

INTRODUCTION TO KAISEKI (懷石)

It seemed like only a few minutes had passed since I'd sat down at the table and ordered a drink. I hadn't ordered any food yet, but there it was—a small bowl of...something—being placed in front of me by the waitress. She told me what it was in Japanese, which was not very useful for a Korean-born, American-raised, engineering nerd like me.

The food looked visually stunning and equally mysterious, and I was reluctant to disturb this colorful arrangement in front of me. The bowl contained a featureless white cube surrounded by a splash of orange jelly and topped with a sprinkling of red, green and yellow. I almost thought that dessert had come first, but the aroma gave it away as being something savory. When I went to take a bite, a hint of vinegar hit my nose as my palate absorbed an interesting array of spices: a little wasabi, red pepper, vinegar, and citrus. A strange combination for sure, but it all blended in my mouth and came together unlike anything I had tasted before. The flavors were complex but perfectly balanced, with no particular one overpowering the others. Surprised and intrigued, I was hungry for more. I knew something special had just begun.

For many foreigners, the first introduction to Japan is often through food. As one of the most popular cuisines around the world, Japanese food has become ubiquitous nearly everywhere. We've all seen the restaurants in our neighborhoods and at the local food court selling everything from teriyaki to sushi, from tempura to ramen. But a lesser known, and more refined genre of Japanese cuisine exists: *kaiseki*. It may not be what most

people think of when they think of Japanese food, but it may actually be the most Japanese food of all.

Often referred to as the highest level of Japanese cuisine, *kaiseki* is, in some ways, more about the process than the actual food—though, of course, the food is important. It is a dining experience where a master chef meticulously prepares and serves several small, seasonal dishes, each complementing the others. Over the course of a *kaiseki*, an exquisite meal takes shape. Think of it as a ten-course meal where you don't know what's coming next. The term *kaiseki* roughly translates to "cuisine for a get-together" and is based on traditional Japanese dishes going back hundreds of years. Modern day *kaiseki* has been elevated to an artform balancing flavors, textures, colors, and shapes to create a dazzling treat not only for the palate but for the eyes as well. Beauty, balance, the seasons, and nature are all key ingredients to Japanese culture, and are, likewise, an integral part of a *kaiseki* experience.

I experienced my first *kaiseki* meal in Osaka when I was still a newcomer to Japan. Still not that familiar with Japanese cuisine, I was a bit nervous as I wasn't able to order something off an English menu, but since I was at a business dinner with Japanese colleagues, I went ahead and put my gastronomic fate in their hands.

I'm sure my colleagues as well as the restaurant staff were trying their best to impress us foreign visitors, and they undeniably succeeded. After that first dish of unknown composition (which was delicious by the way), I was ready for more. What came next was a series of delicately arranged appetizers, followed by fresh sashimi, vegetables, some kind of simmered fish and tofu (I think), grilled fish, an assortment of pickles, rice with grilled eel on top, soup, and finally dessert, a parfait of the freshest tasting berries I've ever had. The only way I finished it all was due to the fact that each course was small and bite sized. One thing was certain: it was the meal of a lifetime. Afterwards, I looked up the restaurant to learn more about what had just happened, and found their motto:

“Hospitality that resonates with all five senses.” And boy did it ever.

Each course was perfectly shaped and arranged and color coordinated on a small plate. The waitress, elegantly dressed in a kimono, brought out the dishes and explained the ingredients and preparation. The flavor and texture of each morsel differed from the previous one, but complimented it very nicely. And of course, everything smelled divine. The two-hour experience left my belly stuffed, and my brain in a state of sensory overload. I was physically and mentally exhausted by the end of the meal. All I could do was to sit back, sip some green tea, and think about how the rest of the trip would go.

I was working for Disney at the time designing a new theme park ride that was to be built in Japan. I was visiting the engineers in Japan often to review the designs and oversee the production and testing of a multi-million-dollar ride system. The challenging and exciting work kept me very busy, but I also wanted to spend some free time outside the office. After my *kaiseki* initiation, I looked forward to getting out, seeing the country, and learning more about the culture.

I started my journey into Japanese culture like many others: as a tourist. I had heard of samurais and ninjas, of sushi and karate, but had no real understanding of the society that produced them. Even now, I don’t claim to be an expert on Japan by any means. But I have spent countless weeks in the country—spread over many years—and in that time I have slowly come to appreciate the depth and beauty of the place, the people, and the culture.

Over the years, I have traveled back to Japan many times, working during the week and taking the weekends to venture out as much as possible. This resulted in me going on a series of short—you could say “bite-sized”—outings to wherever seemed interesting and within reach of where I happened to be. After seeing the usual tourist sites, I purposely tried to visit places more and more off the beaten path. It was at those places that I caught glimpses of everyday life and slowly built an image

of Japanese culture. Visiting places unseen by most foreigners, exposed me to the local life and to aspects of the history and culture previously unknown to me. I found it fascinating and wanted to learn more.

What resulted is a collection of stories and experiences that sum up to an appreciation of what I think makes Japan so unique, beautiful, and rewarding. Although I visited many interesting places, the stories presented here are mere glimpses into the world of Japanese culture. As a foreigner and tourist in Japan, I admit that I may never be able to fully understand three thousand years of Japanese history and culture. Fortunately, culture is a living thing. It exists just as much in the here and now, and can be found, with a little work, in everyday places.

My goal is to encourage the reader to seek out some of Japan's more hidden gems, many of which exist very close to the tourist sites. Not only are they interesting in their own right, but these gems will often offer glimpses into the ideals and concepts that lay the foundations of Japanese culture. They can give the visitor a better appreciation for the country itself. Whether you are a first-time tourist or a seasoned expat living in Japan, there is always something new to be found just around the corner.

I often think back to that first *kaiseki* meal where, as a newcomer to Japan, I was introduced to a whole new universe of experiences. Life, in many ways, is like a long *kaiseki* experience: a string of short, interrelated events that, layer upon layer, form who we are as individuals. I believe that travel and the experiences that we gather along the way are a great catalyst for learning. It is through my travels in Japan that I have attempted to absorb some of the ideals that I've observed and to make them a part of my own life. This book is a collection of bite-sized stories that will be presented here as a *cultural kaiseki*, a meal of experiences. *Itadakimasu*.¹

¹ *Itadakimasu* is a Japanese phrase said before a meal to convey thanks and appreciation for the food about to be received.