

SPAM I AM

By Lisa Masai

The stinky *takuan* sandwiches and the triangle-shaped *omusubi* meticulously packaged in airtight Tupperware boxes had embarrassed me at one point or another while growing up amongst my non-Nikkei peers. After awhile, hearing "What the heck is that?" or "Is there a reason why that smells so bad?" can get tiring. At times I felt embarrassment, at others, irritation. Yet despite these minor tribulations, the memories of opening my lunch bag and finding that delectable *obento* meal made especially for me still brings a smile to my face and a rumble to my stomach.

What exactly makes food Japanese American? My feeling is that it is not merely Japanese cuisine created in America; and that it is beyond the high-priced dishes found in fashionable restaurants, labeled with catchy phrases such as "Japanese urban cuisine." Rather, when the idea of Japanese American foods comes to mind, images of Spam *musubi*, *shoyu sato* hot dog, and *teriyaki* burgers pop up. After all, who is anyone to dictate to me how a Japanese American should eat his or her food? I still find nothing wrong with eating bacon, spaghetti with meatballs, scrambled eggs or even steak with an *ochawan* bowl filled with steaming white rice. I've even encountered a few "That's not right, at [Japanese restaurant name here] they say Spam isn't Japanese. I even went to Japan once and they didn't eat Spam. I think that your family is just weird."

My feeling is that the heart of Nikkei cuisine was created within the households of our families and exists within the souls of those who prepare and consume it. While many of us, myself included, attribute much of our attachment for these foods to their delicious tastes, I also can't deny that there are many other factors that contribute to our continued affection for these Americanized dishes. Growing up with these Nikkei foods allows us to maintain a connection to our heritage through its constant shifts. Although the fast-paced lifestyle of the new millennium leaves us less time to carefully prepare intricate sushi dishes and have *mochitsuki* as often as we'd like, we continue to find ways to integrate the food of our heritage into everyday life. Japanese cuisine is constantly being transformed to fit the tastes and the needs of Nikkei—including creations such as peanut butter microwave *mochi*.

Nikkei cuisine is certainly unique, and is a way by which we differentiate ourselves from other Americans. In the process of this distinction, it also binds us together when we prepare these foods for ourselves and when we share it with others. I'm always glad to share some Spam *musubi* with my floormates and roommates. For myself, eating it brings back some fond memories. As for my friends, they say that they had never before realized the hidden attributes of Spam. At temple, I remember those early weekend mornings of sushi and teriyaki chicken sales. There were always several dozen *Fujinkai* ladies diligently working their long shifts of fanning rice, cooking lunch, cutting vegetables, and making bento boxes to be sold. Although mostly Nisei, there were several generations of women, and men too, with smiles on faces chatting away the mornings and afternoons working together. It's a scene that I have not seen in other settings, and every time I encounter it, it's a pleasant reminder of the distinctive community I belong to.

I have overheard concerns about the decreasing acknowledgement of our culture amongst younger Nikkei generations. We worry about what the future holds. Yet remembering the past simply involves bringing it to the present and integrating it into our everyday life. Food nourishes both the body and soul. And as a vehicle for the preservation of our history and traditions it is efficient and ubiquitous. Through the process of microwaving *mochi* or whipping up some *shoyu sato* hot dog for lunch-on-the-go, we are participating in the preservation of our heritage. Every family and community has their own unique recipes and methods of preparation, passed down through the years to share with their children and grandchildren. With this in mind, I'm convinced that these foods, and this culture, will continue to exist within the contented stomachs and the hearts of Nikkei for generations to come. ☀

Lisa Masai is a Yonsei from Stockton, California. She is a sophomore at the University of California, Berkeley.



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