

WORDS to LIVE by

As told to JUDIT KAWAGUCHI

Kaori Baba, 56, is a cooking teacher in Tokyo. An advocate of eating local foods, Baba bases her lifework around protecting Japan's near-extinct traditional vegetables and popularizing their consumption. Whether she's cooking long, green pumpkins that only grow in one village in Gifu Prefecture or pureeing carrots native to Sannai village in Akita Prefecture, Baba's goal is the same: To cook something so delicious that it becomes a big enough hit to help revive the local economy. So far, her recipes are working. Thanks to her talent for mixing and matching local vegetables and fish with current food trends, her dishes are winning over farmers and consumers alike. Baba is also a best-selling author whose two recently published cookbooks have already sold over 100,000 copies.

If you don't know how to cook, you could have fish flying into your mouth and you would still remain hungry. In Wakayama Prefecture, the rivers virtually overflow with ayu or sweetfish. Ayu really tastes sweet, very much like watermelon. I was invited to the prefecture to find a solution to the area's problem: In the fall there is so much fish that the locals didn't know what to do with it all! The Japanese are very discerning about the perfect seasons for particular products. So, once the traditional ayu season, the summer, is over, a lot less people eat that fish. I came up with new non-seasonal dishes that feature the local delicacy, which includes using its tasty roe.

Farmers really go to extremes to provide great produce. *Negi* (Japanese scallions) are white because as they grow, farmers keep covering the stems with more and more soil. Each onion ends up surrounded by a small pyramid of dirt. The white color is not for beauty: White negi tastes sweeter and their skins are softer. In Gifu's Hida-Takayama, near the Shirakawago Unesco World Heritage Site, green *sukuna* pumpkins are ripened on little individual beds of straw and farmers turn them to make sure they get even sunshine on all sides.

If you want to live a long, healthy life, Japanese food is the way to go.

A traditional Japanese meal consists of a bowl of miso soup, rice and three small side dishes (usually tofu, vegetables and sometimes fish). It's healthy and low in calories. The 1977 McGovern Report, titled "Dietary Goals for the United States," set guidelines for a healthy diet and urged Americans to eat less fat and more vegetables and fruit. After rigorous study, the Americans came to the conclusion that the Japanese diet was the healthiest.

Everyone knows that Japan has the world's highest life-expectancy rate, but few are aware that this is not a new phenomena. There are documents by Chinese travelers, some dating back 2,000 years, that cite Japan, known back then as Yamataikoku, as a country where people lived to their 70s or 80s and where many even reached the age of 100. Not only do Japanese live the longest, but those who live to about 75 lead one of the healthiest lifestyles in the world.

When we have peace, culture develops. In the history of the world, Japan is the only country that has enjoyed almost complete peace for a consecutive 260 years. During the Edo Period (1603-1868), about 90 percent of the Japanese population could read and write. Edo, today's Tokyo, was full of restaurants, and eating out was part of daily life, just as it is today. For example, during Edo times, there were over 4,000 soba restaurants in the city! Not to mention the many tempura and sushi bars, and *izakayas* (Japanese-style pubs).

There's no doubt about it: if Japanese would eat local produce, we wouldn't need to import so much. Japan imports about 60 percent of its seafood, even though it is an island surrounded by waters with plenty of fish. One of the main reasons we import seafood is that people prefer to eat fish that have fewer bones. So we import tuna, salmon and, of course, shrimp. I visit schools to teach about the large variety of Japanese fish. Some children rarely see bones in their food and are surprised to learn that many fish have a lot of bones.

Cuisine is most enjoyable when you try a variety; just like meeting different kinds of people is more fun. The Japanese didn't eat much meat until the Americans popularized it after World War II. After that, our small farms were unified in order to grow onions and potatoes for hamburgers. F1 hybrid vegetable seeds (selectively bred seeds) that yielded sturdier and uniform crops were also introduced. Such mass production lowered costs, but it pushed out local vegetable varieties that Japanese were used to. We used to eat 200 varieties of daikon, each with a distinct flavor, shape and color. Now most supermarkets only carry a few kinds! I want to save and popularize the many neglected varieties of vegetables before it's too late. When everything we eat is uniform, it is unnatural and weird.

Japan must keep an eye on what's cooking around the world. Foreign chefs do their best to learn about Japanese cooking, but it's difficult for them to find schools in which they can polish their skills. I went to private cooking schools in Thailand, Morocco, France, Italy, Vietnam and the United States. Besides such private institutes, many foreign governments support education in national cuisine. For example, the Italian Culinary Institute for Foreigners (ICIF) promotes Italian food and wine by educating foreign chefs. Its goal is to make sure high-quality Italian food is served around the world. There is nothing like this in Japan, so the quality of Japanese food in other countries varies greatly from excellent to not so good.

The recipe for a good life is to stay positive and don't think bad things about others.

Thanks to my parents, I grew up with this mentality. My husband was raised in a similar way, so we have the same way of thinking. We met 34 years ago at an *omiai* (introduction meetings for arranged marriages) organized by my mother's friend. Maybe the key to a happy life is marrying the right person.

Judit Kawaguchi loves to listen. She is a volunteer counselor and a TV reporter on NHK's "Journeys in Japan." Learn more at: morinoske.com Twitter: [juditkoyo](https://twitter.com/juditkoyo)