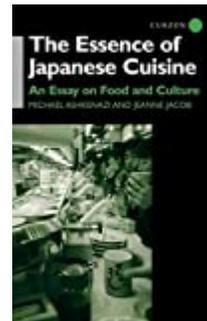




**Michael Ashkenazi, Jeanne Jacob.** *The Essence of Japanese Cuisine: An Essay on Food and Culture.* Richmond and Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000. xiii + 252 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7007-1085-0.



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## Sushi Civilization

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The Japanese have given the world great food. Sushi, tempura and instant ramen are recognized and eaten in every major city in the world and not just by expatriate Japanese. Ashkenazi and Jacob take us back to the roots of that cuisine, arguing that Japanese food is not just food. Japanese food is inextricably linked to cultural practices and social interactions particular to Japan. So this book is not just about food, cooking and eating, but also about culture, as you would expect from a pair of anthropologists. *The Essence of Japanese Cuisine* is a timely addition to the growing anthropological literature on food, and fills the remarkable gap in academic Japanese studies on the same subject. There are serious flaws in the conception and execution of this “essay” which make further studies and discourse necessary, but it is certainly a substantial contribution in an important area.

This is an organized book: ten chapters, each of which has between five and eight subheadings. The first two chapters are mainly directed at anthropologists interested in the methodology and definitions necessary to

carry out this kind of research and analysis. Detailed descriptions of “food events” throughout the book demonstrate the authors’ careful observation and data collection, not to mention great familiarity with Japanese food and a certain lushness of narration. The third chapter is a very satisfying introduction to Japanese food history that, by design, clearly introduces many of the issues of later chapters. These introductory chapters quite effectively set the stage for the heart of the book which follows.

Chapters Four and Five divide up Japanese food events and food preparation largely according to existing Japanese categories, providing a common vocabulary for author and reader; a reader unfamiliar with Japanese food will find this section a particularly efficient introduction to the subject. Chapter Five also includes, amidst the broiling, boiling and frying, introductions to Japanese cultural ideas and existing scholarly understandings of Japanese culture. Thus the discussion of raw foods includes mention of Daoism and the importance of knives in Japanese craft; the discussion of table-cooked meals includes a demographic and generational analysis of food

tastes; the section on noodles also covers concepts of cultural purity. “Male and Female in the Food Game,” (pp. 105-111) is mainly concerned with sweets, traditionally considered women’s food, and exotic foods associated with male potency, but it also wanders into the area of cultural roles, gender transgression (*onna! gata*, of course) and Johann Huizinga’s concept of play. Curiously, Jacob and Ashkenazi rarely invoke gender as an analytical category, in spite of the highly gendered nature of the food loci they identify; when they do address it, aside from the brief encounter with transgression through sweets, the answers are quick and almost glib (p. 211).

The concept of “food loci” in Chapter Six is stimulating, though Ashkenazi and Jacob’s specific application of it to Japan is not entirely convincing. They certainly get credit for identifying the crucial connection between food and place in Japan, but the implications of specific loci needs another monograph or two. The first, and most important locus is the home, followed by restaurants of great variety and bars. The section on ethnic restaurants leads into a discussion of sophistication and restaurant choice among Japanese and how Japanese cultural dictates “correlate with certain eating out habits” (p. 134). They could have followed up by examining the range of choices *within* restaurants, and how many of these choices are predetermined by social factors like class and group dynamics; they hint at this on p. 58 but, as will be discussed later, Japanese as eaters are strangely absent. The last section, using a daily routine to illuminate food loci function, is interesting, but reveals an important lacuna: school lunches. The one-page discussion (p. 136) of the relationship between mothers and the state-run school system is later supplemented with a one-page discussion of curry rice (pp. 180-181) in schools. But any study of food culture, particularly one which acknowledges the power of school lunches to influence tastes and habits (p. 180), cannot ignore both the socialization and the aesthetics of the next generation.[1]

The chapter on aesthetics is ambitious, but whether it succeeds will depend on the reader. Any food experience is “multi-dimensional” (taste, texture, utensil, visual presentation, social context), but Jacob and Ashkenazi argue here that “The essential nature of Japanese food is its conscious multi-dimensionality.” (p. 151) In other words, not only is Japanese cuisine deeply embedded in Japanese culture, but also food producers and consumers are sufficiently aware of the rules of food events that a failure (or “solecism”) in any of these dimensions is immediately obvious. Their argument about Japanese

culture continues: “This tight weave of socio-cultural elements helps explain why Japanese often feel uncomfortable outside the heavy multi- and self-referential context of their culture (and why some Japanese individuals feel stifled by it!), and why non-Japanese find Japanese culture so difficult to penetrate. It is not that any one element is uniquely strange or inimitable, it is that the weave of the cultural structure, the prevalence of interleaved signifiers and ideas, is so tight.” (p. 160). This interleaving makes it very difficult to export Japanese cuisine successfully (and the examples offered are invariably failures at some level: e.g. pp. 87, n. 3; 129-131), and helps to explain how new foods are introduced and accepted (pp. 177-187). But it also opens up the book to charges of cultural essentialism (if the title hadn’t done that already): it is not really clear that other cultures are really less tightly woven, less inter-referential. One could argue that the reason sushi and curry are presented differently outside of Japan is that they are being adapted to the new food cultures within which they now exist. What cultural nexus makes New Yorkers look down on almost every attempt at bagels outside of New York? What Jacob and Ashkenazi identify as exporting failures are actually highly successful and necessary evolutions similar to what new foods go through entering Japanese cuisine.

Ashkenazi and Jacob, anthropologists who cut their teeth on festivals and folk crafts, respectively (and other traditional arts, p. 209), seem to accept without question the Japanese contention that their culture is uniquely impenetrable without total immersion and acceptance of its premises. Japan has a rich tradition of esoteric learning, particularly in its traditional arts, and a tendency to valorize “insider” perspectives. Ikebana (pp. 158-159) is an excellent example of an insiders’ art, incomprehensible without extensive explication. In these esoteric systems, rules and theory become a replacement for talent or taste; “proper” becomes the definition of success, rather than “beautiful.” The tea ceremony also (p. 199), among the majority of its practitioners, is more about rules and form than it is about aesthetics and awareness.[2] Jacob and Ashkenazi have done a service in articulating the rules and theory of Japanese cuisine as an esoteric art, but they have not done as good a job studying the realities of Japanese society. Their discussion of sushi, for example (pp. 200-211) emphasizes individual service, dynamic presentation, and mutual understanding between preparer and eater, but nearly ignores the fact that most sushi is not eaten at sushi bars a la carte, but as *teishoku* sets, with little choice, individual taste, or interaction involved. While I agree that it is important to understand

the subtleties of culture, it is also important to recognize the limits of subtlety, to avoid over-dramatizing.

Chapter Eight, "Learning the Cultural Rules," is somewhat mistitled, being a little bit about socialization and continuing food education in Japan, and more about changing tastes. Changes in food habits are the result of the gradual violation of limits and extension of ingredients and preparations over time: curry rice, cheesecake and avocado are a few of the foods that were at one time fads, but which are now integrated into Japanese cuisine. The description of the process by which innovation is introduced gradually is a model worth considering in other areas of culture and in other societies. Ashkenazi and Jacob argue that "Japanese individuals are far less likely than many Europeans to turn up their noses at new culinary experiments and pleasures" (p. 223), because the process of adoption and adaptation provides a comforting context for experimentation (cf. pp. 118; 127 on mayonnaise). The discussion of cooking comic books is mildly interesting, but the discussion of cooking shows that it overshadows could provide a springboard to a comparative analysis of food television in other societies. The *meibutsu* (local specialties) segment considers the effect of modernity on localism, both in the creation of new local identities through products like food, and the broader marketing of regionalism in a national market.

"The Art of Dining" chapter uses the tea ceremony (*chanoyu*) and sushi as the quintessential dining experiences, the inescapable references which are unquestionably the most distinctive forms of Japanese cuisine. Here the authors examine the concept of connoisseurship, which they claim is "an honest expression of a cultural imperative" (p. 209) in Japan. This is, unfortunately, one of the few places where the issue of Japanese as *eaters* rather than as cooks or sociological niches is directly addressed. It is at this point, if not before, that the astute reader will realize how absent Japanese voices have been in this study. The lingering descriptions of food events by Jacob and Ashkenazi are good participant observation, but Japanese who are not involved in the food industry have almost no voice. The few descriptions of home cooking are either generalized aggregate descriptions or special event meals with guests, a relatively rare event in Japan. When they do ask non-professionals, the results are mixed: "One of our acquaintances, a professional Shinto priest, laughed when asked about the ritual and symbolic significance of some of the colour combinations and food arrangements in offerings. They simply look better that way. Making an offering *look* good is simply making an offering: there is no difference, be-

cause food, for the *kami* or anyone else, is seen as much as tasted'" (p. 155, emphasis in original). Though there are places where they acknowledge the importance of individual agency in developing culture (e.g. pp. 142, n. 4; 186; 197), this essay is a rather rarified presentation of food. The book provides ammunition to self-styled gourmets and "experts" in their constant quest for intimidating "inner knowledge" (p. 208), as much as it illuminates the structure of a complex and interesting society.

The book has a host of annoying minor errors and bad editorial decisions. The "Food in historical theory" section excludes *kashrut* or *hallal* (p. 16), sophisticated early systems of food philosophy, in favor of Greek and Roman philosophers who are handled simplistically. On p. 146 Ashkenazi and Jacob write "It is no accident that the Japanese flag is based on two simple primary colors, red and white," but most national flags are based on simple colors and patterns, because they are intended to be identifiable from a distance. Definitions like "food" and "food event" in chapter two, later joined by explanations of "art" (p. 160) and "fad" (p. 177) are necessary defensive mechanisms, I suppose, but they complicate common-sense concepts and create openings for debates where little existed before. There is awkward over-qualification: "[I]t is in general often true..." (p. 67); "[A]t all times the aesthetic principles articulated in the Tea ceremony help serve as a benchmark of what is 'Japanese' or at least, what is thought to be so, whether invented or not." (p. 140); "[A]s is often the case among certain populations..." (p. 165). There is unnecessary repetition: curry rice as a civilizing influence in the Meiji era (pp. 45, 64, 180); coffee as the new national drink of Japan (pp. 53, 116-117); the Japanese monopsony of Jamaican Blue Mountain coffee (pp. 59, 117). There is also one unreconciled contradiction: the Japanese economy is described as domestically driven on p. 140, three pages after it is described as export oriented (p. 137). There are misspellings ("desiratium" instead of desideratum on p. 216; "Huitzinga" instead of Huizinga on p. 110) and inconsistencies ("konbu (kelp) stock (dashi)" on p. 203) which more careful editing should have caught. The index includes the heading "differences between children and their parents" but does not include entries for demographics, urbanization or gender. The photographs are of very limited utility and mixed quality (black and white, and several are unfocused), which is remarkable considering the importance of presentation. And the assertion that Western cuisine culture is the result of French Revolution aristocratic migrants (p. 26, and it should be the *chefs* deprived of aristocratic employers) is being challenged: restaurants

began as “health-food” establishments serving broths and bouillons.[3]

There are two other errors that are worth note because they illustrate the problem with “essential” cultural arguments. Noh theater is not as minimalist as its theorists suggest (p. 161): props and often quite a few characters share the stage with the main actor and musicians. That spare, compact stage gets pretty crowded sometimes, and the subtlety of movement that is the hallmark of Noh is often interspersed with lively, if stylized, action. Fifteenth century tea master Sen no Rikyu’s execution was not the result of tea utensil price-fixing, as they assert (p. 199). That is widely recognized (at least outside of the insular “world of tea”) to be a bald-faced rationalization, rather than the real reason.[4] While the importance of making connections across disciplines is unquestioned, it must be done somewhat cautiously.

The handling of references is somewhat frustrating to an academic reader: rather than using citations, there is a short list of relevant works with each chapter and a more complete bibliography at the end of the book. There are citations where specific works are mentioned or details extracted. On the positive side, the glossary is nicely done, even though the writing is sufficiently clear that one shouldn’t need to refer to it often.

Ashkenazi and Jacob conclude with a tribute to Japan not just as the source of extraordinary new foods, but as a model of innovation and adaptation. Readers who found the tone of the book to be somewhat worshipping will find confirmation here: “Where European sensibilities searched first for *quantities* of food, and only later were tamed into the realm of taste and restraint, never really losing the preference for great masses of food and grandiose gastronomic statements ... Japanese preference has always been for a great variety (if possible) of small items, prepared as naturally as possible, and presented elegantly.” (p. 222; emphasis in original)

They take a strong stand supporting “traditional” food values (seasonal local ingredients; indescribably subtle connoisseurship; individual service) over modern “industrial” food culture (diversity of ingredients, efficiencies of scale), though they try to reconcile the two by using Japanese gradualism (real or imagined) as a model for world food culture. (pp. 46-51, 142, 165, 200-211, 222-223) Japan, in their view, is a food-connoisseurship society, efficient in its use of resources, with healthful and tasteful food accessible, due to relatively even wealth distribution, to most of its members. Japanese food even has the potential to alleviate the anomie and hyper-individualism of Twenty-first century life (pp. 218-221). This essay, then, like so many others in the realm of business, design, and education, takes a distinctly Japanese approach to solving the problems of the Western world. Jacob and Ashkenazi make it clear that cuisine is culturally integrated, not easily exported: the Japanese are different, and only by grasping that difference in its totality can we be saved. It is a disappointing conclusion to a flawed but engaging argument.

#### NOTES

[1]. Merry White, *The Japanese Educational Challenge: A Commitment to Children*, Tokyo: Kodansha, 1987, pp. 110-111, 130-131.

[2]. Paul Varley, *Japanese Culture*, Fourth Edition, Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2000, pp. 128-129, 160-163.

[3]. Eugene Weber, “Review of Rebecca L. Spang, *The Invention of the Restaurant: Paris and Modern Gastronomic Culture*,” *American Historical Review*, Vol. 105, No. 4 (October 2000), pp. 1401-1402.

[4]. Mary Elizabeth Berry, *Hideyoshi*, Harvard East Asian Monographs No. 146, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982, pp. 223-225. Varley, p. 163.

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