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Cultural divides

What takes the fancy of Figaro when it comes to what Americans like?

What elements of Japan's culinary culture should the French incorporate into their own?

In July this year, Figaro, France's biggest-selling daily, ran a series of articles on people's preferences in different countries. The object of the series was to examine other countries' cultures in detail, and this particular article focused on food and eating.

For each country featured, Figaro ran an analysis of what it believed the French ought to incorporate in their own cuisine, as well as the aspects they would do better not to emulate.

Here are the conclusions drawn by Figaro from its observations of the United States.

According to the writer, one thing the French would do well to learn from their U.S. brethren is "to laugh in restaurants."

It's true that in France, raucous merriment is not generally a feature of the dining experience. For we French, eating is a serious pursuit, an opportunity to savor the food in front of us and debate the merits of the latest films we've seen. Laughter is limited to the recounting of a funny story.

Personally, this style of eating coincides exactly with my own preference. But the Figaro reporter, perhaps more American in his manners than yours truly, believes the French ought to laugh more, that is, like Americans.

If you ask me, U.S.-style laughing is just noisy, to the extent of hindering conversation at surrounding tables. Annoying in the extreme. Figaro's next candidate for inclusion in French cuisine is the barbecue. But to the French, barbecuing is too basic, and frankly, cannot be viewed as cooking. As a natural-born

Frenchwoman, I must agree. But the Figaro writer thinks we should develop more admiration for this type of food, and tries to convince readers that the expertise required--adjusting the flame to just the right heat (so it doesn't char the food, or leave it half-raw); stopping fat from flying about everywhere; and not allowing already cooked food to overheat, yet offering it before it cools--is worthy of respect.

The writer's list of what France can learn from American culinary culture does not end there. Next he sings the praises of the doggy bag. On this, I profess to agree. Afraid of being thought of as terribly gauche, the French never have the courage to request a doggy bag. In fact, in France it is seen as extremely bad manners to leave even a small amount on one's plate. Such behavior is frowned upon when half the planet's population is starving. But if, even then, one can't help leaving some of the meal, the doggy bag is a brilliant idea. Not to mention it makes for some very happy "doggies".

Nor is Figaro's writer opposed to the hamburger, which the French have already embraced, if not, admittedly, to nearly the same extent as the Japanese. Not only that, he even goes so far as to include on his list Coke and the banana split! But let's not be too quick to judge. It's only on the condition that ingestion of these is restricted to once a month.

Having extolled the virtues of Coca-Cola and the banana split, the writer concludes by citing one aspect of the American way of eating the French should most definitely not import: obesity. On this, nobody would disagree. Incidentally, there is a good way to avoid obesity: incorporate elements of Japanese cuisine in one's diet. Needless to say by this I mean traditional Japanese cuisine.

The Figaro series did not cover Japan, so I've

endeavored to come up with my own list. Though it's a mystery to me why the Figaro writer made no mention of sushi, which was introduced with great success to France around the same time as manga.

One could list countless wonderful Japanese foods and dishes—tofu (soy bean cheese), miso (fermented soy bean paste), rice cooked in water, sushi, to name just a few—that are healthy and thus help guard against excess weight, but here I'd like to talk about wagashi: Japanese confections. The vast majority of wagashi have a base of azuki bean paste and sugar, and use no fat whatsoever. In other words they contain none of that unhealthy ingredient almost ubiquitous in Western cakes and confections.

Like Japanese cooking, a sense of seasonality is a vital component of wagashi.

Allow me to reminisce here. Not long after my

arrival in Japan, which happened to be in spring, I was presented with a small box of sakura-mochi rice cakes. Sakura-mochi is the archetypal spring confection in Japan. The mochi rice cake is wrapped in a salted cherry tree leaf, the mildly briny tang acting as the perfect foil to the sweetness of the azuki paste, resulting in a subtle yet sublime contrast of sweet and saline. Enjoy one with a cup of green tea for a heavenly taste sensation...with minimal calories to boot!

Other things we French should definitely adopt from Japan's culinary culture are a sensible, that is not too late, dinner time, and a talent for arranging food with the beauty of a scroll. By now you'll realize that here is a food culture about as far removed from the hamburger as it is possible to be.

*This is the English rendering of a Japanese article originally translated from French.

