

In Kore-eda's kitchens

RANJITA GANESAN

I became acquainted with Kenta last year in January. We had been attending the same lectures in university and were the only two journalists in class. Once over lunch when I brought up Japanese movies, he told me that one of his uncles is doing quite well in film festivals. His diffidence hadn't prepared me for the monumental name he took. "Kore-eda Hirokazu."

Fittingly, this revelation was taking place in a London student haunt known for serving fast meals in very neat boxes. One trademark of Kore-eda's wholesome filmmaking lately has been the meaningful presence of food in it. There is of course his larger investigation of the construct of family, which followed his earlier explorations of death and the otherworld. He is able to shine a torch in the "basement of emotions", as my friend eloquently put it. But also the pantry.

Last month, his *Shoplifters* (2018) had a theatrical release in India. That film has a meal-a-minute, beginning with a dinner of instant ramen and chocolates nicked from a supermarket, as well as croquettes bought from a street vendor. The assortment of individuals eating that three-course spread of junk sent out a warmth that many biological families can only aspire to. It is also a picture of what sustenance can look like on the margins.

Food sets the tone for a tense family gathering in the opening minutes of *Still Walking* (2008). An ageing mother vigorously preps for a feast of fried rice, corn tempura, and iced tea while having a go at her daughter who is trying to help: "Don't mix it like that. How many years have you watched me do this?" While slicing shallots and popping edamame pods, she communicates other, more deep-seated disapprovals, about the daughter's financial vulnerability and her son's marriage to a widow. The activity around the kitchen, which allows for difficult questions to be asked and dodged, is actually a trial in the parental court.



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The filmmaker presents food and drink in the full range of their complex roles — as need, as duty, as memory, and celebration. In 2015's *Our Little Sister*, three siblings bring their step-sister into the household after the death of their estranged father. Moments when they teach young Suzu to make wine using plums from their old family tree, or when she introduces them to the joys of whitebait, convey a sense of acceptance and continuity. Filmed by Mikiya Takimoto, the moreish frames are enough to send one scampering into the kitchen to fix a snack.

The films of Yasujiro Ozu, to whom Kore-eda is frequently compared, also featured countless such scenes. Someone once wrote that awaiting the first eating scene in an Ozu film is as enjoyable as spotting Hitchcock's cameos. For many 1990s kids growing up in India, the first experience of a foreign series was likely *Oshin*, a long-running Japanese drama that Doordarshan aired then. The plot points are hazy now but it memorably had characters sitting in front of kettles or bowls of noodles in every episode.

Japanese television programming, often drawing from *manga* (comics), has taken note of how much of our day is spent cooking, eating and hankering for food. Rather than shooting travel shows where hosts bore you with details about the texture of dishes, they have fiction series where eating prompts characters to enter a bonkers fantasy or quote Goethe and Nietzsche. These tend to be formulaic, silly, and much less emotionally layered than the films — the protagonist here usually has one quirk and each episode revolves around one dish. But, it is still lipsmackingly good television.

Try Netflix's *Kantaro*, about a white-collar worker whose lone vice is playing hooky after sales visits to eat sweets. A modest bowl of *mamekan* (jelly and boiled beans) or a stack of *hottucakes* (pancakes) leaves the otherwise comically serious salesman whimpering with pleasure. Quite like it is *Samurai Gourmet*, the story of a recently retired man who decides to use his free time to look for places to eat. It may not sound like a sustainable theme but *The Solitary Gourmet*, in which a travelling businessman makes regular stops to dine, ran for at least seven seasons in Japan. There must be something about seeing attractive people eat.

When the Palme d'Or was announced for *Shoplifters* last May, I texted Kenta jubilantly and he responded with a photo of Kore-eda and himself, sharing a tray of appetisers in France. Perhaps they started that meal by pronouncing "*itadakimasu*" (I humbly receive). It is certainly an incantation that comes to my mind before any screening of the director's films.