular way of impressing important international guests but Japan's culinary semi-isolation put them at a disadvantage. Japanese tastes did not align with the rest of the world. As Japan became aware of its low international status, officials wanted to raise the island's reputation and embracing Western-style dining was an integral part of this effort.⁵⁰ This movement promoted meat eating, a nontraditional custom in mainly vegetarian Japan.⁵¹ Meat eating had a reputation of being dirty and associated with the lower classes who ate meat out of desperation for food. In 1872, the Meiji emperor announced that he ate meat and revolutionized the connotations of meat eating in the Japanese diet, though it was not without controversy from traditionalists. "Civilized

⁴⁷ "Meiji Restoration" *Encyclopedia Britannica*, last updated December 14, 2015.

⁴⁸ Kushner, *Slurp! History of Ramen*, 93-94.

⁴⁹ Kushner, *Slurp! History of Ramen*, 95.

⁵⁰ Rath, *Food and Fantasy in Early Modern Japan*, 13.

⁵¹ Katarzyna Cwiertka, *Modern Japanese Cuisine: Food, Power and National Identity* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 24.

eatingö took on political significance. The Japanese believed that changing their diet would make them a stronger nation and on par with the Western world.⁵² The trend toward embracing other food traditions, especially meat eating, laid the foundation for ramen's later popularity as a meat-based, Chinese noodle dish.

Yet, Japan still had a long way to go in terms of shifting away from traditional Japanese tastes. The Japanese military was anxious about the small stature of its soldiers compared to their more robust Western counterparts and believed that diet would be the way to change this.⁵³ However, instead of promoting more Western cuisine such as meat, the military put its soldiers on a traditional Japanese diet of white rice. Although many argued in favor of a Western diet for soldiers, the stronger argument said that Japanese soldiers needed Japanese food and that meant heaps of pure white rice, the most coveted Japanese food there was. Unfortunately, this rice heavy diet was nutritionally poor and left large proportions of the military sick with beriberi and unable to perform at any given time. The rice debate had less to do with nutrition and everything to do with defining national cuisine and political identity.⁵⁴

Unlike the military, the maintenance of traditional diets did not concern the leaders of the Meiji Restoration. They were not rich political elites who had grown up with preconceived ideas of what it meant to be Japanese. They were from high social status but monetarily poor backgrounds and the prestige of the food they ate did not concern them. This is part of why they urged the purging of traditional institutions and making way for radical social change.⁵⁵ Attitudes to food and dining, as well as what it meant to be Japanese, were changing in important ways.⁵⁶

⁵² Cwierka, *Modern Japanese Cuisine*, 33.

⁵³ Kushner, *Slurp! History of Ramen*, 108-109.

⁵⁴ Cwierka, *Modern Japanese Cuisine*, 34.

⁵⁵ Kushner, *Slurp! History of Ramen*, 114.

⁵⁶ Kushner, *Slurp! History of Ramen*, 115.

The presence of foreign tastes and pursuit of modernization and "civilization" laid the stage for ramen to finally make its debut.

Additionally, Japan began gaining stature as a colonial power, conquering both Taiwan and Korea.⁵⁷ As the country conquered other lands, it absorbed elements of their cultures and new tastes soon gained favor in Japan's cuisine. Since Japan was gaining power on an international stage, defining national cuisine became important. Japan's cuisine had never been particularly unified, except perhaps for the desire for white rice. However, by the end of the nineteenth century, Japan needed a cuisine that defined its nationhood, could hold up diplomatically, and differentiate it from China and the rest of East Asia.⁵⁸ Yet this was no easy task, considering Japan had never had a very rich food culture of its own and had begun embracing foreign culinary influences from its colonies and beyond.

While Japan was trying to define itself nationally through a unified cuisine, it was also growing more of an international population. One of the largest foreign groups living in Japan was Chinese students.⁵⁹ These students vehemently despised Japanese food and longed for some familiar tastes of home. This group formed a new class of lower and middle class consumers who were eager to dine at restaurants serving anything other than traditional Japanese food. The increase of Chinese exchange students also coincided with Japan's industrialization, which created another market for late-night eaters in search of cheap, filling food—factory workers and a new urban working class.⁶⁰ The search for a national cuisine was not something that concerned the lower classes. The Japanese never fully achieved a truly national cuisine until after World

⁵⁷ Kushner, *Slurp! History of Ramen*, 123.

⁵⁸ Kushner, *Slurp! History of Ramen*, 127.

⁵⁹ Solt, *Untold History of Ramen*, 18.

⁶⁰ Solt, *Untold History of Ramen*, 22.

War II, when modern mass media technologies began to spread the idea to a wide audience.⁶¹ For the most part, the common people just ate what they could afford and, preferably, tasted good. This was to become ramen's prime market.

In the early part of the twentieth century, Japan's trend towards modernization continued. The Japanese government wanted to make the country the most advanced in all of Asia and promoted ever more cultured living and improved lifestyles. They wanted to be on par with the West in terms of industrialization and "civilization," as they saw it.⁶² To accomplish this, they encouraged the people of Japan to find ways to save time and improve convenience in their everyday lives. In 1908, a Japanese company began producing MSG on an industrial scale and allowed cooks to add flavors that would have taken hours to create in a traditional way.⁶³ MSG helped create demand for a more savory taste, otherwise known as umami, which later helped the birth of ramen. Some Japanese people even experimented with using bread as a partial replacement for time consuming rice, which shows just how far Japan had come in its effort to emulate the West instead of fearing foreign influences.⁶⁴ In general, the public had a widespread desire for the new and exotic, especially products that saved time and contributed to their perception of modern living. However, Japan's sense of superiority in its modern, advanced state was more myth than reality for most people. By 1921, only 10% of the population were middle class.⁶⁵

Among this atmosphere of new food technologies, acceptance and desire for non-traditional Japanese tastes, growing Chinese presence, and gap between the extremely wealthy

⁶¹ Kushner, *Slurp! History of Ramen*, 140.

⁶² Akira Iriye, *Japan & The Wider World: From the Mid-Nineteenth Century to the Present* (London: Longman, 1997), 4.

⁶³ Natasha Geiling, "It's the Umami, Stupid. Why the Truth About MSG is So Easy to Swallow," *Smithsonian*, November 8, 2013.

⁶⁴ Kushner, *Slurp! History of Ramen*, 152.

⁶⁵ Kushner, *Slurp! History of Ramen*, 155.

and the laboring masses, ramen finally emerged. It was not quite the popular, pervasive food found in Japan today, but it did gain a moderate popularity right away.⁶⁶ Ramen stalls offered the dish all over the country, not just select big cities as much of the new exotic food was. People considered ramen neither elite nor common food and it offered a cheap, filling meal that was an acceptable alternative to rice. In short, it had a lot to offer the people of Japan.

There are several establishments that claim to have served the first ramen, but it is difficult to determine the true origin as the soup seemed to appear all over the country around 1910.⁶⁷ One prominent theory says the Takeya Cafeteria in Sapporo served the first ramen in 1911.⁶⁸ Due to the many Chinese students from the nearby Hokkaido University, the proprietor began serving a limited amount of Chinese food and hired a Chinese cook named Wang Wencai. Wang called his most popular dish *Shina soba*, or Chinese noodles. The noodles he used were springy, unlike the soba and udon noodles familiar to the Japanese, because he used the Chinese method of adding an alkaline base to the dough. He mixed these noodles with a meaty broth and they were an instant hit. Ramen, as it is known today, was born.

Many people began pouring into cities in the early 1900s as the Japanese economy shifted to a more industrialized and less agricultural base.⁶⁹ Accordingly with this population shift, new avenues for entertainment opened up to serve the growing cities.⁷⁰ Ramen's popularity grew in proportion to the growth of these entertainment sectors and became associated with nighttime, pleasure, and entertainment. Its price, combined with its late night availability meant that it was also a meal associated with students and the working classes, who were also in search

⁶⁶ Kushner, *Slurp! History of Ramen*, 156.

⁶⁷ Kushner, *Slurp! History of Ramen*, 158.

⁶⁸ Kushner, *Slurp! History of Ramen*, 156.

⁶⁹ Solt, *Untold History of Ramen*, 22.

⁷⁰ Kushner, *Slurp! History of Ramen*, 160-161.

of food at late hours.⁷¹ Since ramen had a reputation as a food to be enjoyed after a night out, it had a bit of a low class reputation. Ramen stalls were often located in seedy entertainment districts and the fact that people associated it with Chinese culture meant that it was a food of rebellion in some ways, due to the love/hate relationship shared by Japan and China throughout their history. Although the 1920s set the stage for a food revolution in Japan, the militarism of the 1940s interrupted everything. It wasn't until after the war that foods like ramen would once again become significant parts of the culture.

This was partially because, during the war, food was scarce and poverty was widespread for both urban and rural people.⁷² People didn't eat for pleasure anymore but once again for mere survival. During this time of crisis, attitudes about Japanese food reverted back to traditional ideas of a diet based on rice, miso, and fish as opposed to the widespread experimentations with food during the modernization movement of the 1920s.⁷³ The war bred a renewed sense of nationalism. Patriots hailed the traditional Japanese diet as the key to their future success.⁷⁴ There was national pride about Japan's superior health, though, ironically, the Japanese were not very healthy at the time. Once again, to be Japanese meant to eat meals of white rice; food was the conveyor of Japanese identity.⁷⁵ In 1941, a national nutrition magazine summarized the prevailing sense of nationalism: "Our bodies are not ours to live with as we please: we must use them in the assistance of the nation."⁷⁶ Diet was a home-front weapon to preserve order at home

⁷¹ Solt, *Untold History of Ramen*, 26.

⁷² Kushner, *Slurp! History of Ramen*, 171-172.

⁷³ Kushner, *Slurp! History of Ramen*, 185.

⁷⁴ "Japan's Quest for Power and World War II in Asia," *Asia for Educators: Columbia University*, accessed April 9, 2016.

⁷⁵ Cwiertka, *Modern Japanese Cuisine*, 116.

⁷⁶ Kushner, *Slurp! History of Ramen*, 174.

and defeat the enemy abroad.⁷⁷ Not only should soldiers fight in service of Japan, but all Japanese should use their bodies in solidarity with the country. For most, this was through food.

Yet, the country was largely starving. As it had so many times throughout history, famine returned to Japan. Rice was symbolic of Japanese identity but there simply wasn't enough of it to go around, and the government requisitioned what little there was. In 1940, the government instructed everyone to consume 20% less rice, so the public had to find substitutes.⁷⁸ Noodle dishes such as soba and ramen became more prominent, as they were foods with which most Japanese were familiar and were not made with rice.⁷⁹

The Japanese military was the reason there was so little rice for the public to eat and prove their Japanese identity. Nutrition experts warned military officials that a diet of primarily white rice was not healthy but they ignored this advice, along with decades of evidence, and relied on the belief that the Japanese spirit could overcome any physical demands of health.⁸⁰ They refused to consider substitute forms of nutrition and instead requisitioned as much white rice as possible, ignoring the fact that they were starving the rest of the population in the process.⁸¹ After all, the soldiers took precedence and could not risk losing their inherent Japanese-ness by not eating any white rice. However, the military plan of relying on the strength of the Japanese spirit to overcome any physical deficiencies utterly failed. Although they believed that the Japanese spirit was invincible, 60% of Japanese war casualties came from starvation due to poor planning on the part of their government.⁸²

⁷⁷ Cwierka, *Modern Japanese Cuisine*, 117.

⁷⁸ Kushner, *Slurp! History of Ramen*, 187.

⁷⁹ Kushner, *Slurp! History of Ramen*, 179.

⁸⁰ Cwierka, *Modern Japanese Cuisine*, 117.

⁸¹ Kushner, *Slurp! History of Ramen*, 174.

⁸² "Casualties," *The Pacific War Online Encyclopedia*, accessed April 9, 2016.

Food was a tool of national propaganda in Japan. The military used it to tell Allied POWs how they should conduct their lives under Japanese control, though this was also a way to cover up the fact that the Japanese government could not afford to feed their prisoners Western food because it could barely feed its own people.⁸³ By the end of the war, the focus was solely on survival.⁸⁴ The war had completely destroyed Japan's previous standard of living and people ate what they could find, nevermind the fact that the government told them that eating traditional foods was intrinsic to their national identity. It simply was not a realistic choice for most people, so they turned to alternatives such as noodle soups. Noodles became a culturally and socially acceptable substitute to rice because the dishes had been around so long and were so widely available, unlike more traditional Japanese foods. Rice may have been forcibly replaced in people's diets, but many developed a taste for the alternatives. When Japan surrendered in 1945, there was a postwar explosion of ramen shops. People were starving and the inexpensive, filling noodle soup began showing up as a way for people to make some money as well as feed those who had it.

Postwar Japan was intensely focused on food. Much like wartime Japan, the foods people ate were psychologically equated with the strength of the nation and national pride. Unfortunately, the war economically devastated Japan and people were starving at an alarming rate. The food supply was only 60% what it was prewar, yet was supposed to feed the same number of people.⁸⁵ Japan had become accustomed to plundering its occupied territories for food and supplies and had not produced its own food since 1895.⁸⁶ After the war, these resources were all gone and Japan was left in trouble. A black market for food appeared in which only the

⁸³ Kushner, *Slurp! History of Ramen*, 186.

⁸⁴ Kushner, *Slurp! History of Ramen*, 188-189.

⁸⁵ Kushner, *Slurp! History of Ramen*, 193.

⁸⁶ Solt, *Untold History of Ramen*, 45.

wealthiest citizens could afford to eat.⁸⁷ Originally, General MacArthur was adamant that the United States should not financially aid Japan in its efforts to rebuild.⁸⁸ However, after seeing the widespread starvation and the crippling results of the black market food trade, MacArthur changed his mind about supplying food. In 1948, the United States government began exporting large shipments of wheat to help rebuild Japan. Over the next several years, the US continued exporting surplus wheat to Japan. The primary stated goal of this mission was to feed the starving people of Japan but it had the secondary impact of the United States transforming the rice-based Japanese diet into a more wheat-based Western model.

There were also political ramifications. By rebuilding the Japanese economy on a Western model and providing much needed food for starving people, the U.S. furthered its own interests by working to prevent Communist sentiments from growing in Japan. Before the wheat arrived, Communist leaders were using public frustration against the corruption and ineptitude of the current Japanese authorities to build support for their party. By importing tons of wheat to the starving and frustrated country, the United States helped to quell these Communist thoughts and instead paint the U.S. as a generous benefactor.

The Japanese themselves were less enthralled with their national cuisine after surrender. Much of the imperial bravado died and people no longer believed in the innate superiority of the Japanese diet over Western and Chinese diets.⁸⁹ Repatriates returning from the Asian mainland after the war reinforced this belief.⁹⁰ They brought new tastes and opened food stalls selling cheap, filling food like ramen to students and laborers. The fact that the country now had an abundance of wheat and greater acceptance for Chinese cooking helped these stalls succeed.

⁸⁷ Cwierka, *Modern Japanese Cuisine*, 150.

⁸⁸ Solt, *Untold History of Ramen*, 45.

⁸⁹ Kushner, *Slurp! History of Ramen*, 195.

⁹⁰ Kushner, *Slurp! History of Ramen*, 202.

By the mid-1950s, Japan's economy was stable again and the labor force was busy rebuilding the country.⁹¹ Food stalls grew even more popular as people were working longer hours in offices and factories in order to save money and rebuild from the war years. Cheap, fast meals like ramen aided this effort immensely. Additionally, it was no longer practical for housewives to spend half their day cooking food for their family because, increasingly, much of the family, including the women, were out of the house with jobs or other activities.⁹²

It was into this social and economic atmosphere that instant ramen was born. In 1958, an inventor from Osaka named Ando Momofuku hit upon the formula that would make instant ramen a reality.⁹³ He was concerned that eating too much bread made from the surplus wheat flour would Westernize the Japanese lifestyle.⁹⁴ Noodles, however, had long been part of the Asian food tradition and Momofuku thought that this was a much better way for Japanese people to be eating wheat. However, bread was gaining ground in Japanese homes due to its convenience and time-saving qualities. This spurred him to develop an instant ramen product.

Since more people were pursuing employment and activities outside the home, the appearance of a fast and convenient meal was revolutionary.⁹⁵ People were no longer confined to their particular social strata, and they took advantage of more avenues for advancement such as trade and night school.⁹⁶ People were also working longer hours in offices and factories and companies were sending male employees around the country to take advantage of different economic activities. Additionally, families started living in smaller, single-family apartments with small kitchens and more single people were living by themselves. Instant ramen emerged as

⁹¹ Solt, *Untold History of Ramen*, 83.

⁹² Kushner, *Slurp! History of Ramen*, 203.

⁹³ Karen Leibowitz, "The Humble Origins of Instant Ramen: From Ending World Hunger to Space Noodles," *Gizmodo*, June 22, 2011.

⁹⁴ Solt, *Untold History of Ramen*, 95.

⁹⁵ Solt, *Untold History of Ramen*, 73.

⁹⁶ Kushner, *Slurp! History of Ramen*, 213-214.

a food for the masses that could feed the lifestyles of this new Japanese population. All they had to do was empty a packet into a bowl, add boiling water, and wait three minutes. Voila, a meal.

The product caught on immediately and helped launch the immense popularity of ramen today.⁹⁷ Something else that spurred ramen's popularity was the media, which, in the 1960s, began broadcasting the idea that people needed to find the "authentic" Japan.⁹⁸ This was used to boost tourism to Japan's outlying areas, made possible by the new bullet trains, as well as people's newfound extra wealth and leisure time. This caused a boom in ramen sales, as different regions began to develop their own ramen styles to differentiate themselves and draw more tourists.⁹⁹ Although ramen was a Chinese inspired dish, even called Chinese noodles in its early days, the public consciousness now identified it as an authentically Japanese food.

Later in the 1960s, Momofuku went to the US to market his instant ramen to Americans.¹⁰⁰ He noticed that many people were using Styrofoam cups to make their ramen, as they lacked the deep soup bowls common in Japan. Thus, Momofuku invented cup ramen, with the noodles suspended in a ready to use dish. Now, ramen was being exported as a culturally Japanese food to international markets. Instant ramen, the most common ramen consumed in international markets, is a wholly Japanese product, developed for a Japanese lifestyle at a particular moment in history. Yet statistics from the World Instant Noodle Association show that the world bought over 100 billion packages of instant ramen in 2014, and Japan doesn't even top the list.¹⁰¹

Japan has long had a special connection with its food. When that cuisine is exported across the world in the form of restaurant fare, many Japanese worry that their food is not

⁹⁷ Kushner, *Slurp! History of Ramen*, 206.

⁹⁸ Solt, *Untold History of Ramen*, 107-108.

⁹⁹ Solt, *Untold History of Ramen*, 123.

¹⁰⁰ Leibowitz, "The Humble Origins of Instant Ramen."

¹⁰¹ "Global Demand for Instant Noodles," *World Instant Noodle Association*, updated May 13, 2015.

receiving the proper respect it deserves, especially if non-Japanese are making it.¹⁰² Some Japanese leaders are concerned that their national image is being distorted by the misrepresentation of their cuisine abroad. This harkens back to Japan's long history of equating food with national identity— to eat Japanese is to be Japanese. The government argues that the reputation of Japanese food being healthy, beautiful, safe, and high quality has a direct correlation to how the country itself is perceived internationally.

Later this year, the Japanese government is planning to launch a global certification program to improve Japanese cuisine around the world.¹⁰³ The program will issue certificates of recognition to sushi chefs who travel to Japan to learn how to properly handle raw fish, present dishes, and interact with customers in the Japanese way. This certification will let consumers know if the food they are eating meets certain Japanese standards of authenticity. However, this does not mean that all creativity will be quashed. Foods, like sushi, that are based on traditional techniques will be certified, regardless of their ingredients. The overall goal is to instill basic food safety practices and an appreciation for *washoku*, a Japanese culinary philosophy concerning an approach to ingredients and preparation.

Although ramen permeates the Japanese food scene, it is not the quintessential Japanese food abroad. Instant ramen is one of the most consumed food products around the world, but many people in the US do not really consider it ethnic food. It has a reputation for being cheap and salty and primarily targeted towards college students. Ironically, this is how ramen began in Japan as well, though it blossomed into something fully ingrained into popular culture. In the United States, Japanese food means sushi.¹⁰⁴ Sushi carries an air of exotic mystique. Ramen, on

¹⁰² Kushner, *Slurp! History of Ramen*, 225.

¹⁰³ Wyatt Marshall, "Japan Is Launching a Program to Fight Back Against Bad Sushi," *Vice: Munchies*, February 3, 2016.

¹⁰⁴ Kushner, *Slurp! History of Ramen*, 248-249.

the other hand, is just another noodle dish used to feed the masses. A dish of raw fish and rice stands out as special, and can also be labeled with much higher prices than a soup. The rise of ramen, however, embodies Japan's food history, especially post-WWII.

Sushi

When Americans think Japanese food, they typically think sushi. Sushi officially arrived in the U.S. in the 1960s with the opening of a sushi bar in Kawafuku Restaurant in Los Angeles, but the concept existed in the country decades before that.¹⁰⁵ For example, a 1905 newspaper clip from the *Bismarck Tribune* details a Japanese themed party hosted by women of the town in which the menu featured sushi.¹⁰⁶ Since Commodore Perry officially ended Japan's policy of isolation in 1853, American diplomats, artists, and missionaries traveled to the country and sent back many reports of what they experienced during their travels.¹⁰⁷ As the newspaper article shows, Americans were at least familiar with Japanese food for a long time, even if it was not widely available or eaten until later.

Of course, sushi has a much longer history. The earliest form of sushi originated in northern Southeast Asia to fulfill a need to preserve fish which was an important source of protein.¹⁰⁸ This method of sushi making spread to China but was wiped out by Mongolian invaders in the thirteenth century. However, it stayed around long enough to be transmitted to Japan along with other food traditions. The earliest written records of sushi in Japan appear around the eighth century. The method involved pressing fish between layers of rice and salt with a heavy stone for a few weeks then using a lighter cover until the fish was considered ready

¹⁰⁵ Leah Bhabha, "The History of Sushi in the U.S.," *Food 52*, November 29, 2015.

¹⁰⁶ "An Interesting Entertainment Given to the Members of the Monday Club at the Residence of Mrs. M.H. Jewell," *Bismarck Tribune*, May 11, 1905.

¹⁰⁷ H.D. Miller, "The Great Sushi Craze of 1905," *An Eccentric Culinary History*, July 31, 2015.

¹⁰⁸ Hiroko Shimbo, *The Sushi Experience* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 3.

to eat.¹⁰⁹ This preservation technique worked because the compacted rice fermented and produced lactic acid, which, along with the salt, caused a reaction that slowed bacterial growth in the fish.¹¹⁰ The whole pickling process took upwards of a year to complete.¹¹¹ By the time the process was complete, the rice was reduced to a paste and inedible. Thus, cooks discarded the rice and ate only the pickled fish.

In the subsequent centuries, sushi underwent several transformations. The Azuchi-Momoyama period (1573-1603) saw the invention of *nama nare-zushi*, a type of sushi that was fermented for a much shorter time.¹¹² Cooks found that adding more weight reduced the fermentation time by about a month.¹¹³ They also discovered that fish didn't need to fully decompose to be pickled. This also helped cut down on the not so pleasant odors caused by the fermentation process and made the fish more palatable as a result.¹¹⁴ And because the fermentation time was shorter, the rice did not completely disintegrate and was good to eat with the fish.¹¹⁵ Considering rice was still an expensive commodity, the Japanese quickly embraced the new style of sushi which did not result in wasting the highly prized staple.

In the seventeenth century, the Japanese began producing rice vinegar, which inspired an even faster sushi. Dr. Matsumoto Yoshichi discovered the benefits of adding vinegar to sushi rice.¹¹⁶ He found that the vinegar added a pleasing tartness and also significantly reduced the necessary waiting time before sushi could be eaten. Rice vinegar and sake replaced lactic acid as

¹⁰⁹ Cindy Hsin-I Feng, "The Tale of Sushi: History and Regulations," *Comprehensive Reviews in Food Science and Food Safety* 11: 205.

¹¹⁰ Tori Avey, "Discover the History of Sushi," *PBS: The History Kitchen*, September 5, 2012.

¹¹¹ Shimbo, *The Sushi Experience*, 3.

¹¹² Feng, "The Tale of Sushi: History and Regulations," 206.

¹¹³ Avey, "Discover the History of Sushi."

¹¹⁴ Feng, "The Tale of Sushi: History and Regulations," 206.

¹¹⁵ Shimbo, *The Sushi Experience*, 3.

¹¹⁶ Feng, "The Tale of Sushi: History and Regulations," 206.

the preserving agent and streamlined the process of sushi making even more.¹¹⁷ By the nineteenth century, this new form of sushi, *haya-zushi*, had largely replaced the fermented rice method.

In 1606, Tokugawa Ieyasu, Japan's military leader, moved the capital of Japan from Kyoto to Edo, which later became known as Tokyo.¹¹⁸ Edo underwent a rapid transformation into a hub of Japanese nightlife with a booming population and rising mercantilism. Growing numbers of people in Edo, both workers and travelers, wanted a fast and tasty food.¹¹⁹ By the mid-1700s, Edo sushi makers developed a new fermentation process that again reduced the preparation time for sushi.¹²⁰ This allowed chefs to sell much more sushi to a rapidly growing and thriving Edo populace. The new process involved placing a layer of cooked rice seasoned with rice vinegar alongside a piece of fish, then compressing all the layers in a small wooden box for two hours, then slicing the loaf into pieces to serve. A key component of the new process was the use of vinegar for fermentation. This type of sushi became known as *oshi-zushi* (pressed sushi) or *hako-zushi* (boxed sushi).¹²¹ Although it reduced the length of time before sushi could be eaten, it was still not quite the sushi we know and love today.

It wasn't until the 1820s that *nigiri-zushi* arrived on the scene. A man named Hanaya Yohei of Edo first introduced the recipe for sushi that we would recognize today: a slice of fish atop sushi rice. He also began the tradition of serving sushi as a snack food out of portable sushi stalls. He set up his first stall near one of the few bridges that crossed the river, ensuring a constant heavy flow of customers.¹²² His location near the water also ensured that he could

¹¹⁷ Shimbo, *The Sushi Experience*, 4.

¹¹⁸ Avey, "Discover the History of Sushi."

¹¹⁹ Shimbo, *The Sushi Experience*, 4.

¹²⁰ Avey, "Discover the History of Sushi."

¹²¹ Shimbo, *The Sushi Experience*, 4.

¹²² Avey, "Discover the History of Sushi."

access fresh fish, so there was no need to ferment or preserve it in any way. In addition to the fresh fish, he took advantage of a new preparation process for the rice, which involved adding rice vinegar and salt to freshly cooked rice and letting it sit for only a few minutes with no fermentation or pressing needed. He then hand pressed his sushi, adding a thin slice of fish to the top of a small ball of rice. This "fast food" sushi could be made in minutes, as opposed to hours or days.

Yohei's version of sushi was wildly popular and became the new standard of sushi preparation in Japan. However, at this time, *nigiri-zushi* was always topped with cooked fish. The practice of using raw fish in sushi began only after WWII with the development of high-speed transportation and modern refrigeration and freezing equipment which made the transport and storage of raw fish safe.¹²³ In 1923, land prices in Tokyo decreased dramatically after the Great Kanto earthquake struck the city.¹²⁴ This tragedy gave sushi stall vendors the opportunity to begin buying property and moving their operations indoors to permanent locations. It also forced many people to leave Tokyo and many sushi chefs opened up restaurants back in their hometowns, thus spreading the popularity of *nigiri-zushi* across Japan.¹²⁵

One thing that transformed sushi into a casually accessible, widely popular cuisine was the introduction of conveyor belt sushi, or *kaiten-zushi*.¹²⁶ In the 1950s, sushi chef Yoshiaki Shiraishi set out to revolutionize sushi dining.¹²⁷ Mr. Shiraishi was tired of seeing sushi restricted to only wealthier patrons; he wanted to open sushi dining to the masses. Inspired by the assembly line process at a beer factory he visited, Mr. Shiraishi decided to apply the concept to a sushi counter. He opened his first conveyor belt sushi shop, Genroku Sushi, in 1958. The concept

¹²³ Shimbo, *The Sushi Experience*, 7.

¹²⁴ Avey, "Discover the History of Sushi."

¹²⁵ Lauren Davis, "How Americans Changed the Way Japanese People Ate Sushi," *io9*, January 30, 2015.

¹²⁶ Feng, "The Tale of Sushi: History and Regulations," 206.

¹²⁷ Shimbo, *The Sushi Experience*, 10.

involved a machine producing blocks of sushi rice which then moved to a station of young workers who flipped prepared toppings onto the blocks. They would then place the sushi on color coded plates for price and send them out on a conveyor belt that circled the restaurant, allowing patrons to make their choices at leisure as the pieces scrolled past their tables.¹²⁸ New plates were added as old plates were taken and consumed. This allowed for a constant stream of freshly presented plates, as well as low prices due to drastically reduced costs on the producer side, such as hiring low skill, low wage workers. Overall, the dining experience was informal, accessible, and low cost, which had immediate appeal to the masses of average Japanese people.¹²⁹ Conveyor belt sushi boomed in popularity in the 1970s after a stall was installed at the Osaka World Exposition and again in the mid-1980s when the middle class in Japan began eating out more regularly.¹³⁰

However, sushi sales as a whole declined due to World War II. Japan faced a huge shortage of rice after the war.¹³¹ The American occupational forces set up a rice rationing system, began importing surplus wheat flour as a replacement, and decreed that all sushi restaurants must close. However, Kataro Kurata, a well-known and respected sushi chef, appealed to the American occupiers at general headquarters. He compared the centrality of sushi in Japanese culture to the prevalence of sandwiches in America. He pleaded for sushi to be allowed. The appeal reached the highest level of command and sushi restaurants were allowed to reopen on one condition. Sushi chefs could buy no rice of their own but instead could only use the rice rations brought in by their customers. Chefs would then make sushi to order using each

¹²⁸ Feng, *ōThe Tale of Sushi: History and Regulations,ö* 206.

¹²⁹ Shimbo, *The Sushi Experience*, 10.

¹³⁰ Feng, *ōThe Tale of Sushi: History and Regulations,ö* 206.

¹³¹ Shimbo, *The Sushi Experience*, 7.

customer's rice rations.¹³² One cup of rice equaled ten pieces of sushi. This system began in Tokyo but soon spread across the country. Because one cup of rice was expected to make ten pieces of sushi, the size of sushi shrank considerably. For example, a piece of nigiri in prewar Japan was three times larger than nigiri in postwar Japan. Sushi was in a slump until the Japanese economy regained its foothold and traditional Japanese culture and foods were once again celebrated. In the 1970s, the demand for premium sushi in Japan exploded thanks to advances in refrigeration technology, the ability to ship fresh fish quickly over long distances, and a thriving Japanese economy. Sushi bars opened all over the country. A growing network of suppliers and distributors also allowed sushi to expand worldwide on a grand scale.

Today, sushi is a thriving cuisine in Japan and continues to evolve.¹³³ Since the *kaiten-zushi* trend has faded in favor of sushi franchises which offer even cheaper sushi to a hungry public, sushi has diverged. To compete with the cheap sushi of corporate franchises, *kaiten* style restaurants have now upgraded their interiors and image and brought back better trained sushi chefs to serve made to order sushi at a sushi bar. Half-*kaiten*, half-traditional sushi restaurants are popular in Japan today, as well as expensive traditional restaurants and cheap fast food sushi restaurants. Sushi is also widely available prepackaged and sold in stores across the country.¹³⁴ Sushi itself has been changing as well, along with the methods by which it is sold. Foreign styles of sushi, such as California rolls, are making their way back to Japan and mingling with the more traditional styles. While prestigious, traditional style sushi chefs may scorn the appearance of modified sushi, many younger chefs are embracing the new styles to cater to customers, who seem to embrace the creative innovations.

¹³² Davis, "How Americans Changed the Way Japanese People Ate Sushi."

¹³³ Shimbo, *The Sushi Experience*, 8.

¹³⁴ Shimbo, *The Sushi Experience*, 9.

Many of these innovations and breaks with traditional sushi came from American sushi restaurants. Whenever a foreign born cuisine takes root in a new place, it is often altered to fit local taste profiles. The California roll emerged from this tradition. In the early days of sushi's emergence onto the American restaurant scene, chef Minoru Yokoshima developed a roll specifically to appeal to his Los Angeles customers' tastes.¹³⁵ He combined crab, avocado, mayonnaise and cucumber into a new dish dubbed the California roll. And thus, Americanized sushi was born.

Although there is debate as to which American restaurant first served sushi, it is generally agreed that Los Angeles was the first city in the U.S. to fully embrace sushi, owing to the comparatively large Japanese population on the West Coast.¹³⁶ In 1966, two men named Noritoshi Kanai and Harry Wolf opened Kawafuku Restaurant in L.A.'s Little Tokyo and served traditional nigiri sushi. This restaurant was particularly popular with Japanese businessmen, who helped introduce the food to their American colleagues. In 1970, another sushi bar opened in Hollywood. In Southern California, eating at sushi restaurants became a symbol of status.¹³⁷ It would be fair to say that the habits of Hollywood celebrities and their fans helped drive the popularization of sushi in America. They branded sushi a worthy, high status food and it soon spread across the United States.

Yet, unlike ramen, sushi does not align with traditional American taste profiles. It is based on fish and rice, neither of which is a staple of traditional American food. However, sushi is fully in line with traditional Japanese ways of eating.¹³⁸ Since meat was largely taboo for most of Japanese history, the Japanese developed an aversion to meaty, oily tastes and heavy spices.

¹³⁵ Shimbo, *The Sushi Experience*, 10.

¹³⁶ Avey, "Discover the History of Sushi."

¹³⁷ Shimbo, *The Sushi Experience*, 11.

¹³⁸ Feng, "The Tale of Sushi: History and Regulations," 206.

Fish, however, was specifically excluded from the meat-eating taboo. Considering Japan is an island with poor agricultural land, marine resources such as fish and seaweed have always been a key source of nutrition in Japanese diets. Sushi, in all its historical variants, has always included fish. The little arable land that does exist in Japan is terraced and ideal for growing rice. The Japanese have always placed a high cultural value on rice, especially white rice.

Why, then, is sushi so popular in the U.S.? Firstly, its emergence and spread into the American restaurant scene came at a time when the Japanese economy was brisk and thriving, as was interest in Japanese culture.¹³⁹ In the 1980s and 1990s, Americans began associating sushi with a healthy, fashionable lifestyle. Today sushi remains popular across the U.S., expanding into the center of the country, far away from oceans with fresh fish or large population centers of Japanese people. However, sushi has been popular in large cities such as Los Angeles and New York City for so long now that many people have developed an appreciation for traditional, non-Americanized versions of sushi. Los Angeles sushi chef Hiroshi Shima summarizes the continuing evolution of sushi in America well:

“In the beginning we made many Americanized sushi to please our diners. These were not foods that we liked to prepare, because they were not at the heart of our traditional cuisine. But this actually turned out to be good for us. The process allowed us to free ourselves from our strict ideas, and we began to see sushi from a different point of view. Now, contrary to our expectations, our knowledgeable clientele are asking for real, well-made, traditional sushi. Our business is more challenging than ever.”

Considering that Japanese consumers have begun embracing Americanized sushi rolls and American consumers are now demanding traditional Japanese style sushi, the dialectic of cultural and culinary exchange will continue to evolve in new and interesting ways.

¹³⁹ Shimbo, *The Sushi Experience*, 11.

Chapter 3: Perceptions

It is difficult to study the effects of mixing cultures from a wholly objective, historical perspective. As important as knowing the historical context in which today's Japanese restaurants operate, it is equally important to study the subjective effects of that history. In short, how do people who generally have little cultural or historical background knowledge perceive Japanese restaurants in the United States? Ethnographic study helps us uncover these subjective effects. By studying restaurant reviews left by customers, as well as analyzing my own restaurant eating experiences, I analyze how perceptions of a good dining experience shape an American diner's experience at a Japanese restaurant which then affects how he or she experiences the culture as a whole. As the world becomes increasingly globalized, people have access to more and more cultural experiences accessible from the comfort of their own culture. People from across the globe now interact in unprecedented ways. Ethnic restaurants are often a primary location for experiencing these other global cultures and it's important to understand how perceptions of other cultures as a whole are subtly shaped by these restaurant experiences.

Perception of Status

The status of ethnic restaurants exists along a continuum and is based on consumers' perceptions of what the food is worth. However, this worth is not necessarily correlated with expense of ingredients or expertise needed to prepare the food, but more the status of the home culture. In the United States, this is often correlated with the status of immigrants and the strength and influence of the culture's economy.¹⁴⁰

¹⁴⁰ Ray, "Ethnic Succession," 105.

For example, Chinese food and Japanese food share many ingredients and techniques of preparation but one has much higher status than the other.¹⁴¹ The history and prevalence of Chinese immigrants as derided low wage labor helped plant the seeds of Chinese food's status as low cost food in the United States, which was at first eaten by only the large Chinese community.¹⁴² Although the Chinese economy is now a strong global force, this is a relatively recent development that has not overcome the long history of Chinese immigrants having a low status within the United States.¹⁴³ Japan, on the other hand, has always had few immigrants in the U.S.¹⁴⁴ In 1900, there were still less than 25,000 Japanese in the United States. Proportionately, the Japanese still make up a tiny percentage of all Asian immigrants. In 2009, Japan made up 3.1% of Asian immigrants to the U.S. while China made up 15.4%.¹⁴⁵ Today, there are still many low wage Chinese workers while there are still relatively few Japanese immigrants in the U.S. and many have high status jobs in business.¹⁴⁶ Japanese and American relations revolve strongly around the economy and Japan is heralded by many Americans as a leader in business and high-tech industries, both high status economic sectors.¹⁴⁷ China's economy, on the other hand, is predicated upon the fact that Chinese workers will manufacture export goods for very low prices.¹⁴⁸

In light of these comparisons, it is not difficult to understand why Japanese food has a relatively high status. Immigrant and economic statuses are much higher and thus restaurateurs can charge much higher prices for their food. It does not contain the underclass taint that

¹⁴¹ Robin Asbell, "Chinese and Japanese Cuisine," *Coop: Stronger Together*, accessed November 2, 2015.

¹⁴² Lynne Olver, "FAQs: Asian-American Cuisine," *The Food Timeline*, accessed November 2, 2015.

¹⁴³ Ray, "Ethnic Succession," 104.

¹⁴⁴ "The U.S. Mainland: Growth and Resistance," *Library of Congress*, accessed November 2, 2015.

¹⁴⁵ Jeanne Batalova, "Asian Immigrants in the United States," *Migration Policy Institute*, accessed November 2, 2015.

¹⁴⁶ Ray, "Ethnic Succession," 104.

¹⁴⁷ "U.S. Relations with Japan," *U.S. Department of State*, accessed November 2, 2015.

¹⁴⁸ Michael Estrin, "How Chinese Economy Influences the US," *Bankrate*, accessed November 2, 2015.

“ethnic” cuisine tends to carry.¹⁴⁹ Instead, it carries a sense of intriguing foreignness that gets translated by business people traveling to and from Japan for work-related reasons. Thus Japanese food has become somewhat of a stylish foreign commodity.¹⁵⁰ Another way to think about the high status perception of Japanese food is the idea of exoticism. In many ways, Japanese food is very different from American food. While Americans are accustomed to their meals being large, oily, meat-heavy dishes, Japanese meals are typically light, contain little meat, and are heavy on rice, fish, and vegetables. Due to the various signs marking Japanese food as high status in the United States, consumers perceive the differences in the food as exotic rather than simply foreign and unfamiliar. Of course, perceptions of exoticism can have negative effects, though Japanese food sellers seem to largely benefit from the association since they can sell their food for higher prices.

Restaurants around the United States reflect this high status. According to Zagat, the most popular survey of fine-dining restaurants, almost every major American city counts Japanese cuisine among its top restaurants.¹⁵¹ The number of Japanese restaurants has been growing across the board in the past three decades.¹⁵² These restaurants are also, on average, charging their customers more than other ethnic restaurants. For example, in 2006, check averages at Japanese restaurants in New York City came out to \$46.72 per person, which only French restaurants exceeded at \$47.81.¹⁵³ Again, part of the explanation lies in demographics. There tends to be an inverse relationship between the demographic weight of a group and the check average. Out of the approximately eight million people living in New York City, only about 22,000 claim Japanese heritage and 53,000 claim a French heritage, yet Japanese and French restaurants are

¹⁴⁹ Ray, “Ethnic Succession,” 104.

¹⁵⁰ Ray, “Ethnic Succession,” 103.

¹⁵¹ Ray, “Ethnic Succession,” 103.

¹⁵² Ray, “Ethnic Succession,” 104.

¹⁵³ Krishnendu Ray, “Feeding Modern Desires,” *India-Seminar*, accessed November 2, 2015.

among the most popular fine dining restaurants and have the highest check averages. Whereas, the nearly two million Latinos and two million African Americans in New York City have the fewest fine dining restaurants and have among the lowest check averages at \$22.00-24.50 per person.

A cuisine's status is not only measured in monetary terms, however. Below the blanket of cultural exchange, the food itself carries status. At a very basic level, it is important to distinguish what makes good food, good. "Good" is also a cultural perception that varies around the world. In the United States, people do not generally consider insects to be a food, whereas in many cultures around the world insects are a viable source of protein. The practice of consuming insects for food, entomophagy, feeds more than two billion people worldwide, according to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization.¹⁵⁴ It is a widespread practice, yet many Americans would recoil at the idea of dining on bugs.

Japanese cuisine does not rely on insects as a key protein source but rather fish. Raw fish, more specifically. In the sushi saturated American restaurant scene, raw fish does not seem as abhorrent to us as it perhaps once would have. Japanese cuisine is not the only food to involve raw fish, as some Latin American and Scandinavian dishes also include fish served raw. However, it was a process for American culture to begin to perceive raw fish as a viable, even desirable, food source. Because of this, many Americanized sushi rolls substitute the traditional raw fish with cooked fish or even avocado.

The notion of raw versus cooked has significant roots in anthropology. In his work *The Raw and the Cooked*, anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss theorized that underlying patterns of

¹⁵⁴ "Bugs in the System," *The Economist*, September 26, 2014.

human thought form cultural categories that ultimately structure society.¹⁵⁵ These patterns of thought are structured upon binary oppositions, such as raw and cooked, nature and culture, etc. In terms of Japanese sashimi and sushi, raw fish is considered a cultural delicacy. In that way, it is "cooked" by its cultural status. It is not perceived as truly raw, since sushi chefs have manipulated and elevated it from its natural state into a culturally complete food. The food has not physically changed but its cultural perception has. This is how it goes from a raw non-food to being considered a delicious, high status food. The United States has gradually undergone this shift in thinking and thus Americans have embraced raw fish.

Perception of Health and Safety

However, Americans have not unreservedly embraced the eating of raw fish. The primary concern has been safety. In the United States consumers perceive raw meat, including fish, as a safety concern. Even today, with sushi becoming a mainstream food, there are numerous news articles questioning its safety. In the 1980s, experts predicted that the increasing consumption of sushi would lead to a dramatic increase in parasitic infections.¹⁵⁶ However, the fish served in American sushi restaurants is typically high-end marine fish that has historically low prevalence of parasitic infection.¹⁵⁷ The one exception to this is salmon, which is more likely to be host to the tapeworm *Diphyllobothrium latum*. The fish most likely to be infected with the feared *Anisakis* larvae are typically freshwater fish that are consumed raw in Japan's rural areas and local restaurants. These are not usually the fish served to foreign tourists or exported to be served at sushi restaurants overseas.

¹⁵⁵ Herve Verenne, "The Raw and the Cooked: Introduction to a Science of Mythology," *Columbia University*, accessed December 30, 2015.

¹⁵⁶ Mimi Sheraton, "Eating Raw Fish: The Dangers," *The New York Times*, September 30, 1981.

¹⁵⁷ Yukifumi Nawa, Christopher Hatz, and Johannes Blum, "Sushi Delights and Parasites: The Risk of Fishborne and Foodborne Parasitic Zoonoses in Asia," *Clinical Infectious Diseases* 41, no. 9 (2005): 1297.

While some fears about the safety of raw fish are valid, many of them are blown out of proportion. Like any news story drawing on people's fears, there are numerous articles telling of a sushi loving man being riddled with holes after ingesting a tapeworm¹⁵⁸, about dozens of people getting sick after eating raw tuna,¹⁵⁹ or about a nine-foot tapeworm being found inside a tourist in Illinois.¹⁶⁰ These sensational stories are the exceptions, not the norm. Though there has indeed been a rise in parasitic infections arising from raw fish, this is to be expected with the meteoric rise in sushi's global popularity. Consuming raw fish does carry dangers of parasites, but if chefs handle the fish properly, a person's chances of being infected are still slim. For the most part, eating sushi is safe.

However, eating at any restaurant in the United States does still carry some risks. As ethnic restaurants have grown in popularity and accessibility in recent years, so too have foodborne illnesses associated with these ethnic restaurants.¹⁶¹ Why is this? Ethnic foods are not necessarily more prone to make someone ill, with the possible exception of raw fish as described above. Restaurant foods in general are more prone to cause foodborne illnesses due to *Salmonella* and *E. coli*, for example, as there is often not proper preparation, cooking, and storage of food.¹⁶² Since food handlers are often not as familiar with ethnic foods or food products, they are more likely to mishandle the food. Understanding the culture, language, and practices of foreign food handlers and dealers could lead to a great decrease in mishandling food that would then lead to illness. Although Mexican food led to the highest number of outbreaks due to the usage of many fresh ingredients that can be mishandled, misunderstandings of this

¹⁵⁸ Anna Hodgekiss, "Sushi Lover's Entire Body Left Riddled with WORMS after Eating Contaminated Sashimi," *Daily Mail*, September 24, 2014.

¹⁵⁹ "53 People in Nine States Sick After Eating Raw Tuna," *USA Today*, May 15, 2015.

¹⁶⁰ Lauren Cox, "Eat Raw Fish! Get a 9-Foot Tapeworm," *ABC News*, June 16, 2009.

¹⁶¹ Jee Hye Lee, Johye Hwang, and Azlin Mustapha, "Popular Ethnic Foods in the United States: A Historical and Safety Perspective," *Comprehensive Reviews in Food Science and Food Safety* 13(2014): 2.

¹⁶² Lee, Hwang, & Mustapha, "Popular Ethnic Foods," 7.

nature plague other ethnic restaurants as well, including Japanese.¹⁶³ Foodborne illness in Japanese restaurants often stems from raw fish being stored at improper temperatures or rice being pre-made and sitting at room temperature. Sharing basic safety information and implementing food handling procedures easily controls both instances. In fact, fast food restaurants serving Japanese food were often safer due to the systematic procedures in place at such establishments. Similarly, high end restaurants also tended to be safer due to their higher standards. The restaurants which fell between these two ends of the spectrum were the biggest safety offenders.¹⁶⁴

Dealing with this issue in terms of consumer perceptions can be tricky. Once consumers associate a particular food with being at high risk for foodborne illness, they are less likely to purchase that food.¹⁶⁵ Sticking ethnic foods with the stigma of being high risk can then lead to a decline in those ethnic foods and a stigma also being attached to the culture associated with them. Considering the risk associated with ethnic foods in particular tends to be caused by a lack of communication and understanding between home culture and consuming culture, this stigma would be unfairly placed.¹⁶⁶ Therefore, it is important to address these food safety issues at their source and open up better avenues for cross cultural understanding, as well as continually emphasizing the tenets of good food safety procedures needed in any restaurant. Once these measures are in place, consumers can more safely enjoy food of any cultural background.

Despite the risk of illness from mishandled raw fish, American consumers usually perceive Japanese food as generally healthy, at least nutritionally. One reason it does not receive the taint of dirty food is its country of origin. Since Japan is a developed country associated with

¹⁶³ Lee, Hwang, & Mustapha, "Popular Ethnic Foods," 8.

¹⁶⁴ Lee, Hwang, & Mustapha, "Popular Ethnic Foods," 8-9.

¹⁶⁵ Lee, Hwang, & Mustapha, "Popular Ethnic Foods," 11.

¹⁶⁶ Lee, Hwang, & Mustapha, "Popular Ethnic Foods," 12.

business and technology, its food is perceived as cleaner and less dangerous, as opposed to less developed countries with a lower economic status.¹⁶⁷ Americans tend to associate a Japanese lifestyle with healthy living and Americans apply this perception to Japanese food, however Americanized it may be.¹⁶⁸ While the original version of ethnic cuisines may indeed be healthy, Americans often alter the recipes to suit their tastes and add many calories in the process.¹⁶⁹ However, the perception of the original food as healthy endures. The recent trend for healthy eating has actually contributed to the rise in popularity and accessibility of Asian foods such as Japanese.¹⁷⁰ Ingredients such as tofu and edamame are now widely available in grocery stores across the country.

In fact, Japanese cuisine in its most traditional form is extremely healthy. People on the island of Okinawa often live to be over a hundred.¹⁷¹ Not only are traditional Okinawan diets rich in fruits and vegetables, but they are also prepared in the healthiest ways possible, often lightly steamed or quickly stir-fried. While the food and preparation are important, Okinawan lifestyles also contribute to the people's health. Many practice *Hara Hachi Bu*, which means to eat only until you are eighty percent full. Comparing this to the American style of supersizing meals and eating to excess, it is clear that there is more than the food itself to consider in assessing the healthiness of a particular ethnic cuisine.

Perception of Authenticity

On some level, American consumers understand that the food they are eating is likely Americanized to some degree, along with the additional calories. Consumers want an authentic

¹⁶⁷ Lee, Hwang, & Mustapha, "Popular Ethnic Foods," 14.

¹⁶⁸ Lee, Hwang, & Mustapha, "Popular Ethnic Foods," 5.

¹⁶⁹ Annie Corapi, "The 10 Healthiest Ethnic Cuisines," *CNN*, August 25, 2010.

¹⁷⁰ Lee, Hwang, & Mustapha, "Popular Ethnic Foods," 5.

¹⁷¹ Corapi, "The 10 Healthiest Ethnic Cuisines"

dining experience when they go to an ethnic restaurant. They want to feel like they are eating just like a Japanese person, for example. Although, on another level, most diners know this is not the case. People accept, and even expect, a certain level of Americanization. Consumers want a unique cultural experience while still feeling comfortable in their own cultural expectations.¹⁷² These expectations are what lead chefs in America to replace raw sushi fish with avocado and to sweeten sauces with spoonfuls of sugar. Authenticity is not a static, objective criterion, but rather a socially constructed and interpretive qualification.

So how do consumers judge if a restaurant experience is authentic? The information available to the average restaurant patron is limited. They often do not know what sort of training the chef has had or what vision the owners hold. They do not know if what they are served is a culturally accurate representation of the cuisine. Furthermore, the accurateness of representing culture is homogenizing and subjective itself. What restaurants serve in Nagasaki is not necessarily the same food served in Tokyo. Grouping the different culinary traditions in Japan into one type of Japanese food is not an accurate representation of the culture and is thus not necessarily "authentic." Authenticity is a word that holds different meaning to different people and should not be counted upon to accurately judge how close a particular food is to its traditional iteration.

Thus, it is instructive to look at how people judge the authenticity of restaurants based in a culture other than their own. There are many online outlets for consumers to review their restaurant experiences for the benefit of future customers. These sites, such as Yelp and TripAdvisor, are filled with claims to authenticity or lack thereof. The criteria used to determine this authenticity ranges from the fact that a lot of the clientele was Asian to merely a sense that it

¹⁷² Shun Lu and Gary Alan Fine, "The Presentation of Ethnic Authenticity: Chinese Food as a Social Accomplishment," *The Sociological Quarterly* 36(1995): 535.

felt authentic. These reviews reveal that the average American consumer does not know what Japanese food is like in Japan and has no way of comparing the food they are eating to what is being served in the home culture. Although some reviewers and customers do have the knowledge to make these comparisons, most average American consumers do not. This is true not just in the case of Japanese food, but in most ethnic food served in America. Thus, reading restaurant reviews often reveals more about the perception of authenticity rather than any actual claim to cultural accuracy.

Perception in Practice

American diners claim to desire an overall good dining experience over merely having good food or affordable prices. The emphasis on the holistic experience is an interesting perspective to take with food, as we use more than our sense of taste to judge. Thus, I endeavored to find, research, and dine in a variety of Japanese restaurants across the Midwestern state in which I live. Foodies do not herald the Midwest as a hotspot for authentic Japanese cuisine, as it does not have a large immigrant population nor is it located near oceans for access to fresh fish. Yet, the growing popularity of Japanese food means that there are still a number of Japanese restaurants open for business. To choose which restaurants I would eat at, I did research on popular restaurant review sites such as Yelp and TripAdvisor. I read the reviews of previous customers to gauge what others' perceptions of these dining establishments were and to see what elements of their experience they deemed most important to share. I then visited the restaurant myself to note the food, the atmosphere of the restaurant, the customers, and any other element of my holistic dining experience I deemed important. Eating can be a very subjective experience and I acknowledge my position as someone relatively unfamiliar with Japanese food. However,

my position is a very common one for people in this area to share, so my observations and perceptions can reveal what a typical dining experience in a Japanese restaurant might be and show how perceptions can profoundly affect a diner's experience of another culture.

Tanaka Japanese Steakhouse¹⁷³

"'Friday night out' Our server was extremely good and got everyone involved in the fun. Try this place out and you will [be] glad you did." –David S., TripAdvisor review, Oct. 26, 2015

"We had so much fun here. The food was delicious, the waiter and the chef were very entertaining and welcoming. My mom had never visited a Japanese Steak House and she really enjoyed the experience." –Gina B., TripAdvisor review, July 20, 2015

"We were here on a Saturday evening for a birthday. 11 of us were seated around the grill. This was all new to me; I'd never been to anything like this before. It was part show & part meal. The show was fun & involved us all. The food was good & the portions were generous." –Jeff J., TripAdvisor review, June 8, 2015

"The Cook was very entertaining. He made a memorable night for the couple at our table celebrating an anniversary. He had the same tricks that we have seen at other Japanese Steak Houses. He was experienced." –jim r., TripAdvisor review, Dec. 2, 2015

"Love the atmosphere. We were paired with a group of young adults who were lively which added to our experience. Hibachi grill was excellent." –Steve M., Yelp review, Nov. 8, 2014

My mother and I parked downtown and walked up to the large glass paneled restaurant on the corner. The streets were mostly empty on this Monday night and Tanaka reflected this. When we walked through the double glass doors, the host asked us in which section of the restaurant we wanted to sit; all sections had plenty of seating on this slow night. The most action seemed to be happening in the hibachi grill area, so we opted to sit there. However, it was a bit strange to be seated at the empty side of a large grill table. We felt out of place as a party of two when the rest of the grill area was filled with large groups celebrating together. The atmosphere made it clear that this was a place for special occasions.

¹⁷³ All names of restaurants have been changed to protect confidentiality

Tanaka Japanese Steakhouse is located in a Midwestern city of approximately 60,000 residents, 0.53% of which are Japanese, the fifth highest percentage in the state.¹⁷⁴ This particular city has a great deal of industry which has ties to Japan, thus drawing in many Japanese people. Tanaka is one of five restaurants in the city offering Japanese food, but it is one of the highest recommended. I checked ratings and reviews from online commenters but this restaurant was the only one friends recommended to me in person. Thus, I chose to visit this establishment to see what the dining experience would be like.

First of all, the neighborhood surrounding Tanaka is very trendy. In fact, it is located in the trendiest part of downtown along with other hip restaurants and entertainment. It is in the one part of town that feels like a big city, as opposed to the sprawling industry and department stores that make up the majority of the town. The restaurant is on a corner, and both sides facing the streets are large plate glass windows, interrupted only by a few curtains drawn back. The décor is modern, sleek, and fairly minimalistic. In the summer, the restaurant also has outdoor seating on the sidewalk to accommodate the number of patrons wanting to eat there. However, a Monday night in January is not busy season and the restaurant was relatively quiet.

When entering, guests are asked where they would like to sit. There is seating at the bar, the restaurant, and the hibachi grills. On this particular night, my guest and I opted to sit at the grill. The tables surrounding the hibachi grills were large, fitting eighteen diners in a horseshoe shape around two grills. When we arrived, the waiter seated us at the mostly empty side of a horseshoe opposite a party of ten already enjoying the show put on by their grill chef. The customers sitting at the hibachi grills seemed to be mostly families and couples. Considering many reviews of ethnic restaurants tend to regard customers appearing to be of the ethnic group

¹⁷⁴ "Cities with the Highest Percentage of Japanese in Indiana," *Zip Atlas*, accessed January 5, 2016.

as a good sign of authenticity, it is interesting to note that there did not seem to be any Asian customers in the restaurant. Instead, the customers appeared to be primarily white. Of course, ethnic heritage can be difficult to judge solely on appearances, but phenotypes are generally the one marker a casual observer has to go on. Using these criteria, the only Asian-appearing people in the restaurant were the three grill chefs and one waitress. Overall, the clientele appeared overwhelmingly white.

Additionally, the diners and waitstaff were all wearing clothing typically considered to be dressier than average for a casual restaurant. Most of the men were wearing collared button down shirts and many of the women wore dressy sweaters and jewelry. Even many of the small children were wearing dressier than average clothes. The waitstaff all wore white button down shirts and black pants. Overall, there was a sense that this restaurant was a place for special occasions. It was not an everyday casual dining establishment. Perhaps this notion of a Japanese steakhouse being a place for special occasions led to the fact that it was mostly empty on a Monday night. Several reviewers on Yelp and TripAdvisor warned potential diners to get there early or make reservations because it was very busy on weekends. During the hour that I was at the restaurant it was fairly empty but two groups were celebrating birthdays, which supports the notion of the restaurant being a place for special occasions. This fact was obvious to everyone in the restaurant because two waiters paraded into the dining area beating a drum and banging a gong to present the birthday boy or girl with a complimentary dish of fried ice cream and sing happy birthday.

When it came time for my guest and I to order our food, we were limited to the menu specific to the grill, although the menu was several pages long and included sushi, sushi rolls, sashimi, tempura, teriyaki, noodles, various dinner entrees from the kitchen, soups, salads, bento

boxes, chef's specials, desserts, and appetizers both raw and cooked. The hibachi menu listed a variety of meats and combinations that could be ordered in full or half-size. The meals also came with a house salad with ginger dressing, a bowl of clear soup, grilled vegetables, a sampler of two shrimp, and your choice of fried rice or noodles. In short, there was an abundance of food.

The primary reason people choose to sit at the grill is because of the entertainment factor. There is nothing necessarily special about grilled vegetables and meat served with rice or noodles. However, it becomes worth the extra cost when you get a show to go along with the meal you see being cooked right in front of you. The chefs not only cook the food but also entertain their audience. This is what makes the experience fit for a special occasion. During this visit, the chef began the routine by setting the grill on fire while cleaning it, causing a large, impressive burst of flame. He then did a routine of tricks with the spatula and knives used in the cooking process. He tapped them rhythmically on the grill and tossed them in the air, flipping them up and catching them. Other tricks included making a volcano out of onion slices and squirting sake in people's mouths from several feet away. The chef interspersed these theatrics with periods of actually cooking the food on the grill and serving it up to the people around the table who ordered it. Hibachi grill routines such as this one are not traditionally Japanese.¹⁷⁵ They use Japanese grills and cooking techniques, but the theatrics are all-American. Rocky Aoki, a Japanese-born boxer in New York City with no restaurant experience, developed the idea into a chain of restaurants, named Benihana. Other restaurants borrowed Aoki's concept and the "Japanese steakhouse" was born, a purely American invention.

As I watched the chefs perform their culinary tricks, it became apparent that they were noticeably more interactive when they have a large crowd. Watching the chef cooking for the group of ten on the other half of the table and watching the chef cook for my small party of two

¹⁷⁵ Matt Schudel, "Rocky Aoki; Flashy Founder of Benihana," *The Washington Post*, July 12, 2008.

were very different experiences. Our chef essentially went through the motions of doing a few tricks while cooking our food while the other chef with the big crowd was interacting with his customers and providing more of a show for them. I wondered why there was such a difference. However, when I considered the importance of tipping in American restaurants, it made more sense. If a chef performs for a larger group, he has the chance to make many tips from different groups around the table. Yet, if he only has the chance to make one tip, regardless of his performance, it makes sense to do the show quickly and prepare for a larger group.

As for the perceptions from American diners, Japanese hibachi cooking is clearly perceived as a form of entertainment. As the reviews show, fun and entertainment are paramount. People come for dinner and a show, often to celebrate birthdays or go on a date. It is not everyday food, as it is typically more expensive than many other restaurant offerings. However, it is also unquestionably perceived as Japanese, even though the history of the theatrical cooking style says otherwise. The grill chefs were all Asian men who spoke with accents and thus are likely to be perceived as authentically Japanese. Yet, when a customer asked one of the chefs about how he learned to work the hibachi grill, he said he trained for three months but had worked at a Chinese buffet before that so he already had some experience. This makes me wonder whether this man was Chinese or Japanese or perhaps neither.

Does it even matter? Not really, considering grilling meat and vegetables is not an ethnically specific style of food. People all over the world prepare and eat this type of food, albeit usually without the tricks. However, the fact that almost everyone else in the restaurant, both workers and customers, were white and the grill chefs were all Asian men implies that this exception is significant. People expect a Japanese chef at a Japanese restaurant, even if his skills are not necessarily exceptional in the realm of restaurant chefs. In the instance of the man

performing the show, people expect authentic Japanese, nevermind the fact that hibachi shows of this sort began as a wholly American invented experience.¹⁷⁶ And, in this case, the chef only needs the appearance of Asian-ness for this authenticity to be perceived, regardless of his actual nationality.

My experience at Tanaka Japanese Steakhouse confirmed many of my preconceived notions of what this type of restaurant would provide. There was a modern atmosphere, an Asian grill chef giving a show, and people using the venue to celebrate special occasions. And although the food was nothing more than meat, vegetables, and noodles cooked in teriyaki sauce, it was more expensive than any other Asian food I am used to eating. The bill for an appetizer, two half-size entrees, and two fountain drinks was \$39.93. Along with the atmosphere, the price is another element that gives the perception that this is special occasion, high status food.

Osaka

“Osaka, hands down, has some of the most gorgeously plated sushi in [the city]. Not only that, the authenticity is undeniable as you’re surrounded by all Japanese speaking patrons in this family run business.” –Zenobia W., Yelp review, July 2015

“The atmosphere inside is cozy, warm, and full of character...It’s one of those places where you walk in, and you almost know immediately that the food is going to be great and authentic.” – Sophie C., Yelp review, Feb. 2015

“When I want authentic Japanese food, I go to Osaka. They have great Japanese dishes that other local “Japanese” restaurants don’t serve. Being from Japan, it’s nice to have somewhere that tastes like home.” –Rumi W., Yelp review, July 2015

“First off the ambience is very nice. Not in a posh or romantic kind of way but in an authentic izakaya way. Very Japanese décor and all the staff I saw were Japanese including the chefs, one of which was a lovely young lady.” –Eric J., Yelp review, Feb. 7, 2013

“Pro: One of the best “pure” Sushi in [the city]. The cook is actually Japanese, not Korean or Chinese. Their appetizers are great too. The staff are friendly. I recommend going there on weekdays 5-7 pm for their half price nigari. Great deal!” – Andy T., Yelp review, Sept. 6, 2010

¹⁷⁶ Samuel Muston, “Kitchen Drama: Teppanyaki Cooking is as Theatrical as it is Culinary,” *The Independent*, April 13, 2011.

The reviews advised me to arrive early, as Osaka was small in size but big in popularity. Accordingly, my boyfriend and I pulled up into the mostly empty strip mall parking lot at 5:00 on a Thursday evening. We waited for the neon "Open" sign to glow red, then tentatively walked in. We were the first customers of the dinner hour and the waitresses were still getting the restaurant set up, directing each other in Japanese. Amidst her preparations, our waitress, an Asian woman with platinum blonde hair pulled into a bun, seated us behind a low wooden wall near the entrance and left us to peruse the menus. Almost immediately after we took our seats, another group arrived for dinner. The warnings about Osaka's popularity seemed to be apt.

Osaka Japanese Restaurant is located in a strip mall on the northside of a major Midwestern metropolitan area. This city ranks 55th in the state for percentage of Japanese individuals with 0.08% claiming Japanese heritage.¹⁷⁷ There are numerous Japanese restaurants in the metropolitan area, notwithstanding the relatively low population of Japanese people. On Yelp, Osaka came in at #11 on a list of 79 restaurants claiming to serve Japanese food around the city. I chose to visit this restaurant because the low prices and quality food pleased many reviewers, as well as what many perceived to be an authentic atmosphere.

We were dining on a Thursday evening, so the crowds never reached overwhelming proportions but the small restaurant did do a brisk business for the hour and forty-five minutes we were eating there. The hostess seated us at a wooden table near the front and gave us three menus. These included one full menu of appetizers and dinner entrees, one sushi menu, and one menu of half-price sushi, since we were visiting during the restaurant's sushi happy hour. As promised, the prices were all relatively inexpensive compared to other Japanese restaurant menus I had seen. My dining companion and I ordered water, Oolong tea, two appetizers of agedashi tofu and takoyaki, one piece of half-price yellowtail nigiri, a tonkatsu based ramen, and a bowl

¹⁷⁷ "Cities with the Highest Percentage of Japanese in Indiana," *Zip Atlas*.

of kitsune udon. We later split a bowl of green tea ice cream. The total bill for this meal, minus a 10% discount for paying cash, came to \$34.62. For the generous portion sizes and the sheer number of dishes we ordered, we were pleasantly surprised by how affordable our meal came to be. There was a table of men in suits discussing business sitting next to us and overhearing their conversation confirmed that they frequent this establishment for its generous portions and quality food but especially for its low prices.

The reviewers especially noted a sense of authenticity. Our perception was similar. Although I have never been to Japan and do not have extensive experience with Japanese food, I did feel a sense that I was getting a more authentic Japanese eating experience. All the signs around the place were written in Japanese, with some, but not all, having an English translation under them. The clientele appeared about half white and half Asian, but, according to the restaurant's website, the staff was entirely Japanese. A Japanese family owns and operates this restaurant, which lends further to a sense of authenticity. Additionally, the table was set with napkins and chopsticks but the waitress offered no forks for the benefit of non-Asian diners, as I have experienced at other restaurants.

The décor seemed to be a hodgepodge of decorations collected over time rather than a seamless, put-together design motif. The tables were all wooden and partitions around the restaurant were all made of light colored wood or wood lattice. There were an abundance of flowers and plants sitting around the place as well as a black cloth banner with a gold bamboo design hanging around the ceiling. Additionally, a collection of fans, masks, and framed prints decorated the walls in an Asian style. There was a sushi bar area with a low wooden bar and stools where customers could sit and watch the female sushi chef at work. On the night of my visit, the sushi bar was reserved with the exception of the one older Asian man eating his dinner

there. Beyond the sushi bar was a private room with a low table sunk into the floor and cushions sitting around as seats for diners. I admit I don't know much about traditional Japanese dining customs, but since this setup was nontraditional by American standards, I assumed this dining situation was traditionally Japanese and therefore lent credence to the restaurant's authenticity.

When thinking about the criteria I noticed when making my own judgments about this restaurant's authenticity, I realized the arbitrariness of it all. With the possible exception of judging the restaurant more authentic because a Japanese family owned and operated it, most of the points I noted were assumptions made from my position as an American who is not overly familiar with Japanese customs. First of all, I made the assumption that a large proportion of Asian customers probably meant that the food was more authentic. The low prices and good food could have drawn those Asian customers there, just as they drew me. Additionally, just because the customers were Asian does not mean they were Japanese. I also made the assumption that since only chopsticks were available to all customers that it was a more authentic eating experience. However, there are many Asian countries that use chopsticks, not just Japan. And the method of bringing the food to your mouth does not fundamentally change the taste of the food or the genuineness of its origins.

Yet, I have learned about some Japanese eating customs during the course of my research so I am not totally ignorant to what may or may not pass as authentic. Since I ordered a bowl of ramen as my main course, I considered the etiquette surrounding ramen.¹⁷⁸ In Japan, ramen is a very popular and common dish. The Japanese prize it partially for the lack of structured customs surrounding it, contrasting sharply with the knowledge and etiquette needed to eat sushi. Ramen is a food for the masses, not just knowledgeable insiders. However, there are still social expectations: namely that ramen must be slurped. In Japan, slurping food is considered polite, as

¹⁷⁸ Kushner, *Slurp! History of Ramen*, 229-231.

it shows the diner is eating the food as the chef intended, which is piping hot. Although I knew this bit of proper ramen etiquette, I did not slurp my ramen in pursuit of authenticity. My parents taught my American self from a young age that eating noisily is impolite and should be avoided. I did not notice anyone else in the restaurant slurping their food either. Although we were all eating in a Japanese restaurant with the expectation of authenticity, there were still unconscious limits to how much authenticity we were willing to experience. As authentic as an ethnic restaurant might be, it is still located in an American setting with American customs still subtly enforced. We want authenticity, but only the aspects we deem pleasing.

Japan Bistro

“I’ve never had a bad experience here...Love this sushi bar. It’s pretty small but the booths are so cute and cozy. And it’s just got a nice vibe, even when the techno music gets loud. Service is great and the sushi is reasonably priced, and tastes fresh. Also, they are almost always on Groupon with deals, def look into that. Then there’s 50% off specialty rolls during the day. So many perks about this place!” –Rebecca N., Yelp review, July 2015

“A glass of house wine (\$4) & Sapporo on Fridays (\$1). Can you spell affordable?” – Robin K., Yelp review, Feb. 2015

“The location is absolutely ideal as it’s smack-dab in the heart of downtown. I will say that the ambiance was the biggest highlight. The music was fun and upbeat. The entire inside made me feel far from downtown.”- Steve F., Yelp review, Aug. 20, 2013

“Cheap, good sushi. Dollar Japanese beer if you order food. Private feeling booths. One of the best places in town.” –Noah H. Yelp review, June 2015

“The price was excellent and if I was a poor college student I would have been happy.”-James C., Yelp review, July 17, 2014

The sounds of slightly-too-loud techno music hit me as soon as I pushed the door open into Japan Bistro. Without the throbbing music and green overhead lights creating a dappled mosaic on the floor near the bar, I would have assumed I was entering a more traditional Japanese restaurant. The décor was almost entirely wooden, with wooden walls, floors, tables,

and chairs. A bank of wooden booths were separated into individual cubicles with wooden walls. A paper lantern lit our wooden cubicle booth and illuminated our menus printed on thin planks of wood. Our group of four was one of the few groups patronizing Japan Bistro at 5:30 on a Friday night. For a restaurant located in a large college town, 5:30 is early. The bartender still stood alone near his shelves full of sake and our waiter easily took care of the whole restaurant. The mixture of more traditional style wooden décor and loud dance music swirling around the empty restaurant set the somewhat strange ambiance for the evening.

Japan Bistro is a tiny, easy to miss restaurant and bar located in the downtown section of a large college town in the Midwest. With a population of over 100,000, the town has a bustling city center, filled with young people associated with the university as well as residents of the town. Just over 0.33% of the population is Japanese, the tenth highest percentage in the state.¹⁷⁹ Considering the university brings in a fair number of international students and faculty, it was no surprise to see a plethora of international dining options in town.

I visited Japan Bistro as the guest of my brother and sister-in-law who live in the city. They had visited the restaurant several times in the past and enjoyed it for its good food and low prices, especially during sushi happy hour which ran from 5:00-6:00. On this particular visit, they had purchased a Groupon which included drinks, soup or salad, and special rolls for four people. In addition to this, they ordered two extra rolls which were half price for happy hour. In total, the bill came to only \$14, plus the price of the Groupon, which was \$38. For a group of four, this came out to \$13 per person. When dining out in a college town, low prices are especially key, even when the food being served has a high status and typically costs more than other ethnic cuisines.

¹⁷⁹ "Cities with the Highest Percentage of Japanese in Indiana," *Zip Atlas*.

Really, the location of the restaurant in a trendy college town marked everything about it. Although the restaurant was easy to miss from the sidewalk, loud dance music immediately marked the interior atmosphere. It almost sounded like we were entering a club. This loud mix of EDM and hip hop continued throughout the meal, clashing a bit with the traditional wooden décor. Although we did not order alcoholic drinks, there was a large bar that many reviewers praised. The wooden booth we sat in created an intimate dining experience, as I could only hear my dining companions and the music. There were a few other customers in the place while we were eating but I did not actually see them until I walked around later. They seemed to be of primarily the same demographic we were: white students in their twenties. Our waiter was also a white man who appeared to be in his late twenties or early thirties, dressed in a black t-shirt and jeans. Contrasting with the other Japanese restaurants I have visited, this one did not seem to be striving for a feeling of traditional Japanese authenticity as much as the others. The customers and the atmosphere seemed to indicate that this place embraced its position as a sushi bar for Midwestern college students.

However, just because it was not striving for authenticity does not mean its food was not good. Authentic and delicious do not have to be mutually inclusive. The sushi rolls we ordered were filled with ingredients that would not be considered traditionally Japanese. For example, I ordered the Lion King Roll which was rice wrapped around shrimp tempura and topped with more shrimp, strips of avocado, crab meat, and masago. My boyfriend ordered a Sex and The City Roll which was deep fried spicy crab wrapped with rice and covered with wasabi mayo and chili sauce. In fact, there were several options on the menu that were deep fried and covered in mayo. This is undeniably not authentic to traditional Japanese tastes. Yet, the rolls still tasted very good, despite their inauthenticity.

Many American consumers tend to think that authentic equals traditional, and that traditional means old. However, tradition is not unchanging. Culture evolves with every generation, just as it does here in the U.S. We don't necessarily eat the same way we did fifty years ago and neither do the Japanese. Yet, we hold onto ideas of what tradition means in other cultures. For example, I have been using the phrase "traditional Japanese tastes" throughout this essay and, to be sure, there are some tastes that better fit a Japanese profile than others. But this is not necessarily a rigid, impenetrable category that has never changed in the history of Japan. In fact it has, as the chapter on food history shows. Furthermore, traditions not only change, they are often invented at a specific point in history that may only be in the recent past.¹⁸⁰

However, I still could not help thinking "but it's not authentic" as I ate a piece of deep fried, spicy mayo covered sushi. And it is undeniably Americanized. But as a restaurant aimed towards a twenty-something student demographic, it is important to consider the audience. This is a place that is targeting young people in a Midwestern town, which is not Japan. It is catering to American tastes. There is nothing inherently wrong in this as long as Americans do not think that what they are eating is a good representation of what is eaten in Japan and, as a result, that they now think they know something about Japanese culture as a result of eating the sushi. Japan is a developed country that also imports different ethnic cuisines and alters them to cater to Japanese tastes. Every country does this. That is why McDonald's tastes differently depending on where you eat it. Yet, no one should eat an indigenized Big Mac and think that they somehow gain insight into American culture. Globalization affects every culture to some degree.

The problem doesn't arise until restaurateurs try to pass the food off as representational of the culture of origin. When we eat ethnic food, we still tend to think of it as representing the

¹⁸⁰ Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions," in *The Invention of Tradition*, eds. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1.

home culture in some way, even if chefs entirely alter the cuisine from its original state. Even when we know that what we eating is Americanized, our ideas of the people of that culture are subtly shaped by the foods we eat. We still think that the more traditional and authentic the food we eat, the more we will absorb about Japanese culture. There is nothing wrong with eating ethnic cuisine altered to fit the tastes of the culture it is served in, but consumers have to be careful to realize that what they are eating should not be used to represent the culture of origin and, by extension, the people who are a part of it. Cultures are complex, multifaceted things that cannot be reduced to food on a plate and believing that they can trivializes the heritage of thousands of people. Diners should also consider that other cultures are not static and unchanging and judging ethnic food should not be based on vague ideas of what connotes tradition in another country.

Chapter 4: Implications

When considering Japanese restaurants in America, it is hard to underestimate the effects of globalization. Displaced food has always taken on local characteristics, including most foods we think of as “traditional.” Both ramen and sushi provide excellent examples of this phenomenon. Sushi, especially, is an increasingly globalized food. The modern world is immensely connected in terms of communication, knowledge, economics, politics, culture, and a number of other factors. These factors lead to a more connected world with more shared goods and ideas. In many ways, this is a good thing. Researchers across the world can collaborate to solve global problems, economies can grow due to access to global markets, and people across the world have increasingly wide access to a global network of information and resources.¹⁸¹ Yet, globalization also has its drawbacks. In many cases, rich CEOs get richer while workers are exploited, corporations become so powerful that they begin influencing political decisions, and the environment is impacted negatively as natural resources are mismanaged to meet increasing global demand.

Environmental Impacts

In the case of Japanese food, the globalization of sushi has led to overfishing of tuna, one of the most prized sushi fishes today. Modern Japan is the hub of high-grade sushi consumption but the Japanese have only valued tuna since the mid-nineteenth century and, even then, only yellowtail and albacore tuna, not bluefin.¹⁸² In other parts of the world, with the exception of the Mediterranean where the fish has historically been prized, fishermen only pursued giant bluefin

¹⁸¹ Mike Collins, “The Pros And Cons Of Globalization,” *Forbes*, May 6, 2015.

¹⁸² Alistair Bland, “From Cat Food to Sushi Counter: The Strange Rise of the Bluefin Tuna,” *Smithsonian*, September 11, 2013.

tuna as a product of sport fishing, which gained popularity in the early twentieth century.¹⁸³ If commercial fishermen caught a bluefin tuna, they would sell it as cat food if they could or haul it to a landfill if they couldn't. Bluefin were widely considered trash fish at the time; no one, including the Japanese, perceived them as high status or good to eat.

This perception did not change until the 1970s, a crucial time in the globalization of sushi. In Japan, some say partly due to the introduction of a more fatty American diet, the national palate began to embrace the strong flavors and dark flesh of beef, so embracing the strong, dark meat of bluefin was a next logical step for the historically fish-centric country.¹⁸⁴ The newfound appreciation for bluefin in Japan coincided with the expansion of the electronics trade between Japan and the United States. Through the 1970s and into the 1980s, Japan maintained a huge trade surplus over the United States.¹⁸⁵ The Japanese had a marked edge in the consumer goods trade that the U.S. simply couldn't match. Many Americans viewed this disparity as a threat to American commerce. In order to rebalance the trade relationship, the U.S. capitalized on the one advantage they had over Japan: agriculture. Japan could afford to be picky when it came to consumer goods but they had to import nearly all their raw agricultural materials. By 1980, Japan was importing over \$6 billion in American agricultural exports. This came to include bluefin tuna.

When Japan sent cargo planes full of electronics to the United States, those planes were wasting a trip back to the island empty. The pilots of the cargo planes, instead of returning home to Japan empty handed, began buying cheap tuna in New England and flying them home to

¹⁸³ Theodore Bestor, "How Sushi Went Global," in *The Cultural Politics of Food and Eating: A Reader*, eds. James L. Watson and Melissa L. Caldwell (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 16.

¹⁸⁴ Bland, "From Cat Food to Sushi Counter."

¹⁸⁵ Sasha Issenberg, *The Sushi Economy: Globalization and the Making of a Modern Delicacy* (New York: Gotham Books, 2007), 169.

Japan for massive profit.¹⁸⁶ Around the same time, new fishing limits were imposed worldwide that excluded foreign ships from fishing in prime coastal waters and environmental campaigns forced many countries, including Japan, to scale back their distant water fishing operations.¹⁸⁷ Thus, the Japanese had to turn to foreign suppliers, such as the United States, to fulfill their desire for tuna. American fishermen quickly realized that the Japanese were willing to pay for these trash fish and, due to advances in refrigeration technologies on ships, increased the hunt for the massive tuna fish.¹⁸⁸ The tuna gold rush had begun.

During the 1980s, Japan's economy was booming and the sushi business flourished. Japanese imports of bluefin tuna increased from 957 metric tons in 1984 to 5,235 metric tons in 1993.¹⁸⁹ By the early 1990s, bluefin prices hit their peak as the American tuna fishing industry began really taking off. However, the thriving Japanese economy took a dive in the 1990s and the primary market for high price bluefin collapsed. At the same time, American tuna fishermen were reaping the results of overfishing.¹⁹⁰ The zealous drive to catch as many tuna as the sea would give them led to the inevitable conclusion of less tuna coming out of the water. After the recent tuna boom, there were simply fewer tuna being caught and less Japanese money being spent on them.

However, by the 1990s, bluefin had been cemented as a delicacy and its popularity had spread across the ocean.¹⁹¹ While the Japanese economy may have been in a slump, bluefin was still coveted across other parts of the world and thus still relentlessly hunted by fishermen. The American economy was booming and the sushi craze was in full force.¹⁹² So, although the

¹⁸⁶ Bland, "From Cat Food to Sushi Counter."

¹⁸⁷ Bestor, "How Sushi Went Global," 15.

¹⁸⁸ Bland, "From Cat Food to Sushi Counter."

¹⁸⁹ Bestor, "How Sushi Went Global," 15.

¹⁹⁰ Issenberg, *The Sushi Economy*, 180.

¹⁹¹ Bland, "From Cat Food to Sushi Counter."

¹⁹² Bestor, "How Sushi Went Global," 15-16.

Japanese could not afford to pay top dollar for bluefin anymore, American restaurateurs were there to take up the slack. Due to the globalization of sushi, the decline of the target economy no longer means a decline in production. There will always be another market ready to fill the gaps.

Due to this process, bluefin is both scarcer and more valuable than ever. British marine conservation scientist Callum Roberts estimates that for every fifty Atlantic bluefin swimming in 1940, there was just one in 2010.¹⁹³ It is estimated that there are now only 9,000 spawning adult bluefin left in the fish's Mediterranean stock.¹⁹⁴ Additionally, the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico polluted one of only two known bluefin spawning grounds. Overall, most scientists agree that the bluefin population is down over 80% since bluefin began to be hunted en masse.¹⁹⁵ The Pacific bluefin are not in much better shape. A meeting of the Scientific Committee of the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission concluded that Pacific bluefin are down to just 4% of their original stock size.¹⁹⁶ Clearly, the demand for bluefin tuna has the species in crisis. Yet, bluefin is more valued than ever before, perhaps partially due to its scarcity. In January of 2013, a 488 pound bluefin sold for \$1.76 million dollars to a Japanese restaurateur.¹⁹⁷ Although the market value for the fish is much lower, the publicity of extravagant tuna purchases is just one more way to push demand for the fish, especially in Japan. With such a profitable market for the tuna, it is unlikely that fishermen will stop pursuing them anytime soon.

There is a governing body responsible for managing the bluefin population, though it is widely regarded as ineffectual.¹⁹⁸ The International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) includes members from the U.S., Canada, Japan, Brazil, and the European

¹⁹³ Elizabeth Kolbert, "The Scales Fall," *The New Yorker*, August 2, 2010.

¹⁹⁴ Paul Greenberg, "Tuna's End," *The New York Times Magazine*, June 22, 2010.

¹⁹⁵ Bland, "From Cat Food to Sushi."

¹⁹⁶ "Pacific Tuna Stocks in Alarming Decline," *The Fish Site*, August 16, 2013.

¹⁹⁷ Allison Aubrey, "The \$1.76 Million Tuna: Great for Publicity, Bad for the Species," *NPR*, January 7, 2013.

¹⁹⁸ Kolbert, "The Scales Fall."

Union. In 2008, ICCAT scientists recommended that fishermen limit the bluefin catch in the eastern Atlantic and the Mediterranean to 8,500-15,000 tons. Instead, the ICCAT adopted a quota of 22,000 tons. In 2012, Monaco made a proposal that would include Atlantic bluefin on the list of animals that cannot be traded across international borders. However, the proposal was defeated and heralded as a victory for Japan. Yet, the evidence is compelling. Bluefin tuna are being quickly hunted to extinction and the worldwide popularity of sushi is the cause.

Ironically, many sushi traditionalists do not eat bluefin.¹⁹⁹ They regard the melt-in-your-mouth quality of bluefin as unsophisticated and unpalatable. It's a fish for amateur sushi aficionados. The real connoisseurs enjoy their sushi with protein such as squid, clams, flounder, and sea bream. When considering the history of sushi, bluefin tuna is a relatively new fad that does not match the taste profile that many consider to be more authentic to traditional sushi. In order to both protest the overfishing of bluefin and promote more traditional sushi, some sushi devotees are spreading the word about these other varieties of sushi fish. Trevor Corson, commercial fisherman turned author and chef, no longer eats bluefin. Instead, he hosts sushi tasting classes in New York City to spread the word about the delights of historically authentic, traditional sushi.²⁰⁰

Another suggested method for solving the overfishing problem is tuna ranches. Since commercial fishing is one of the last frontiers of hunter-gatherer modes of subsistence, it makes sense that it too would move from hunting to farming. Advocates of fish farming say it will take the pressure off dwindling wild stocks and generate a surplus of seafood which, due to the supply, more people would be able to afford.²⁰¹ However, the realities of fish farming suggest

¹⁹⁹ Bland, "From Cat Food to Sushi."

²⁰⁰ "Historical Sushi Dinners," *Sushi Concierge*, accessed March 29, 2016.

²⁰¹ John Volpe, "Dollars Without Sense: The Bait for Big-Money Tuna Ranching around the World," *BioScience* 55 (2005): 301.

otherwise. Fish farms actually consume more materials and energy than they produce. Ranched tuna takes twenty units of baitfish to produce one unit of tuna.²⁰² Additionally, ranchers need to import baitfish to feed the tuna since they quickly overwhelm the local baitfish population. Importing baitfish often leads into importing foreign diseases which then devastate the tuna and local environment. This strategy leads to epidemiological problems, wastes a great deal of money and energy, and may have future consequences for the abundance of baitfish species. Clearly, tuna ranching is not an efficient conservation strategy.

Due to the growing scarcity of bluefin tuna, increased pressure is put on fisheries to maintain an adequate supply for the demand. This is why there has been an explosive growth of tuna ranching, especially in the Mediterranean and Australia, even though it has been proven inefficient.²⁰³ Ranches, in contrast to farms, rely on wild-caught juvenile fish which are fattened in pens and eventually harvested. Tuna ranching is not subject to the same regulations as normal fishing vessels. Since the boats that capture the juvenile tuna do not technically harvest the tuna from the water until several months later, and often in a different country, tuna ranching companies are able to circumvent most regulations put in place to protect the tuna population.²⁰⁴

Although both wild-caught and ranched tuna present their own problems, there may be a ray of hope. Since producers have found a way to harvest so much tuna, markets in Japan and elsewhere are nearly saturated. If the tuna is no longer scarce in the market, its value will decrease. In fact, the market value of ranched tuna fell 50% between 2003 and 2004. Costs of production at tuna ranches continue to rise and market prices for tuna have fallen. Thus, the tuna industry may become a victim of its own success, which would ultimately be a lifesaver for the worldwide bluefin tuna stock. Tastes change, and sushi may find a new fad fish in the coming

²⁰² Volpe, *Dollars Without Sense*, 302.

²⁰³ Volpe, *Dollars Without Sense*, 301.

²⁰⁴ Volpe, *Dollars Without Sense*, 302.

years. However, observing the drastic environmental impact this one food has almost singlehandedly wrought on a species of fish proves once again the very real implications of globalizing a cuisine such as sushi.

Cultural Impacts

The consequences of globalized cuisine are not just environmental, however. There are many cultural implications as well. Ethnic food is accessible to all, but it has special meaning to people of that ethnic group; it is a symbol of their ethnic identity. Thus, the presentation of that food and how it is perceived and experienced by outsiders can have high stakes for people of that ethnicity.

Sharing food is a symbolic act that can cross borders and promote understanding and goodwill among people of different backgrounds.²⁰⁵ However, it can also be used as a weapon to degrade people of different backgrounds. By denigrating ethnic food as foreign and strange, Americans are, by extension, denigrating the culture as foreign and strange. This is also the reason why "food adventuring" can toe the line between being appreciative versus being appropriative.²⁰⁶ Using someone else's cultural identity symbols as an adventure or a hobby is an act of privilege. Considering people of that ethnic group may have faced discrimination and teasing for their culture, it does not sit well when that culture suddenly becomes trendy. This is especially true when someone uses their experiences at "authentic" ethnic restaurants as evidence of their personal worldliness. Cultural appropriation is defined as a practice that involves taking

²⁰⁵ Susan Kalcik, "Ethnic Foodways in America: Symbol and the Performance of Identity," in *Ethnic and Regional Foodways in the United States: The Performance of Group Identity*, eds. Linda Keller Brown and Kay Mussell (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1985), 37.

²⁰⁶ Ashlie Stevens, "Stop Thinking and Just Eat: When 'Food Adventuring' Trivializes Culture," *The Guardian*, June 1, 2015.

parts of a specific culture, commodifying them, and, in the process, trivializing them. This feeling of appropriation is certainly understandable under the circumstances.

Thus, it is important to consider how Japanese restaurants are representing Japanese food and Japanese identity. Our attitudes toward food from different cultures can, in turn, inform our attitudes about those cultures and the people who comprise them. Japanese food is typically more expensive, high status food. This, in turn, affects how Americans perceive Japanese people. Similarly, eating sushi in a sleek, modern restaurant will send a different message about Japanese culture than eating that same sushi from a plastic to-go container at a desk, even though both modes of sushi eating could be considered "authentic" to Japanese life in their own ways. Our perceptions of culture based on food can have very real effects. This is partially why the Japanese government wants to begin their program to certify restaurants selling Japanese food.²⁰⁷ In Japan, sushi making is an art form deeply tied to the country's heritage, and the government wants to regulate how foreigners experience that cultural craft. It has profound implications for the country's national image and reputation. Considering Japan's history of equating traditional cuisine with national identity, this certification program and the international image it is in place to maintain highlight the importance of perceptions of culture abroad.

Many Americans, particularly white Americans, tend to view everything as accessible to them, not considering the significance something might have to another group. Just because these appropriative moments are not intended to offend doesn't mean they won't. We will be better consumers of culture if we consider other perspectives and realize the importance of making informed culinary decisions. It does not have to be difficult or complicated, but approaching ethnic food with the right attitude can make all the difference. It is important to acknowledge that eating ethnic food does not lend insight into a culture's "exotic" ways, that it is

²⁰⁷ Marshall, "Japan Is Launching a Program to Fight Back Against Bad Sushi."

not a platform to express one's sophistication or adventurous spirit.²⁰⁸ The food a restaurant patron is eating is the same food that a whole culture has been eating for everyday sustenance for generations, or at least some approximation of it. An entire rich, complex culture is not merely a trend to be tasted and bypassed when the next cuisine comes into fashion. However, the excitement built up around a particular culture's cuisine can also be used as an opportunity. Food is an accessible way to introduce people to a culture and open the door to greater knowledge about a particular heritage.

So, by all means, go out and eat! Experience an introduction to many different cultures. Just remember that it is only that: an introduction. Eating new foods can be fun, but it is important to realize that food is only one small piece of a much larger picture. With the globalization of diverse cuisines, it is now easier than ever to engage with different cultures. It is also now more important than ever to be an informed eater who respects the history and heritage attached to the foods.

²⁰⁸ Stevens, "Stop Thinking and Just Eat."

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