JAPANESE FOOD

Yuiko Yagi

[Assignment: As a foreigner, what strikes you as especially different about American culture? Your comparison should be structured to expose some values primary in each culture.] Note: This essay was written for the special section for international students.

(1) I received a package from Japan last night. The cardboard box was almost crushed after one month's sea voyage, yet it still clearly bore my address in English. Each of the awkward letters showed my mother's hard fight with English spelling and almost got me into tears. The box had, among my winter clothes, a plastic bag with something red in it: pickled Japanese plums. I tasted one; then I could not stop my tears any more. The appetizingly sour, yet not spicy nor salty but subtly sweet, little red plum reminded me not only of my family but also of everything Japanese. I am already sick of American "junky dinners" and missing Japanese food very badly, but the point is not the taste. Food is not just food; it reflects the sense of being in each country. Let me show you, first of all, how different they are--our Japanese dishes and American ones--especially those served at dorm cafeterias.

(2) We take more care of the originality and subtlety of each food. First, we give priority to how fresh it is because fresh food keeps its flavor best. That is why, though we love salad, we did not hit on the idea of salad bar fare. We enjoy raw vegetables but to us they are just "weeds" if lettuce is discolored and beans are in sulfites. Next, we prefer plain taste and use as little seasoning as possible because seasonings are just for supplementing the original taste. Foreigners call a Japanese dish "hotch-potch," but it definitely is not; it is "boiled and lightly seasoned." We basically do not use heavy dressings with which Americans cover the whole dish and distort the very taste of the food. Third, we do not fry food as deeply as Americans do. They smash everything up, cover it with a thick coating of batter and fry it into an uncertain brown lump as if they were trying to hide something bad! Some may argue that we have tempuras as a counterpart of American deep fries, but we fry food only to make it crispy.

(3) Next, we pay more attention to the appearance of dishes. We have our own individual plate or bowl for each food and spend time decorating it carefully like an art work and arranging dishes of food in harmony with each other on the table. That is why I am sick of seeing Americans heap their plates with several foods jumbled together without any sense of beauty.

(4) These differences reflect essential differences in the character and identity of both nationalities. First, Japanese are more sensitive to "details" and believe that only the accumulation of the best details can bring us the best of the whole and provide real satisfaction to us. We are entirely different from Americans who cheat themselves on details and depend on sauces and dressings which taste alike whether ingredients are food or not and make any dish look so-so by covering its surface. Second, Japanese attach more value to "basic living," and believe that neglecting
the base of living like eating makes our total life poor in quality. We make every possible effort to make our eating time as pleasant as possible, because eating means to us more than "getting nutrition." For us eating should be independent of other activities, unlike American businessmen who try to have meetings during breakfast and lunch and American students who prefer sandwiches, hamburgers and pizzas as handy dinners.

(5) Missing Japanese food, therefore, means missing the Japanese state of being. I think that I should get used to American junky food in my goal to experience another culture, but at the same time I do not want to become addicted to American food so easily and blindly that it spoils the delicate sense of taste in my tongue and my ability to experience food and life as a Japanese. For awhile, therefore, I will depend on the Japanese pickled plum as a defender of my identity!