



# Cultural specificity in food choice – The case of ethnography in Japan



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 20 April 2015

Received in revised form

30 July 2015

Accepted 6 September 2015

Available online 9 September 2015

### Keywords:

Food choice

Food variety

Cross-cultural research

Japan

Ethnography

## ABSTRACT

Previous studies examining food choice from a cross-cultural perspective were based primarily on quantitative research using the Food Choice Questionnaire (FCQ). This study suggests ethnography as a complementary research method in cross-cultural food choice studies.

While use of the FCQ resulted in findings of cultural differences in food choice processes, within a preliminary motive list, ethnography allows the exploration of new, possibly culture-specific motives for food choice. Moreover, ethnography allows a deeper understanding of the cultural background of food choice processes in a studied culture.

Using Japan as a case study, this research demonstrates the use of ethnography to argue that variety is a primary motive for food choice in contemporary Japanese culture. Variety is hence regarded here as a part of a larger food culture attribute, an “adventurous palate,” which can also provide a background for previous FCQ findings (Prescott, Young, O’neill, Yau, & Stevens, 2002).

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## 1. Introduction

Furthering the understanding of the human food choice process is of importance due to its involvement in many current social and economic issues, among them the efforts invested in promoting a healthful lifestyle and distribution and marketing challenges in the global food market (Carrillo, Varela, Salvador, & Fiszman, 2011; Dawson, 2013; Dressler & Smith, 2013; Insch & Jackson, 2013). The issue of food choice has therefore been thoroughly examined in various studies, exploring the contribution of different factors, among them biological, psychological, economic, as well as cultural (Drewnowski, 1997; Furst, Connors, Bisogni, Sobal, & Falk, 1996; Konttinen, Männistö, Sarlio-Lähteenkorva, Silventoinen, & Haukkala, 2010).

This study will discuss cultural affiliation as a factor involved in food choice. Food-related choices are affected by culturally-defined practices passed on from one generation to the next (Aboud, 2011), and thus, while people are physically able to consume numerous foodstuffs, membership in a certain culture, considerably narrows acceptable options (Fieldhouse, 1995).

### 1.1. Expressions of cultural effect on adults and children

The effect of culture on food choice was observed among adults,

who perceived “normal” eating behaviors in their society as a reference point for their own food choices during interviews (Bisogni, Connors, Devine, & Sobal, 2002). It was also found in children, who, while discussing their food choice processes, appeared to rely on social acceptability more than on health considerations (Ross, 1995).

### 1.2. Cross-cultural implications

Cultural influence on food choice was also noted in studies using the Food Choice Questionnaire (FCQ) (Steptoe, Pollard, & Wardle, 1995). These studies concluded that motives for food choice are prioritized differently in different cultures. For example, Russians were much more attuned to food availability, in comparison with other cultures (Honkanen & Frewer, 2009); sensory appeal (taste, appearance, texture, and smell) was found more important to participants of European descent; Filipino consumers were more affected by mood (Januszewska, Pieniak, & Verbeke, 2011); health factors held precedence for Chinese-origin participants; and Japanese considered price as significant, and sensory appeal as less crucial (Prescott et al., 2002).

The cited studies all used the original FCQ (Steptoe et al., 1995), or its modified version (Lindeman & Väänänen, 2000), yet it is clear, that as a measure constructed from data derived from one specific culture (British), the FCQ is limited in its ability to offer extended cultural backgrounds to cross-cultural differences and might also not take into account motives relevant to cultures absent from the

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initial data pool (Prescott et al., 2002; Steptoe et al., 1995).

Taking Japan as an example, there is a gap in the understanding of cultural settings connected with the lesser importance the Japanese ascribe to sensory appeal. There is also a lack of knowledge regarding culturally-related food choice motives unique to contemporary<sup>1</sup> Japanese culture.

Use of alternative methodological approaches may prove effective in the effort to minimize these gaps. Ethnography shall be discussed in this article as a viable research method for the study of specific cultural food choice characteristics in the broader context of cross-cultural differences.

## 2. Material and methods

### 2.1. Ethnography as a cultural research method

As a qualitative research method, ethnography offers a means for close examination of cultural phenomena, compared to most quantitative methods. It is designed to enable a deeper investigation of different aspects of social life. The ethnographer strives to represent the studied phenomenon the way it is manifested in the field, as compared to laboratory or survey methodologies (Olliffe & Bottorff, 2006). Learning about social or cultural phenomena within their natural settings is considered crucial for understanding certain human behaviors, since they are significantly influenced by the setting (Wilson, 1977).

In ethnography, data is collected while conducting field work and applying participant observations: taking part in the daily life of the studied culture, usually for a long period of time, using personal experience, informal conversations, and interviews, in addition to documents and artifacts of various kinds, as multiple sources of information for analysis (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007).

#### 2.1.1. Theoretical implications

As a qualitative research method grounded in a constructivist view, ethnography strives to learn the way reality is constructed by people of a studied culture (Bernard, 2006). Ethnographic description integrates the emic view of people from within the studied culture, and the interpretative etic view of the researcher who is typically an outsider. A combination of these two perspectives can facilitate an understanding of the studied culture within its own parameters, as well as in comparison with other cultures (Befu, 1989; Sanjek, 2000). In the current study, this technique enables a discussion about unique qualities of contemporary Japanese food culture which might otherwise not come to light.

Unlike some other research methods, ethnographic research categories are not determined a priori, but are generated a posteriori from the data collected in the course of field work, thus affording an opportunity to make use of a deep acquaintance with the social environment before drawing a theoretical framework (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). This aspect of ethnography could prove effective in the search for culturally-specific food choice motives.

#### 2.2. Limitations

It is important to assert in advance that knowledge produced by means of ethnographic methodology has certain constraints. Ethnography is an interpretive study which deals with people's perceptions and beliefs rather than with numerical data. Its product, as a written composition, is subject to the experience and

expressive choices of the ethnographer, an individual influenced by political, economic, academic, and other considerations (Van Maanen, 2011). Therefore, the quality of the empirical data and theoretical claims of an ethnographic study cannot be assessed by the quantitative concepts of validity and reliability, but rather by different criteria, such as “trustworthiness,” as elucidated by Guba and Lincoln (Guba & Lincoln, 1985; Guba, 1981). Among the acceptable criteria for trustworthiness are: triangulation, the use of multiple sources for data collection or analysis in order to examine a certain social phenomenon from various perspectives (Creswell, 2009); rich, thick descriptions, detailed and contextualized in a way that enables the reader to make an autonomous decision regarding the transferability of the specific claims (Geertz, 1973); and reflexive account of the personal status and circumstances of the ethnographer in the field (Davies, 2008).

### 2.3. Aims of the study

The aims of this study are twofold. Methodologically, it suggests ethnography as a complementing approach to questionnaire methodology in cross-cultural food choice research, highlighting its unique contribution to acquiring a deep understanding of cultural backgrounds and specificities of such choice processes. Theoretically, it offers a new construct, which is not included in the FCQ, and could enrich the scientific view on contemporary Japanese food choice processes.

This article presents findings from a larger ethnographic study for which field work was conducted intermittently in Japan, since 2005, accompanied by ongoing research through correspondence with informants and content analysis of media material.

The author conducted participant observation in cooking-school lessons over the course of a year and a half, took part in many formal and informal food-related gatherings, and conducted interviews with 26 Japanese women and two Japanese men, between the ages of 12–60. All these and other daily conversations and practices, together with various documents and media sources connected with food, such as cookbooks, advertisements, Internet sites and blogs, informational pamphlets, television shows, etc., were documented and analyzed according to the ethnographic method.

## 3. Results and discussion

The current article's focus is on ethnographic findings regarding a food choice motive specific to contemporary Japanese food culture: *variety*.

Variety as a primary motive will be described from three perspectives: 1. within the frame of a traditional Japanese meal; 2. across locations; 3. across time. A description of the socialization into variety in food choice as a cultural schema shall follow, introducing an attribute connected with Japanese food culture, termed here, the *adventurous palate*. The subsequent passage defines variety in the context of the discussed phenomenon, stressing attention given to details and nuances. The report of the findings will conclude with a demonstration of the uniqueness of the described motive in the Japanese food culture (See *Illustration 1* for a visual representation of this structure).

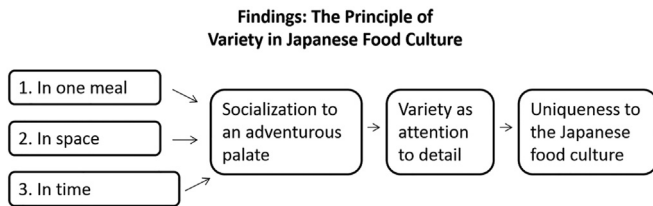
Findings are formulated in the first person as customary in ethnographic writing.

### 3.1. Variety in the Japanese meal: one point in time and space

#### 3.1.1. The Japanese-style meal: variety in appearance, flavors, and textures

The term **Washoku**—literally, Japanese meal—may appear traditional, but it is actually a neologism, coined in Japan during the

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this article, unless otherwise indicated, any mention of Japanese, Japanese culture, or Japanese cuisine, will refer to descriptions of contemporary Japan.



**Illustration 1.** Results presentation structure.

Meiji restoration in the mid-19th century (Rath, 2012). It is mostly a modern reference to the *kaiseki-ryōri*, Japanese haute cuisine which emphasizes esthetics, quality, freshness, and seasonality. In pre-modern Japan, *kaiseki-ryōri* was served only to the higher social ranks of Japanese society while the diet of most Japanese during these times was quite unvaried, containing very little meat, poultry, fish, or other costly ingredients. The economic growth during the second half of the 20th century allowed the common Japanese greater access to many kinds of food they could not afford before; and along with political and social changes throughout the last century, Japanese have become accustomed to eating food that is plentiful, varied, and of good quality (Cwiertka, 2005).

*Washoko*, as a cultural term, is criticized for not being authentic, and, lately, also as an attempt of the Japanese government to promote Japanese products through the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity at the expense of the complexity and richness of the Japanese food culture (Cang, 2015). This criticism is well-placed, yet the emic view of the term *washoku*, as I found it in the field, is not as narrow as the Intangible Heritage definition (UNESCO, 2013), and used for food that is perceived as Japanese by form, ingredients, and taste. In the next paragraphs I will demonstrate how variety is a basic principle in such meals.

First, in *washoku*, based on the esthetic principles of the *kaiseki* cuisine, courses are usually served simultaneously in diverse utensils on a large tray. Upon being served such a meal, the diner beholds an assortment of various shapes and colors. Even though in past eras, only the rich could enjoy such meals, in recent decades, one could find alongside very expensive *kaiseki* restaurants, many restaurants serving *washoku* meals at affordable prices. Even with a limited budget during my time in Japan, I could still easily afford such meals, characterized by the esthetic form of dishes served simultaneously in different bowls. (See *Illustration 2* for an example of such a meal, costing the equivalent of about 15 USD).

Naturally, when several dishes are served together, the diner has a chance to experience a variety of flavors. A basic *washoku* meal would be comprised of soup, rice, vegetables, and fish, often accompanied by a tofu dish and some kind of meat or poultry. Dishes are prepared using various methods (cut fresh, steamed, fried, baked, etc.), and together create a sensory experience of multi-faceted diversity.

Another consideration enhancing the experience of variety is that of texture. A proper Japanese-style meal should include an array of textures, ranging from crispy, mealy, and sticky, to gelatinous, spongy or even slimy. *Natto*, a concoction made of fermented soy beans, is known exactly for its slimy attribute.

Such variety in textures, colors, and flavors could also be found all in one dish. One such example is the *makizushi*, the famous sushi roll. It may consist of crispy dark green *nori* (dried seaweed), sticky white rice, and pink slippery raw fish, often combined with light green, crunchy cucumber, or yellow soft fried egg, to note just a few of its possible ingredients. All these ingredients present a colorful composition and are intended to be eaten in one bite, so that the mouth fills with different sensations simultaneously.

This style of Japanese meals is reflective of the basic tendency of



**Illustration 2.** An example of a *washoku* meal.

Japanese cuisine of delivering a wide range of sensations within a single dining event. This tendency is practiced, as I seek to demonstrate, not only in “traditional” style meals, but in different kinds of purchased food and in simple homemade meals.

### 3.1.2. *Obentō*: variety in a box

Another example of Japanese preference for variety in meals are the *Obentō*, Japanese typical lunch boxes, containing *washoku* or other types of food, sold on every street corner and prepared in many homes. In most cases, the *Obentō* includes more than one central dish, the box itself being divided internally so that it can contain several types of food comfortably. It thus offers an interesting diverse meal, full of flavors, colors and shapes.

Such *Obentō*, sold in my local supermarket (see *Illustration 3*), was divided into nine inner sections, each filled with a different dish: three types of seasoned rice, a fish and a fish cake, two chicken dishes, one kind of sushi, and meat with vegetables. Beyond this design, two of the inner sections were further divided by paper cones, adding egg salad to the fried chicken and pickles to the fish,



**Illustration 3.** Supermarket *Obentō*.

totaling eleven different dishes in a single meal.

It is apparent then, that variety is one of the prime characteristics of Japanese meals. Yet, as I spent more and more time in Japan, I came to realize that the variety appearing at one meal is actually one element of a broader cultural schema. Variety as a component in Japanese food culture does not confine itself to the limits of a single dining event, but has a hold on larger time and space frames.

### 3.2. *Food and location: the dimension of space*

#### 3.2.1. *Food as a tourist attraction*

The Japanese are keen domestic tourists, and food is a central feature of their traveling habits (Arlt, 2006; Tussyadiah, 2006). It begins with the planning, making sure to incorporate food attractions into the itinerary. Browsing through Japanese domestic travel books and magazines, one finds them to differ somewhat from their English counterparts. Typical English-language guides, targeting foreigners, elaborate on historical, natural, and cultural attractions, and give relatively little attention to restaurants and other food experiences. Many Japanese versions, on the other hand, deal mainly with two types of tourist attractions, which take up most of the text. One type relates to hot springs of various types, and the other deals with restaurants and other food-related attractions, resulting in the fact that food-related content comprises almost half of the provided tourist information.

This difference attests to the preference of many Japanese for food tourism. In contemporary Japan, food-related tourism is not relegated to a niche category, aimed at people with special interest in food; rather it is the common form of tourism. Each Japanese region is famous for its own food specialties, be it a locally produced ingredient or a unique local dish, and trying new, unique foods, from different parts of the country, is a highly sought-after experience in Japan. This experience, an adventure for the senses, is an expression of the spatial dimension of the variety as an aspect of the Japanese food culture.

Knowledge of those regional specialties, such as apples from Aomori or the *Okonomiyaki*, savory cabbage pancakes from Hiroshima, is considered common knowledge. Every person I talked with could describe different specialty foods and their geographic location. Whenever I mentioned traveling somewhere, one of the first responses I would get was a mention of the typical local food and a recommendation to try it while visiting. Another aspect of the same phenomenon was the response I received while traveling in Japan, saying that I live in Hokkaido, the northern island. People immediately began talking to me about the great food there (Hokkaido is famous for its fresh and tasty produce) and about the ingredients and dishes special to the region, such as lamb meet barbeque or a type of Ramen soup.

#### 3.2.2. *Local food as merchandise*

Similar to the case of the term *washoku*, the enthusiasm and familiarity shown by many Japanese regarding regional food specialties constitutes another modern phenomenon. Knowledge regarding local delicacies, their popularity, as well as their authentic image, are a product of commercial interests, deliberate policy making, and media focus, meant to encourage economic activity, mostly in provincial areas, in the Japanese centralist economic system (Cwiertka, 2005; de St Maurice, 2014; Rath, 2012).

In this light, it is not surprising to find that many businesses are designed to capitalize on the appeal created in the public for local products and dishes. For instance, in a small town famous for its delicious melons, it is almost impossible to escape tasting a melon, and the crowd cooperates willingly. There is even an option for “all-you-can-eat melon”, where I witnessed people eat more than a

melon and a half in less than 30 min. But fresh melon is not the only commodity taking advantage of the Japanese desire to experience “everything melon” when they visit the region. Many melon-flavored snacks are sold exclusively there. Melon-flavored versions of popular chocolate bars, cookies, hard and soft candy, juices, wines and more are all available for purchase (see *Illustration 4* for an example from a central stand in a local souvenir shop).

It is, of course, possible to sell such merchandise everywhere in Japan (the melons themselves are sold all over the country, some of them for very large sums), but they are sold only in that particular place, their appeal relying on the fact that they are limited in quantity and are linked to that specific place. That way, by traveling and tasting the foods exclusive to each destination, one can enjoy the opportunity to expand one's gastronomic experience and to comply once more with the principle of variety – this time, not by means of a varied meal, but by adding a new food-related encounter to one's repertoire.

An important element of the tourist experience is that of buying gifts to those remaining at home, be it family members, friends, or colleagues. These souvenirs, termed *omiyage*, are expected to be reflective of the trip's destination and often take the form of food or drink. This common custom is one more platform for local businesses to generate revenue from region-specific foods, and provides a strong incentive to keep developing new merchandise that align with and encourage the public interest in local food specialties.

The author Yoshimoto Banana wrote an anecdote in her novel “Kitchen” (Yoshimoto, 1993), which demonstrates the interest and familiarity typical Japanese show when it comes to special regional foods. The main character takes a long taxi ride in the middle of the night, bringing a uniquely tasty dish to her loved one. Nearing their destination, the taxi driver tells her about the local special foods available in the area and describes their historical origin. It is apparent that even though he is not a culinary professional, and probably not even local, he is familiar with the region's food specialties and considers this topic a favorable option for conversing with a stranger.

#### 3.2.3. *The geographic origin of food as part of its identity*

The spatial dimension of the variety in the Japanese food culture, I would argue, is reserved not only for Japanese food. Foreign cuisines are also a matter of common knowledge and interest in Japanese society (Cwiertka, 2006). Japanese I met were always enthusiastic to try new foreign foods; the annual fair at the university was a big attraction for locals, at least partly because foreign students used to offer various foods from their homeland for sale at the festival, and give a chance for the hungry crowds to try foods that are normally inaccessible.

Foreign food's place of origin, much like the case of local food mentioned earlier, is an important part of that food's identity and is a consideration for consuming it. Even when it comes to foods that were modified to taste more “Japanese” (like pasta, pizza, or hamburgers with Japanese toppings) or foods that have been prepared in Japan for centuries (like Ramen soup, which originated in China), they are still associated with their country of origin.

All in all, contemporary Japanese food culture is very sensitive to the geographic origins of foods, be it within or outside Japan, not as an attempt to exclude from general culinary acceptability, but as a part of the Japanese aspiration to include as many different food experiences as possible – which is the essence of variety within the Japanese food culture.

Another expression of this principle comes to light upon examining variety in Japanese food culture in relation to days, seasons, and years.



Illustration 4. Melon-flavored sweets.

### 3.3. Variety between meals: the dimension of time

#### 3.3.1. Cooking a broad repertoire

A Japanese friend of mine used to praise his mother's cooking from time to time, since he lived away from home and had missed her cooking very much. He took pride in the fact that she never served the same dish twice in one month (and given that many meals are made of several types of dishes, this is very impressive).

The fact that he chose to emphasize her ability to prepare such a large food repertoire is not incidental. Diversity between meals is an important part of the Japanese food culture, as I witnessed it. Many Japanese put an emphasis on diversifying their meals throughout the day, week, month, or year.

Like my friend's mother, many women, who are typically responsible for cooking in Japanese homes (Fuwa, 2004), try to create a diverse range of food to serve to their families. During interviews I held with students from the cooking school I attended, I often heard that one of their motivations for going to cooking school was that they wanted to experience and to be able to cook a wider range of dishes. One student told me: *I would like to prepare different things*; another said: *I want to broaden my cooking*.

This, of course, was not unique to my cooking school peers. When I asked other informants how they decided what to cook at home, I must say it took me by surprise at first that every one of them treated variety as an important consideration. A working woman in her sixties, living with her husband and her daughter put it simply: *"If I cooked fish today, tomorrow I'll cook meat. A 40-year-old newlywed, said: I always make sure not to cook what I had cooked the day before, and the one before that. A Ph.D. student and a mother to a teenager, said: I think I'll cook something different from what we had the day before. I think about what my daughter had for lunch at school, and if they served noodles, I will make rice. If she ate curry at school, I won't make curry for supper.*

During her interview, she mentioned a wider aspect of variation through time in food – the yearly cycle: *I think about using products in their season, because they are cheaper then, and better. When you buy cucumbers during the winter, they are all of low quality, so we eat cucumbers in the summer.*

#### 3.3.2. Seasonal influence

This preference of many Japanese, to make modifications in the food they eat according to the time of year, is a part of general attention of the Japanese public to freshness and quality of food, as well as to fair pricing (Prescott et al., 2002). It is also an echo of the artistic sensitivity the *kaiseki* cuisine has for the changing of the seasons as a part of culturally-embedded connectedness with the cycle of nature (Bestor, 2011; Shirane, 2011).

Yet, this cultural feature of varying food through time is also

expressed in less traditional ways. Popular Japanese coffee chains, for instance, use it as a marketing strategy. They offer a "special of the month" food and beverage that matches and induces the consumer's interest in diversity and seasonality.

During one of my visits to Japan, a major coffee chain had offered chestnut-flavored beverage and cake, as chestnuts are a popular seasonal food in the autumn, as October specials. Another chain sold coffee with chocolate and whipped cream, and espresso-chocolate layer cake as that month's specials. At other times, the monthly specials included green tea, caramel, various fruits, and the like, many corresponding to the relevant time of year.

I argue that the pleasure the customers feel while consuming these specials does not derive solely from the look and taste of the food, but also from its being different and temporary – thus enabling customers to expand their culinary experience. The economic implications of such marketing tactics are clear, but it is noteworthy that, by using it, these companies take a role in the social reproduction of the eminent place variety takes in this culture.

### 3.4. Creating an adventurous palate: the socialization into variety in food choice

Commercial companies, marketing time-specific or place-specific foods, as described above, have a very significant influence on the Japanese public's preference for varied food, as noted above. Yet they do not operate outside of the social context; otherwise, they would not have succeeded. I would like to propose that this is a part of a larger social reproductive mechanism, which maintains and develops the significance and relevance of variety in contemporary Japanese food culture. As I would like to demonstrate, this mechanism also involves the media, the education system, and child-rearing practices. An important aspect of this principle is the delight taken by Japanese in expanding their eating repertoire. In order to be able to enjoy all new food experiences, the Japanese have developed what I term an *adventurous palate*, an openness and an eagerness to try new foods, a quality nurtured from childhood.

#### 3.4.1. Raising children who eat everything

When I discussed meal planning with my newlywed informant, I asked her if she prefers to cook foods her husband likes. Her answer was: *I think about what my husband likes to eat, but don't make his favorites every day. It's wrong to eat only the food you like. She said this with a tone of importance, as if reminding me of a behavior code one should act upon. She then said, He likes to eat everything. He never refuses to eat anything or says he can't eat it. It's because of his mother ... as a kid, if he didn't want to eat something or hated a certain food, she wouldn't prepare something else instead. He*

had to eat whatever she served ... or he would stay hungry. That's why now he eats everything.

As we were talking, I realized that she was actually giving me a lesson in Japanese culture and socialization. Not having *sukikir-ai*—likes and dislikes—is an aspect of Japanese good manners taught to children from an early age. It shows respect for the person who worked hard to prepare the meal, it teaches children *Gaman*, making an effort to endure difficulties, and it's about eating a healthy, nutritious diet. However, it also helps them develop a flexible palate, with which they will be able to enjoy the exploration of new and various foods later, as adults.

The education system continues the work begun at home. Pre-school children are instructed and expected to eat all the content of the *Obentōs* (lunch boxes) they bring from home, as mothers are guided to prepare them with variety and to gradually incorporate into them foods their child may not like.

These requirements for *Obentō* making—variety and the introduction of less cared for foods—are communicated to mothers by the teachers, and are heavily reinforced by the media (Allison, 1991). Books, magazines, and websites give ample advice regarding the preparation of such *Obentōs*, stressing, among other things, these two requirements. Some publications are even dedicated to the cause of weaning children from food selectiveness (Yamazaki, 2004).

But not only teachers and mothers expect children to consume their *Obentō* in their entirety. This is a demand made also by their peer group, since the entire class will go on recess only when all the children have finished eating their *Obentōs* (Ben-Ari, 1997). As a result, the children who have to eat it all are left with no choice but to widen their culinary repertoire.

Later in the child's education, many schools provide institutional catering, and only one menu option is offered at each lunch (Schmid, 2012). Although this does not provide a variety of choice, it supports children's ability to eat everything, which again enables future culinary adventures. This process resembles an aspect of martial arts training in Japan, based on *shuhari*, the concept by which, in order to reach mastery and freedom of thought, one should at first abide by very strict rules and make them one's nature. In the same way, having to eat everything as children allows Japanese adults to savor this ability and feel free and adventurous in their eating experiences.

#### 3.4.2. The media as a facilitator

These adventures for the palate are also featured constantly in the Japanese media, which surrounds the Japanese people with different kinds of culinary content. Numerous titles of books and magazines are dedicated to the subjects of food and culinary tourism. The nation who gave the world the cooking-contest show, "Iron Chef," which first aired in Japan in 1993 (Lukacs, 2010), watches food-related media from morning till night. In this sense, the media is another strong influencing force, nurturing the desire for eating a varied diet and trying new foods. One of the popular themes in this genre is watching well-known television figures as they cook and eat a wide range of foods, some of which are unfamiliar and strange (e.g., Fuji Television, 2014). The networks' choice to air such television content shows how they respond to and shape the Japanese audience's interest in food adventures.

In fact it seems that an interest in various foods and an adventurous palate is a pre-requisite for celebrities who want to maintain their popularity, so much so, that famous talents who happen to be vegetarian keep this a secret and go on tasting all kinds of food on television (Brasor, 2013).

#### 3.4.3. Social preference for omnivorism

Another aspect of the centrality of variety and the adventurous

palate in Japanese food culture is its little tolerance for people with restricted food agendas. Vegetarianism and veganism are both rather new and marginal in the Japanese society. There is the exception of *Shojin Ryori*, a religious Buddhist cuisine in Japan, which eschews animal flesh and root vegetables, but only a very small group of priests keep it as their only diet. Most Japanese eat everything, as noted, and vegetarian foreigners may find it very difficult to explain vegetarianism and to obtain vegetarian food in Japan.

This lack of accommodation of vegetarianism relates to the cultural value of being able to eat and enjoy all kinds of foods. This value implies a difficulty to acknowledge even a moral choice to avoid certain foods, when it comes to foreigners, and regards these food restrictions as undesirable when it comes to Japanese.

Without undermining the magnitude of cultural importance ascribed in Japan for aesthetics in general (Ikegami, 2005), and for food specifically (Cwiertka, 2005), this theoretical concept of the adventurous palate as a social requirement, could provide a cultural background for the relative lesser importance found in the FCQ regarding sensory appeal in Japan (Prescott et al., 2002). This social requirement might unconsciously prevent Japanese from reporting (and perhaps even feeling) sensory appeal as an important consideration in making food choices. Being adventurous and able to enjoy a wide repertoire of flavors, textures, and presentations is the proper form in Japan. Japanese people are constantly exposed to different manifestations of this cultural principle, are influenced by it and contribute to its reproduction.

#### 3.5. Expressions of variety: a little goes a long way

The social manifestation of variety as an aspect of the local food culture was apparent with everyone I met in Japan. People from different ages and backgrounds engaged very willingly in conversations about food, ate (as much as they could afford) in restaurants serving cuisines from around the world, and were ever searching for new and exciting food experiences. The only time I saw a Japanese refuse to eat something was due to allergies and even then, many apologies were expressed.

Yet, respecting and enjoying variety in food, does not mean that each dish presented in Japan has to be totally new and unrecognizable. The importance of variety is manifested many times in attention to details. Even the smallest nuance of change is noticed and appreciated.

The Japanese *Miso* soup, made of fish stock and fermented soy bean paste, can serve as an example, since it is a basic food that most people consume regularly. It has infinite variations and can change according to the type of stock or bean paste used, and to the vegetables or other ingredients served in it. Serving it with thinly sliced Japanese radish, instead of spring onions, would make for a different soup and would be valued accordingly.

My friend's aforementioned mother, whose ability to create a wide range of dishes was so cherished, practiced this principle when cooking for her family. She did not have to introduce new cuisines or radical changes in the menu on a daily basis. She was simply very skilled and talented at manipulating her ingredients into a whole array of slightly different yet distinct flavors, textures, and colors, treated as unique by her family.

Books and magazines about home cooking are also full of slightly different variations for basic and elaborate dishes, each are treated as special. In one of my favorite Japanese cookbooks, the author demonstrates 30 different ways of making *Onigiri*, basic rice balls with fillings, and by doing so, she creates a scope of distinct and unique food experiences (Arimoto, 2007).

The case of the cited coffee chains' specials-of-the-month is very similar. Most of the special beverages are basically combinations of

sugar and milk, with relatively few differences. Yet these small changes are enough to create the feeling of variety and innovation. That alone justifies consumers buying and enjoying them, and for the chains to make the effort to create new specials every month.

This delicate attention to nuance makes choosing what to order in restaurants a task taken very seriously. Customers, who wish to know precisely what they are going eat, cannot be satisfied solely with the information supplied by the menu. A written description cannot adequately showcase the unique amalgam of a specific dish; therefore the need for better representation is satisfied in many restaurants by a display of plastic models of each dish.

These models (see example of a plastic model of a lunch-set in [Illustration 5](#)) are prepared manually to match the specific serving, and are such close replicas of the real thing that customers can know in advance exactly how it is served. They can learn, for instance, to what level the egg is boiled or how marbled the slices of meat are. It also gives them an opportunity to appreciate the appearance of the dish, which, as noted, is an important part of the dining experience. Since each restaurant makes an effort to create a unique range of dishes for competitive reasons, the use of plastic models helps to highlight the slight distinctions among neighboring restaurants.

This high awareness to slight differences and nuance allows for endless selections, making each food experience an opportunity for a deep appreciation of every ingredient, color, texture, and flavor.

### 3.6. Variety in the Japanese food culture – is it truly unique?

As evident by the current findings, the preference for variety in contemporary Japan is not an inborn trait, nor is it a cultural constant from the dawn of Japanese culture. It is culturally constructed and is strongly influenced by policy, mass-media, and commercial interests, as well as by practices of individuals in their daily lives. That being said, it was apparent during my field work that food variety is a strong, relevant food choice motive in the lives of contemporary Japanese.

Variety in the Japanese food culture manifests itself in different ways, from the small scale of one meal, to larger scales of variety between meals over time and space. But is this principle really so unique to the Japanese culture? After all, many who are not Japanese enjoy and even prefer to vary their menu, and some would also go to great lengths to achieve this variety. It is more than reasonable to assume that a preference for variety in food choice

exists in many cultures, at some level. Still, I would contend that its cultural expression in contemporary Japan is uncommon in more than one aspect. Its uniqueness to Japan will be argued next, stressing the way this value is embedded in the culture, its popularity, and its significance to the Japanese people.

First, food variety is thoroughly incorporated into to the socialization process in Japan, relying on multiple social institutions that produce and reproduce the Japanese adventurous palate, which relates to the ability and interest of Japanese to consume dishes as varied as possible. Japanese individuals are socialized into this cultural schema through influences within their family and peer group, the education system, the media, and the economic system.

Second, as a result, food variety is present and active in the lives of people in Japan, not just members of a specific social class or group, nor just enthusiasts, but as a common characteristic of the average Japanese. In a recent survey conducted by a popular local Internet company regarding things Japanese love the most about Japan, the phrase: *there are many different kinds of food* (*tabemono no shurui ga ōi*) was one of the top ten chosen, along with personal safety, the four-season cycle, and other things which are perceived to be at the core of Japanese culture ([Nifty, 2013](#)).

Third, as argued, variety in Japanese food choice processes takes precedence over other considerations. While people from many countries appreciate and might even plan for variety in meals, more common considerations outside of Japan would be taste, convenience and availability, health, or religion ([Chandon & Wansink, 2011](#); [Dindyal & Dindyal, 2003](#); [Honkanen & Frewer, 2009](#); [Milošević, Žeželj, Gorton, & Barjolle, 2012](#)). The fact that variety as a motive for food choice was excluded from the FCQ ([Steptoe et al., 1995](#)) shows that this principle is not considered as such a priority everywhere as it is in Japan.

## 4. Conclusions

The current study had two aims: First, it set out to demonstrate the contributions ethnography could offer as a complementary research methodology in cross-cultural food choice study. The second aim was to depict a cultural context and examine specific constructs for food choice motives in Japanese society.

Ethnographic writing, which makes use of *thick descriptions*—interpretive, detailed descriptions combining emic and etic points of view—results in the uncovering of the inner logic of cultures as well as their singularity. By placing the studied cultural phenomena in its relevant framework of worldview, ethnography makes studied cultures more accessible and relatable ([Geertz, 1973](#)). Pertaining to the first aim of this research, the findings demonstrate how the use of ethnography in food choice studies facilitates achieving a deep familiarity with the local food culture, and formulating informed, theoretical conclusions regarding cultural specificity in food choice. Integrated with cross-cultural knowledge about food choice processes gathered from studies using other research methods, data from ethnographic studies could help create a fuller picture of different cultures' food choice motives.

With regard to the study's second aim, learning about contemporary Japanese food culture by means of ethnography has led to the discovery of a unique cultural food choice motive, which sheds new light on findings from earlier research using the FCQ ([Prescott et al., 2002](#)). The cultural significance ascribed to variety, as described above, appears to be prominent in food choice processes in Japan. It is present throughout time and space, cultivated from childhood to adulthood, and takes part in private and in public spheres. Variety is thus proposed as a culturally specific motive for food choice in the Japanese food culture.



**Illustration 5.** Plastic model of a restaurant-meal.

The prominence of variety as a food choice motive can also serve as a contextual setting for the relatively low ranking Japanese participants gave sensory appeal in the FCQ (Prescott et al., 2002). Although sensory attributes of a meal's components are very important in the Japanese culture, it may be that variety—and the adventurous palate as an aspect of it—receives more conscious attention and therefore the norm of omnivorism overshadows the consideration of sensory appeal.

Preference or rejection of food variety has been studied from a clinical point of view, mostly as relating to children's diets, as an indicator of the diet's nutrient adequacy or of healthy eating habits (Dovey, Staples, Gibson, & Halford, 2008; Hatløy, Hallund, Diarra, & Oshaug, 2000; Hodgson, Hsu-Hage, & Wahlqvist, 1994; Nicklaus, 2009). However, it has yet to be discussed, to the best of the author's knowledge, as a cultural phenomenon, stressing its broad social context or the impact it has on a cross-cultural level as a food choice factor. In this manner, this study constitutes a contribution to the existing body of knowledge in this field.

Future research may further the exploration of ethnography as a research method in order to provide cultural insights for other cross-cultural differences and to locate more culturally-unique food choice factors.

An additional path for further research would be addressing the nutritional implications of the findings reported above. Variety as a motive for food choice in Japan could interact with a phenomenon called the variety effect: Studies have indicated that variety in a meal tends to increase planned and actual consumed food portions and energy intake (Rolls, Van Duijvenvoorde, & Rolls, 1984; Wilkinson, Hinton, Fay, Rogers, & Brunstrom, 2013). This effect, combined with variety as a primary food choice motive as described in this study, should have resulted in high food-intake behaviors and high percentage of overweight and obesity in Japan. Yet, compared with other countries, these conditions do not particularly characterize the Japanese population (OECD, 2013). The absence of high levels of obesity may be due to the relatively smaller food portions consumed customarily in Japan, among other considerations. How Japanese overcome the variety effect in meal planning and stay satisfied with smaller portions in a diverse meal, is an issue yet to be studied.

## Acknowledgments

This study was made possible thanks to the generous support of the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology – the Monbugakakusho. Partial support for one trip to Japan was granted by the University of Haifa. I was fortunate to receive advice and guidance throughout this research from two very talented and benevolent teachers: Dr. Tsipy Ivry from the University of Haifa and Prof. Kuwayama Takami from Hokkaido University. I would also like to thank Dr. Mayyan Agmon for her insightful comments on earlier drafts of this article. My humble gratitude is given to all those who shared their lives and thoughts with me during this research.

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