

Japanese food – a lesson in reverence

I asked myself a question. Is it possible to capture the essence of Japanese food without recourse to unusual ingredients? Although accessibility comes in to it, what I really wanted was to get past the usual food suspects and find what lies at the heart of Japanese food. A brief internet search left me uninspired so I turned to books and found 'Japanese Farm Food' by Nancy Singleton Hachisu; a beautiful book yet the Kindle version does it little justice. The lessons I learned through reading this book, and my subsequent experiments in the kitchen, are some of the most valuable I have received during my entire cookery career.

As with any other cuisine, Japanese food is central to her culture and way of life. Like all native cuisines, it is based upon the natural produce that thrives in any given geographical area. Japanese food is about respect for the produce; bringing out the inherent flavours and making them shine. Yet so is any other food worthy of mention. Exactly what is it that sets Japanese food apart? To understand this, I recommend that you cook the meal in the recipe article that follows. Until that point, the differences remain (although clearly obvious) elusive. They do not want to give up their secrets so easily; you must earn them through understanding and respect.

As I cooked, and the various components began stacking up, I began to see how this meal would come together as a whole and that it would do so in an entirely memorable way. Not one of the ingredients was alien to me, largely comprised of foods I eat every day. But the Japanese brief had forced me to focus in a completely different way. I can see why so many people become hooked on this cuisine.

When I ate, and a whole new world of flavour memories sang along my neurons and leaped across synapses, I realised what it is that defines this food. Sensation. The excitation of the senses. Not in the way that food excites all the senses; smell, sight, sound, touch, taste. Yes it works on all of these levels, but there is one sense that works overtime. Taste.

Taste is a physical reaction to food and, essentially, it is how food works. The components of taste all affect each other in numerous ways and it is this knowledge that defines the art of cooking. It is the heartbeat, the baseline, of all food. But then you have flavour. Linked to smell, as the product of aroma molecules, and shaped by taste, these are the nuances. The faint sweetness of garlic in the background, or the sweet symphony of strawberry on a summer's day. This is the bloodstream, the top notes of food that tremble lightly on the surface of your skin. You require both to create a symphony, but it is those visceral tones of the baseline that keep you dancing all night.

And behind this, lies an ethos. Centuries of human endeavour, cultural identity and spiritual shape. Nature is all, and all is nature. To bring us back to Nancy and her wonderful book, it is a lesson in reverence and respect for the land. Again, as all good food should be. But there is a spiritual element, a sense of the pure and clean, that is the essence of the land and the produce that she gives us so willingly. Read the book, it is one that belongs on the well-worn shelf of cookery classics. Anyone who plucks ducks whilst listening to early Joan Baez has to have something worthwhile to pass on.

As a nation of cynics, that stoically weather any storm thrown our way, us Brits may find the idea of getting touchy feely with vegetables and being at one with the food a little hard to stomach. Sarcasm and derision is our default mode. But sarcasm and derision have no place in the kitchen. The very act of cooking is one of love. And it is true, the more love you put into the food the better it will taste. So, pull up a pew by the hearth, immerse yourself in 'Japanese Farm Food' and be properly thankful for the lessons within.