Miso: Food for the Samurai

Miso is an essential ingredient in Japanese cuisine, commonly used to make soup. ***Tony McNicol*** *reports on companies that are guarding old traditions in making and selling this healthy and high-protein food.*

If you asked a Japanese person to identify the core foods that define their cuisine, there is a good chance that rice and its natural companion, miso soup, would top the list. A fermented soy bean paste often dissolved in fish stock to make soup, miso is produced from just three ingredients: soy beans, salt, and a special kind of mold (also used in sake) called *koji*.

Differences in color and flavor mostly originate from the types of *koji* used. Historically richer parts of Japan, such as Edo (the former name for Tokyo) and Kyoto, enjoyed miso made with mold grown on rice. More frugal areas made their miso with barley *koji*, or mold grown on soy beans.

During the Warring States period in Japan (fifteenth to sixteenth centuries) miso became a vital source of protein and nutrition for soldiers and besieged citizens. Even today, the former Tokugawa-clan stronghold of Aichi Prefecture and surrounding areas are famous for their dark-brown *akadashi* miso, bitter, astringent, and rich in protein.

Regional variations remain, although the tradition of homemade miso has mostly disappeared. Like many other foodstuffs, much of Japan's miso is made by large companies today. Yet that has not stopped a few determined and resourceful artisans from guarding old traditions.

Ishii Miso Vice-President Kosuke Ishii stands next to wooden barrels used to make premium miso. ©Tony McNicol

Like Making Wine

Ishii Miso in Nagano Prefecture, for example, ages its miso for up to three years. Larger manufacturers heat the miso to shorten the process to as little as a month, but Ishii Miso just waits patiently.

"Our miso is alive, like natural cheese," says Vice-President Kosuke Ishii. "The difference is akin to that between canned and filtered coffee." Founded in 1868 in the city of Matsumoto, Ishii Miso made only 50 tons this year, a tiny fraction of the 100,000 tons that some large miso manufacturers output annually. Its miso also costs three to five times the price of the miso on supermarket shelves.

Shinshu miso made in Nagano with rice *koji* is one of the most popular varieties in Japan. Of over a thousand miso manufacturers in Japan, a tenth are based in this mountainous region. And in terms of production, Nagano accounts for over 45%.

Almost all of Japan's miso is now made from imported soy beans, largely from the Americas. But Ishii Miso uses soy beans grown in native Nagano that have not been genetically modified. Locally grown soy tastes better, says Ishii, and is softer when boiled. Unfortunately, it is also triple the price of imported soy, and the price

Inside Sano Miso shop in Tokyo. Sano Miso sells 60 kinds of gourmet miso as well as various miso products. ©Tony McNicol

can rise even higher should a typhoon or other factors damage the harvest.

Ishii uses pinewood barrels from Niigata Prefecture instead of the stainless steel or plastic tubs used by larger manufacturers. Mold lives in the wood even when the barrel is empty, contributing to the miso's flavor.

"Wine made in a stainless steel tank would be completely different from that aged in a wooden barrel," says Ishii. Ishii, 48, is the son of the current president. Before entering the family firm in 1991 he spent seven years in Tokyo as a wine importer, and he sees great similarities with his previous job.

"Wine and miso are both fermented products," he notes. "And the best wine is produced on a small scale. The sourcing of ingredients is incredibly important, as is the environment where the product is aged."

Promoting Understanding

Initially the company made miso only for the local neighborhood. But as tourism to the area increased several decades ago, it started selling its premium products directly to visitors. Now its sales are mostly from the shop next to its factory and to past visitors via mail order. The company also hosts miso-making workshops for schoolchildren; over a thousand pupils visited last year. "It's important for children to see how the food that they eat is made," says Ishii.

Today a group of Belgian tourists were viewing the factory. "Japanese food is incredibly interesting and enormously varied. We want to try everything," said Nadine Martens as she tucked into a lunch, including miso soup. "We thought the miso soup would be strange, but it has quite a gentle taste." She is, however, enjoying a sandwich with her miso soup. "We still appreciate bread and butter," she said smiling.

All the Miso You Can Eat

Standing in the Sano Miso store in Kameido, Tokyo, are 50 large tubs of miso ranging in price from ¥660 a kilogram to ¥2,300. The most popular is the shop's own-made Temae miso. (*Temae miso* in Japanese can mean both "homemade miso" and "blowing your own horn.")

One premium variety, *shirokoshi* miso, is made by using only the protein-rich core of the soy bean. "It's very smooth, mild, and creamy. It's great for miso soup with turnips or radishes," says CEO Masaaki Sano.

The company's first shop was opened in 1934 by Sano's grandfather. At the time they only sold three kinds of miso made in Nagano by a family friend. Now they sell 500 tons of miso a year in four shops, including 100 tons of their own brand Nagano miso. But despite the shop's evident success—bustling with customers on a weekday afternoon—Sano is very aware of miso's slow decline.

According to the Japan Federation of Miso Manufacturers Cooperatives, per capita miso consumption in Japan has almost halved since the 1960s. Some 70% of Sano Miso's customers are over 50, who probably consume miso every day, says Sano. "But we're very nervous about the future. Young people are forgetting about miso," he says.

"Some young people might be interested in miso, but they certainly don't have it every day. These days, they almost see miso as an exotic foreign food." On the other hand, "The foreigners who come to shop here are very serious," he says. "They really want to learn about miso." Staff members offer advice on how to make *dashi* fish stock and describe the different kinds of miso.

So what advice does Sano have for miso novices? He recommends starting with standard Shinshu miso. Miso soup is the first thing to try, mixing miso paste with *dashi*, chicken stock, or even vegetable stock. You can eat miso raw as a dip for fresh vegetables like cucumbers, but you should mix in some sugar if the taste is too sharp.

"If the miso soup is too strong, try adding a little milk," comments Sano. Surprisingly, miso goes very well with dairy products. "Miso is a traditional food, but you can do anything with it," he adds. "There are no rules." HJ

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