

Life in Japan

2010s: The decade Japanese food took over the world

This article by Patrick St. Michel is reprinted from the November 16, 2019 issue of *The Japan Times*. It tells a wonderful story of the popularity of Japanese cuisine with special attention to the everyday food that is a staple of everyday life in Tokyo -- the convenience store egg sandwich!

The konbini (convenience store) egg sandwich highlights just how cool Japanese food has become over the 2010s.

This humble offering – costing a little under ¥230 at your convenience store franchise of choice – has taken on new status abroad over the last decade. Anthony Bourdain championed the snack, and his celebration of Japan’s humble culinary delights has spread. Since then, other writers have sung the praises of Seven-Eleven’s version, recipe designers have tried to replicate the filling and YouTube channels have also gotten in on the eggy hype. In 2018, Konbi, a restaurant in Los Angeles, began offering its own upscale take on the sandwich.

Japanese cuisine in the 2010s has enjoyed a period of popularity, more so than any other cultural export to come out of the island in recent memory. That’s partially due to good timing – this has been the decade of the foodie and the rockstar celebrity chef. Japan’s dishes have benefited greatly from this newfound interest in all things culinary and, as the 2020s come into view, food has proved to be a very effective tool of soft power.

Food from Japan has long fascinated those outside the archipelago, buttressed by sushi and,



at the other end of the spectrum, the Benihana teppanyaki steak restaurant chain (or maybe corn on pizza for the “weird Japan” crowd). In the 2010s, though, the gastronomical vocabulary of Japanese food expanded for most people. Japanese chains expanded into New York, London and far beyond, hoping to improve their image. Ramen became a sensation with the arrival of Ippudo and Ichiran, among others.

Other popular domestic chains such as Ootoya and Ikinari Steak opened up outposts stateside, to varying degrees of success. Japanese cuisine also spread elsewhere, with cities such as Portland developing a tight-knit connection with Japan, and startups in Canada trying to popularize hōjicha (roasted green tea) with the masses.

Government initiatives have helped spread the cult of Japanese food, too. The official Cool Japan program has mostly missed the mark, but its culinary investments, such as food-centric video network Tastemade and wine club startup Winc, which aims to promote sake stateside, have fared better than most. The biggest coup on the food front, though, might have been getting washoku (basically the entire Japanese culinary canon) designated as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2013.

Across the globe, the number of Japanese restaurants increased significantly during the 2010s. A 2018 report by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries found that the number of Japanese eateries abroad exceeded 100,000, a 30 percent increase since 2015. That growth primarily came from Asia, the Middle East, and Central and South America: a reminder of just how far Japanese cuisine has spread this decade.

Statistics, though, lack the sizzle that a movie or TV show can bring. One of the decade's biggest documentaries, "Jiro Dreams of Sushi" (2011), focused on sushi master Jiro Ono, and got another bump when former U.S. President Barack Obama dined at Jiro's eponymous restaurant. Food-centric television programs such as "Ugly Delicious" devote plenty of screentime to Japanese eats, while YouTube matured into a platform full of top-notch uploads, many of which zoomed in on Japan and professed more love for the nation's convenience stores.

The secret to Japanese food's big decade – both physically and digitally – is that more people than ever got to experience the real deal. Tourism to Japan ballooned over the past 10 years; inbound visitor numbers rose nearly every quarter. Many of those tourists filmed videos of themselves enjoying Japanese food or waxed poetic about lesser-known dishes, helping spread awareness beyond the core "must eat" staples.

While having a hotshot ramen joint open in your neighborhood overseas can be neat, actually getting to enjoy Japanese food in Japan proper tops anything else. And hey, it's the only place to get the real egg sandwich experience.