

'Japaneseness' as a measurement of culinary authenticity in Hong Kong's Michelin rated Japanese restaurants

Journal of Tourism, Hospitality & Culinary Arts (JTHCA)
2017, Vol. 9 (1) pp 27-32
© The Author(s) 2017
Reprints and permission:
UITM Press
Submit date: 25th Feb 2017
Accept date: 18th April 2017
Publish date: 30th June 2017

Watson Baldwin*

School of Hotel and Tourism Management
Hong Kong Polytechnic University
watson.baldwin@polyu.edu.hk

Proposed citation:

Baldwin, W. (2017). 'Japaneseness' as a measurement of culinary authenticity in Hong Kong's Michelin rated Japanese restaurants. *Journal of Tourism, Hospitality & Culinary Arts*, 9(1), 27-32.

Abstract

Culinary authenticity has been discussed and interpreted by many scholars in previous works and studies. From a recent study examining the chef's perception of Michelin rated Japanese cuisine in Hong Kong, an interesting conclusion was reached. The Japanese chefs of these restaurants in Hong Kong measure their cuisines' culinary authenticity based on the "Japaneseness" attributes within their restaurant and dining experience. For these chefs, who are transferring their cuisine to a different country with a unique palate and dining culture, the usage of traditional Japanese foods and techniques becomes even more important. For them, maintaining the "Japaneseness" of their cuisine while serving guests is at the heart of what they are trying to accomplish. In the restaurants, "Japaneseness" comes in many forms that included but are not limited to Japanese hospitality technique, training, omotenashi and culinary authenticity.

Keywords:

Japaneseness, Culinary Authenticity, Hong Kong, Michelin, Restaurant

1 Introduction

The notion of "Japaneseness" has been put forth by researchers from various disciplines looking at the modernization and globalization of all things Japanese. The ideology has been presented in research contexts such as influences of the post-war

culture and Japanese identity, tracking the globalization of tuna in relation to sushi and its increased popularity, as well as the cultural representation of omotenashi and the areas that Japanese hospitality can be experienced (McCormack, 1993; Bestor, 2000, Cwiertka, 2006). The book *Modern Japanese Cuisine: Food, power and national identity* written by Prof. Katarzyna Cwiertka examine the history and influences of Japanese cuisine both in Japan and worldwide. In addition, a thesis prepared by Tanaka (2008) presents Japaneseness in part with Bestor (2000) statement on how “just because sushi is available in cities around the world doesn’t mean that it has lost its status as Japanese cultural property.” Tanaka (2008) goes on to analyze Japanese culinary culture in her work by obtaining the perspective of Japanese restaurants in Toronto and how the local Canadian diner perceived Japanese cuisine and identity. In 2013, Japan’s Ministry of Forestry and Fishery (MAFF) indoctrinated Japanese “Washoku” into the Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity at the UNESCO Convention for Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage held in Baku, Azerbaijan Republic (MAFF, 2013). Officially listed as “Washoku; Traditional dietary cultures of the Japanese,” this listing was done to help preserve the traditional cooking methods, ideologies and procedures of Japanese foods as the cuisine continues to rise in popularity through its globalization.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Japanese chefs in Hong Kong perceive “Japaneseness” as Culinary Authenticity

The ideology of authenticity in research is heavily contested and argued throughout many disciplines. This research note does not contribute to that argument and is set rather on the culinary authenticity in the scope of discussed research. The research being presented focuses on a chef’s ability to transfer the essence, integrity and authenticity of *their* cuisine from one place to another (Baldwin, 2016). Within Hong Kong’s large Japanese restaurant market (over 1200 Japanese restaurants), there is a nano-sized market of Michelin rated Japanese restaurants in Hong Kong (JETRO, 2015). These restaurants represent various forms of Japanese cuisine such as sushi, kaiseki or the most formal and seasonal of Japanese cuisines, yakitori/yakiniku or grilled items, ramen which is the Japanese representation of a Chinese noodle soup but has become a staple in Japanese food, and lastly there are izakayas which are the Japanese version of pubs (Cwiertka, 2006). These four areas were chosen because they are listed in Hong Kong’s Michelin Guide 2014/2015 list with recognition varying from Bib Gourmande to having 3 stars. Nine (9) restaurants were examined in Hong Kong along with 2 of their sister properties in Tokyo, Japan. Hong Kong, at that time, was the only place in the Asia where Michelin rated chefs or brands from Japan have successfully established their second property so they are the picture of transference with regards to cuisine.

3 Methodology

Through the qualitative methods of semi-structured interviews and field observations into the restaurants and kitchens of the restaurants, the abovementioned research study was conducted. While most of the restaurants were located in Hong Kong, several of the restaurants had properties in Hong Kong and Tokyo; as such the researcher was able to interview and observe the chefs in their culinary environments. Special attention was paid to the chef's preparation and cooking of foods as well as in-depth flavor analysis of dishes found in restaurants in both cities. The areas that were discussed the most by the chefs were; Hong Kong's palate and dining culture, Omotenashi, and Training with regards to cuisine transfer.

4 Findings

4.1 Hong Kong's Palate and Dining Culture

The chefs commented that one of the biggest complaints they receive is not about food quality but rather the speed of food getting to the table in the restaurants. An example would be the serving of a kaiseki meal. The traditional kaiseki experience is a multi-course meal served at relatively slow speed to allow the diners time to enjoy and reflect on the experience as a whole. The chefs serving kaiseki meals said that many of their Hong Kong diners want their food faster and prefer to eat in a more family style or "traditional Chinese" style with all the plates being delivered to the table at once. This setting doesn't fit their service dynamic. However, they did try to make some changes to their service accommodate the dining speed for those guests. Another point was on the drinking culture of Hong Kong people while eating Japanese food. One of the chefs mentioned that in his restaurant, there are diners that come in with the perception that a certain style of food has to have a certain style of beverage paired with it. Ta Vie's Japanese-French mantra invites such a notion, and for the chef, this presents a challenge because of the types of ingredients he serves in his cuisine which is primarily seafood based. Using his perception of the customer's feedback and the approach to fine tune the dishes per beverage per guest is an astounding feat that he welcomes so that he can please his customers. He commented that a lot of his guests view his restaurant as French rather than Japanese, whereas he sees it as a French influenced interpretation. His guest often takes this an assumption that they can follow the traditional French food and beverage pairing guidelines, which proves to be difficult.

4.1.1 Omotenashi

Omotenashi, culturally, is a very big service element that many Japanese restaurants in Hong Kong are lacking when speaking to the interviewees. However, in the Michelin rated restaurants, this isn't a concern. This could simply be because of the caliber of restaurant and standard of work ethic that is required; fine dining is of course noticeably different than a quick service restaurant (QSR) or casual take away. However, it doesn't

mean that the other markets couldn't be up to the standards of Omotenashi that the Michelin restaurants are, it could just be an issue of transferring culture and work ethic rather than cuisine. The Michelin rated Japanese restaurants have demonstrated that Omotenashi is one of the cornerstones of being a high-level restaurant. Guests can see that there is a great degree of care and attention paid to this concept within each restaurant. However, there is a separation between Omotenashi, Japanese dining culture and the Hong Kong perception of Japanese dining culture. From the chef's perspective, Omotenashi is just as important as their food that comes out of the kitchen. The challenge resides with how the chefs and the restaurant staff ensure that all aspects of Omotenashi are practiced and observed throughout the dining experience.

4.1.2 Training

Hong Kong's market of Japanese Michelin rated restaurants in less than ten years old, and has only experienced extreme growth in the last three years and with that has come to a change of what Japanese cuisine has been in Hong Kong. The training and education behind the technique and skill of these food preparations are one of the topics that the chefs pointed as areas of concern. The need for a Japanese chef at this level is absolute and finding the staff to train just as important. There is a heavy emphasis on being able to find the right junior level staff that can be trained to perform at the high level they require. Many of the restaurants employ a large percentage of Japanese staff rather than the local Hong Kong workforce. But in some cases, they can send the locals out to train (in Japan or other restaurants) and learn more techniques so they can produce the cuisine at the level that the chefs desire. Respondents pointed out that in the low to mid-tier markets of Japanese restaurants, hiring and coaching staff is more common and this makes running the operations difficult today because of chefs and workers will jump jobs quickly for higher pay. One of the chefs mentioned that rather than spend the money bringing staff from Japan, he would focus on proper skill training of local staff to bring them to the level of skill that was required for the restaurant.

4.2 Comparison and Analysis: Hong Kong to Japan

To examine the transference of cuisine in Michelin Japanese restaurants, the sushi restaurants Iwa (JP), Ginza Iwa (HK), Shikon (HK) and Yoshitake (JP) were analyzed as a direct restaurant comparison for cuisine transference. While conducting the comparison and analysis of the four restaurants, two major themes emerge as issues and concerns for the transference of Cuisine: Menu Item Seasonality and Product Availability.

4.2.1 The Sushi Iwa Brand

At the most basic level, the chefs mentioned that the palate difference between the Japanese and Hong Kong people is very different with regards to their tastes in seafood. Comparing the seafood offerings at Sushi Iwa, several dishes had been changed. The

chef at Iwa Tokyo commented that he knows it is difficult, but he follows a different track of seasons for the fish he chooses. He acknowledges that the Hong Kong acceptable palate range for seafood is different than the Japanese and in the Hong Kong branch, in some cases, many have said they don't like certain fish that they serve. He mentioned seafood products like various mackerels, surf clam, dried fish roe (karasumi) and other seasonal fish as examples of foods that weren't acceptable for Hong Kong palate but are prized by the Japanese. The sushi itself in the restaurant was different between the restaurants with regards to taste. Both chefs acknowledged when preparing the rice, they had to take a different approach to the seasoning of the sushi rice. Iwa's style of rice seasoned very strongly with salt and vinegar, which they found was too intense for Hong Kong people. So, they made changes to both the style of rice and how they seasoned it when serving in Hong Kong. These can be considered major changes in transferring the cuisine and maintaining Japaneseness from one place to another.

4.2.2 The Yoshitake Brand

These restaurants are the closest to direct transfer of cuisine and Japaneseness that can be presented in this note. From speaking with both chefs and getting a firm understanding of what the goal was when expanding to Hong Kong, they have succeeded at direct transfer. There are some subtle differences but nothing as major as mentioned before. Being able to watch them each work on the same dishes was a great way to see their symmetry and skill. The chefs do have a slightly different skill when preparing the fish; the difference is so subtle it may be unnoticeable if you are not looking for it. A guest who dined at the restaurant in Tokyo the same time I was there commented, "It's amazing, I have been to both Shikon (HK) and Yoshitake (JP) numerous times, and I can't believe that is the same meal, the same exact meal." This verified when of transferring cuisine not only are there issues with palate differences and culture, there are skill differences between the chefs as well. For these chefs, their desire to maintain the Japaneseness of their cuisine speaks to their desire and mission to maintain the culinary authenticity of Japanese food, in that they have succeeded.

5 Conclusion

As this research topic is new to the field of culinary research, further exploration is required. The analysis of Michelin rated Japanese restaurants in Hong Kong is just the beginning. Future research, with regards to Japanese cuisine in Hong Kong, may focus on the consumer perception of culinary authenticity of the Michelin marker and the other market tiers of Japanese restaurants. Future study can also be expanded to other cuisines both in the Michelin guide and in the restaurant market of Hong Kong, as well as with both qualitative and quantitative studies examining the further implications of chef's perceptions of culinary authenticity in Hong Kong.

6 About the author

Watson Baldwin is a Chef turned Food and Beverage researcher. He received his BSc in Culinary Arts Management from The Culinary Institute of America Hyde Park, NY; his MSc in Hospitality Management from The University of North Texas Denton, TX and his D. HTM from Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong SAR. Previously held posts as Chef Lecturer at The University of North Texas and Executive Sous Chef of Dallas Country Club. Research interests include culinary arts and science, gastronomy, nutrition, and dietetics as well cultural flavor transference and perception.

7 References

- Baldwin, W. (2016) *The Transference of Cuisine and Michelin Rated Restaurants: A Chef's Perspective on of Japanese Cuisine in Hong Kong*. School of Hotel and Tourism Management Thesis Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong
- Bestor, C. Theodore. 2000. "How Sushi Went Global." *Foreign Policy*. Nov./Dec. pp. 54-63.
- Cwiertka, K. J., (2006). *Modern Japanese Cuisine: Food, power and national identity*. London: Reaktion Books, 2006.
- Japanese External Trade Organization, JETRO HK (2015)
- McCormack (1993) Japaneseness, *Japanese Studies*, 13:3, 109-110.
- Ministry of Agricultural, Forestry and Fishery (2013) MAFF Update No.762. Available at <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?lg=en&pg=00009>
- Tanaka, N. (2008) *Consuming the "Oriental Other," Constructing the Cosmopolitan Canadian: Reinterpreting Japanese Culinary Culture in Toronto's Japanese Restaurants*. Department of Geography Thesis Queen's University Kingston, Ontario, Canada