

# Menus for the Soul

## Changing Food Landscapes in Contemporary Japan

Paola Scrolavezza

Alma Mater Studiorum – Università di Bologna, Italia

**Abstract** In recent years food in Japan has established itself as a fundamental feature of national and local identity and became one of Japan's most influential ways of cultural and national branding. An intriguing example is the *B-kyū gurume* boom, the celebration of creative versions of typical comfort food, intertwined with the obsession for local traditions. Such processes are reflected in representations of food in media and arts: contemporary culture plays a fundamental role in shaping but also in connoting food culture with new meanings. The aim of this paper is to analyse the construction and narration of contemporary Japanese food culture in one of the most recent and successful franchises, *Shin'ya Shokudō*, the popular manga by Abe Yarō, which inspired the Netflix series that enjoyed unexpected international success in 2017.

**Keywords** Food. Media. Shin'ya Shokudō. National identity. Japan. B-kyū gurume.

Food looks like an object but is actually a relationship.  
(Eagleton 1998, 204-5)

As Nancy K. Stalker (2018) points out, in recent years food in Japan has established itself as a fundamental feature of national and local identity and has become one of Japan's most influential ways of cultural and national branding. Japanese cuisine spread internationally in the 1980s, when *sushi's* popularity literally exploded in the United States and Europe, quickly achieving global favour. However, the importance of food culture for national branding has been recognised only in recent years, and an important contribution to this process

has come from the representations of food in art, movies, animation, *manga* and literature: contemporary culture in all its forms has played – and plays – a fundamental role in shaping and defining food culture but also in imparting *cuisine* with new meanings.

An intriguing example is the recent surge in popularity of *B-kyū gurume* (B-class gourmet), the celebration of creative and local versions of typical comfort food, deeply intertwined with the obsession for regional traditions: the aim of this paper is to analyse its representation in one of the most successful franchises over the last few years, *Shin'ya Shokudō* 深夜食堂 (Midnight Diner), the popular manga by Abe Yarō, which inspired the Netflix series *Midnight Diner: Tokyo Stories*, that enjoyed unexpected international success in 2017 and 2019.

The manga has been serialised in Shōgakukan's *Biggu Komikku Orijinaru* since 2006, and the first volume was published in December 2007: to date twenty-three volumes have been released. Since 2009 it has been adapted into a Japanese *dorama* (TV series), directed by Matsuoka Jōji and starring Kobayashi Kaoru, which ran for three seasons up until 2014, and a live-action film was released in 2015. Netflix Japan produced a fourth season and a second live-action film in 2016/17, and a fifth season in 2019. *Shin'ya Shokudō* was also adapted into a Korean television series titled *Late Night Restaurant* in 2015, and into a Chinese television series in 2017.

In 2010, the manga won the Shōgakukan mangashō (Shōgakukan Manga Award) and the Nihon mangaka kyōkai shō (Japan Cartoonist Association Award), and in 2018 was nominated for the Fauve d'Or Prix du Meilleur Album (Best Comic Award) at the Festival de la Bande Dessinée d'Angoulême (Angoulême International Comics Festival).

As Tomoko Aoyama argues, “the food we read may well be closely related to the food in the actual, physical world. Or it may be symbolic or metaphysical food” (Toyoko Aoyama 2008, 2). Furthermore, as James L. Watson and Melissa L. Caldwell state, food is “a window on the political”, for “food practices are implicated in a complex field of relationships, expectations and choices that are contested, negotiated and often unequal” (Watson, Caldwell 2004, 1). In other words, *Shin'ya Shokudō* encourages:

the surprising and intriguing variety of ways that food and eating may function as a code, a sign system, a leitmotif of fascinating complexity, to expand the possible repertoire of readings. (Pole 1999, 4)

The setting of *Shin'ya Shokudō* is a small 12-seat *izakaya* (a sort of Japanese-style pub or tavern) in Shinjuku (Tokyo), open from midnight to 7 am. The opening of each episode of the Netflix series features a voice-over of the main character saying:

When people finish their day and hurry home, my day starts. My diner is open from midnight to seven in the morning. They call it “Midnight Diner”. That’s all I have on my menu (i.e. tonjiru or butajiru, sake, beer and shōchū). But I make whatever customers request as long as I have the ingredients for it. That’s my policy. Do I even have customers? More than you would expect.

“The Master”, the main character, is the owner, chef, and bartender who runs the diner. While he has a very poor menu (consisting only of *tonjiru* or *butajiru*, sake, beer and *shōchū*), he offers to prepare any dish a customer wants, as long as he has the ingredients, but refuses to cook any dishes that are beyond his skills or overly complicated. Sometimes recurring customers bring their own ingredients, usually local products from their hometowns or seasonal specialities, emphasising even further the connection between the dishes that can be tasted at the small restaurant and comfort food.

Moreover, each chapter of the manga or each episode of the TV series focuses on a particular customer, on his/her tragicomic drama (unhappy love affairs, broken marriages or friendships, loneliness) and on a particular Japanese dish, related in some way to the story. In addition, every single episode of the Netflix series ends with the recipe and with the Master offering a brief demonstration of how to prepare the dish.

The focus of *Shin’ya Shokudō* is certainly food, from the ingredients, to the preparation, to the pleasure of eating, and the obvious subtext is that food goes straight to the heart; it’s a relationship, as Eagleton says. Menus are rather curious to read: *amerikan doggu* (corn dog), *hamu katsu* (ham cutlet), *sasami chizu katsu* (fried chicken breast with cheese), to mention just a few of them.

Both the manga and the TV series in Japan have become best-sellers, and in addition to the agreeableness of the plot, this is surely due to the ‘gourmet boom’ of the most recent years, which has produced and consumed thousands of food-related books, as well as movies, manga, anime, *dorama* and TV shows.

As Tomoko Aoyama suggests,

In traditional Japanese culture, eating enjoyed a status far lower than that of drinking. To talk about food, to desire food, or to be at all interested in food was generally regarded as vulgar, especially in adult men. The uninhibited eating and food writing of contemporary Japan seems to have received its impetus from a reaction to the repression and oppression of appetite during the war - expressed in the slogan *hoshigari masen katsu made wa* (desire nothing till victory) - and to the understandable preoccupation, during and immediately after the war, with food simply as a means for survival. (Aoyama 2008, 131)

By the mid-1950s, however, eating and cooking for pleasure began to attract public attention, and that interest continued and developed into the gourmet boom of the 1980s: delicacies were no longer only for the elite, but were available even to ordinary people, who consumed food and, at the same time, were eager for information about food and the act of eating. An outstanding example of this trend is provided by popular television programs such as *Ryōri tengoku* (Cooking Paradise, 1975-92) or *Ryōri no tetsujin* (Iron Chef, 1993-99), and by manga series such as *Oishinbo* (The Gourmet, 1983-) and *Kukkingu papa* (Cooking Papa, 1984-), addressed to target audiences clearly diversified in terms of age, culture and interests.

Moreover, another intriguing feature of *Shin'ya Shokudō* is the strong connection established between food and the soul of the people, with a special focus on those "hearty, reasonably priced, down-to-earth dishes, often with strong regional associations" (Itō 2015), known as *B-kyu gurume* (B-class gourmet cuisine). The term *B-kyu gurume* was first coined in the mid-1980s, after the American movie genre 'B movies', or low-budget films. It's important to note that although *gurume* is the Japanese version of 'gourmet', it doesn't mean a person who enjoys food ('gourmand'): it refers to a type of cuisine. As we have seen, around the mid-1980s the Japanese economy was booming and dining out at luxury restaurants that offered expensive and maybe exotic dishes was definitely a must-do.

Early on, some people began to react against this trend, arguing that it was not necessary to pay crazy amounts of money to eat good food. Then, in the 1990s, after the economic bubble burst, *B-kyu gurume* literally spread: magazines and newspapers that had previously featured articles about luxury restaurants, began to focus on family restaurants that served hearty, 'homemade' food, and on cheap diners.

But it's interesting that one of the earliest examples of *B-kyu gurume* cuisine was *motsunabe*, a *nabemono*, a hotpot made with cow or pig offal, with leeks, garlic, chili peppers and other seasoning: a popular local dish in and around Fukuoka (especially in Hakata Ward) and Shimonoseki, in southern Japan, that uses inexpensive ingredients cooked with care and served in large portions, both fundamental features of *B-kyu gurume* (Itō 2015).

Here, the spread of *B-kyu gurume* intersects another emerging trend, the emphasis on local cuisine which is part of a wider discourse that has often surfaced within contemporary Japanese culture over the last few decades. A sort of obsession for the recovery of a cultural authenticity, whose integrity is constantly threatened by the exposure to 'the West' and to Japan's often-hostile other East Asian nations. Here the appreciation of regional cooking plays a pivotal role: as underlined by Theodore C. Bestor (2011, 278), there is no city or village not claiming original ingredients, peculiar styles of prepara-

tion, and regional calendars of seasonality and festivities marked by specific local foodstuffs.

A good example of this obsession is the popularity of *ekiben*, the typical *bentō* box meals available in the railway stations throughout Japan. Indeed, eating local food is one of the most cherished pleasures of travelling through the country: every district – or rather every municipality – claims its own culture, supposedly preserved for ages, including foods, dialects, and traditional crafts. In guidebooks the best restaurants or deli shops that will enrich your travel experience are listed alongside famous palces and spots to visit. And this experience is not limited to local diners or eateries but widens to include train stations along your way that serve unique *ekiben*. *Ekiben* is indeed different from regular lunch boxes sold at any delis because it includes unique local ingredients, and some have even become destinations in themselves: people travel to certain stations just for their *ekiben*.

This concern for cultural and culinary authenticity, similarly to the already mentioned ‘gourmet boom’, emerged during the 1980s, when a new trend, born – as Abe Yarō – during the 1960s, was growing, a tendency that can be identified as ‘Returning to Japan’, an emergence of nationalistic discourse in Japanese media culture. An advertising campaign, launched by Japan Railways (JR, former Japan National Railways) in the 1970s had a leading role in spreading this concept. After EXPO 70, a national event that drew a total of 60 million visitors, JR started its *Discover Japan* campaign aimed at maintaining or increasing the number of railway travellers in Japan. In 1978, the success of this ground-breaking format inspired the *Good Day, Start Off* campaign and in 1984 the *Exotic Japan* campaign. The message behind JR’s strategy was clear: there is no need to travel abroad, because the desire for exoticism can also be fulfilled in Japan (Ivy 1995, 56).

In the 1990s, JR launched new advertising campaigns, based on the same communication strategy, and benefited from the decline of overseas travels after the economic bubble burst. In the same years – not surprisingly – the popularity of *B-kyu gurume* continued to grow, embracing new dishes that contributed to defining *B-kyu gurume* itself: first of all, *ramen* – and the first Netflix series starts with an episode focused on *tanmen*. *Ramen* is the poor and basic bowl of hot soup and noodles, cheap and tasty, probably originally brought in Japan by Chinese immigrants in the late nineteenth-early twentieth centuries. In the 1980s and 1990s, this unpretentious dish was given new attention, and regional versions and varieties grew in appeal and relevance, becoming a sort of touristic highlights, attracting travellers eager to taste the ‘original dish’, to reconnect with that cultural ‘authenticity’ threatened by the alienating life of metropolitan areas. ‘Discovered’ and celebrated by food critics from Tokyo,

'gourmet ramen' quickly became wildly popular nationally, and in recent years have enthused international palates too.

Boosted by the enhancement and celebration of local cuisine, which – as we have seen – is one of the cornerstones in the construction of food culture as pivotal element in contemporary nation branding discourse, in the late 1990s, the concept of *B-kyu gurume* has morphed into the form of *gotochi* (local, or regional) *B-kyu gurume*: Itō Makiko, journalist, blogger and leading specialist in Japanese cuisine, in an interesting article in the *Japan Times* writes that one of the most popular examples of *gotochi B-kyu gurume* is *Fujinomiya yakisoba* from Fujinomiya (Shizuoka), made using thick, chewy steamed noodles and *tenkasu* (crunchy bits of fried batter left after cooking *tempura*), topped with *katsubushi* (bonito flakes) and dried mackerel or herring powder (Itō 2015).

However, in recent years, the concept of *gotochi B-kyu gurume* has been openly contested: the main objection is that the *gotochi B-kyu gurume* boom encouraged local organisations to 'invent' new dishes and to label them as 'local' and 'traditional'.

Today, actually some of the most popular *B-kyu gurume* dishes in Japan include *takoyaki*, *curry rice*, *katsu*, *udon*, *yakisoba*, *ramen*, *okonomiyaki*, rice bowl dishes, but there are also Japanese derived Western dishes: for example, *spaghetti Napolitan* and *omuraisu* (cooked rice wrapped in an omelette). And most of them are quoted in *Shin'ya Shokudō*. Moreover, besides the taste, a defining feature of *B-kyu gurume* restaurants is that the personalities of the owners are important: the best places to find rich and reasonably priced *B-kyu gurume* are the small *izakaya* and diners, most of them located in the narrow streets behind the skyscrapers of Shinjuku, in a sort of world apart, very far from the image of Tokyo as an hyper-modern metropolis.

The Master in *Shin'ya Shokudō* comforts himself and the customers in his small diner preparing their favourite 'soul dishes'. Cooking becomes a way to communicate, comfort and reconnect with one's past and roots. It's not, however, Japan's traditional and worldwide praised *kaiseki ryōri* that are served, but a mix of familiar and mod-est flavours.

*Shin'ya Shokudō*, through food and foodways, offers a different point of view on Japan's obsession for "culinary authenticity", and on the contemporary Japan relationship with the myth of its self-essentialised cultural uniqueness and its increasing incorporation of foreign elements. Because, quoting Appadurai (1986), concerns over "culinary authenticity" are a reflection of a society's uncertain sense of identity as it is going through – or reflecting upon – periods of great change.