

Seaweed Stories

Don Maybin (Shonan Institute of Technology)

Some ingredients are such a part of our national identity that we find it hard to imagine another culture also eats the same thing. One interesting 'Japanese food' eaten in many communities by the ocean is seaweed. I have found seaweed on my plate in several countries, including my homeland, Canada. Seaweed is a traditional ingredient for the native peoples who live along Canada's coasts. The first time I tried seaweed was in Ahousat, a *First Nations community off Vancouver Island. I was visiting a high school friend and her mother served a breakfast of herring roe on kelp — or *komochi-konbu*. Unlike the dish found here in Japan at New Year's, my Ahousat breakfast was covered in seal oil. I definitely prefer the Japanese version!

After high school, I was accepted on a study program to Malaysia for one year. This was a government project, which meant there were official ceremonies with long speeches. Fortunately, at every function wonderful local dishes were served, including colorful coconut jelly. In Canada, gelatin is made from beef or pork tissue so I was surprised to discover that this delicious Malaysian dessert was made from agar-agar, another seaweed product which you know as *kanten*. I recently bought some jellies here in Japan and saw agar-agar listed among the ingredients in English. It made me nostalgic for Malaysia.

After Malaysia, I returned to Canada to attend university in Vancouver. While there I made some Japanese friends and was soon learning how to prepare *maki-zushi*, a popular dish with students who would roll up almost anything in the middle of a large sheet of *nori*. But I wasn't the only one learning about the joys of seaweed. My mother had gotten a job in a health food store and suddenly became a walking encyclopedia of seaweed knowledge. She knew more Japanese names than I did and was an amazing source of seaweed trivia.

For example, did you know that a treatment for goiter, a serious thyroid disease in many countries characterized by a painfully swollen neck, was discovered thanks to Japanese seaweed? It seems

that Japanese people rarely suffered from goiter. Was the reason genetic or environmentally based? By studying the local diet, scientists discovered that goiter is prevented by iodine in our diet — and seaweed contains a lot of iodine. For this reason, 'iodized salt' is now used around the world.

Another interesting anecdote from my mother is that, after the terrible nuclear accident at the Chernobyl nuclear facility in Russia in 1986, health food stores in Scandinavia sold out of *konbu* products. Why? Because people were afraid of being infected by the nuclear fallout and it was felt by homeopaths that *konbu* had the ability to flush radioactive waste from the human body.

As you can see, seaweed also plays a role in parts of Europe. Perhaps my most memorable 'seaweed experience' happened many years ago in Ireland's Dingle Peninsula. While renting a bicycle at a local pub I was overheard by some locals. More important than being a Canadian was the fact that I lived in Japan. Later as I huffed and puffed up a steep slope on my rented bicycle, a car pulled up alongside with customers from the pub who invited me for dinner. The group turned out to be a marine biology professor and his students living in a cabin by the sea. They were studying seaweed along the Dingle coastline and had decided to 'hijack' me to find out how seaweed is used in the Japanese diet!

Fortunately, when I first arrived in Japan I signed up for cooking lessons so that I could understand what to shop for in a supermarket. I explained to my Irish friends that *konbu* was used for soup stock, *wakame* was put in *miso* soup, *hijiki* tasted delicious simmered with carrots, and *nori* was not only rolled around sushi, but also rice crackers. I explained how mixes of dried seaweed were sold in convenient packs and reconstituted in water for strikingly colorful salads. As it turned out, I stayed with the group for over a week and had a wonderful, educational time — all thanks to seaweed!

* First Nations refers to the indigenous people in Canada.