here and there around San Francisco, American diners in the 1970s knew nothing or next-to-nothing about authentic Japanese cuisine. It is probably safe to say that most people regarded Japanese ryori (cooking) as a dubious cuisine, revolting even. Certainly, the thirty or more years since the bombing of Pearl Harbor and Japan’s part in World War II had done little to alter or heal the hostility Americans had against that country. Families who embraced, devoured Chinese food (most every urban setting back then had a Chinatown whose restaurants were packed year-round, especially on New Year’s Eve) were wary, even frightened of Japanese food. It struck them as too exotic, too funny looking and sounding. Few ventured to try a Japanese restaurant if, that is, one could be found. Their minds and mouths were closed to such an adventure.
By 1978, Mary Frances Kennedy (M.F.K.) Fisher had well-established herself as one of the United States’ premier chroniclers of food, wine and travel. In landmark books such as Serve It Forth (1937), How to Cook a Wolf (1942) and The Gastronomical Me (1943), Mrs. Fisher blazed a trail through what before her had been the mostly male-dominated territory of food writing and landed at the place of literary and culinary distinction she has continued to hold to this day.

Although it was 1954’s compendium, The Art of Eating, that cemented M.F.K.‘s reputation and drew her to the attention of many of the globe’s culinarians, her work had been long admired by many in the gastronomical world. One of these was young Shizuo Tsuji, Japan’s answer to James Beard, Jacques Pepin, and Julia Child all rolled into one. Tsuji had schooled himself not only in Japanese ryori but also in French haute cuisine and was offering chef hopefuls rigorous, skilled training at his prestigious Ecole Technique Hoteliere Tsuji, a cooking academy known and acclaimed beyond the shores of Japan. A passionate admirer of M.F.K.

Fisher’s prose, he had agreed to meet her in 1953 after she wrote to him for information about sake for her Napa Valley Wine Library. Tsuji, in turn, requested information on the Foire Gastronomique, an annual culinary fair in Dijon where M.F.K. had lived. Over the next years, Fisher would periodically host Tsuji and his colleagues in her home. She liked the young, ambitious Japanese entrepreneur and Tsuji, in turn, adored M.F.K., likely feeling he had found a spiritual and a culinary mother to exchange ideas with and to learn from. Theirs became a true east-west alliance, professionally and personally perfect.

It was no surprise then when, in 1978, Tsuji asked the illustrious Fisher to write the introduction to his new book, Japanese Cooking: A Simple Art. To help her do so, Tsuji invited her for a two-week stay in Osaka and Kobe so that she could observe firsthand the art and execution of Japanese cuisine and explore the many intricacies of Japan’s culture and people.

Taking along for company and consultation her beloved sister-sidekick, Norah
Kennedy Barr, Fisher set out on what was to become a revelatory odyssey to a country she knew not much about, to a cuisine she admitted she knew “much too little of.” This was all about to change.

To begin, Tsuji introduced her to the mind-boggling 220 recipes his book contained and rigorously explained the many ceremonies, cultural meanings and symbolisms behind each dish. Multi-course tasting dinners were laid before Fisher and Barr as if they were empresses, resplendent with every fish and meat, every tea, every new sensation. The sisters sampled a cornucopia of Japanese noodles—spaghetti-like ramen, the chewier udon, wheat-based hyamugi, soba, shirataki, see-through hirame— and every assortment of seaweed the Japanese table enjoyed, from nori to hijiki, agar agar, wakame, and more.

Tsuji and his skilled staff prepared “what seemed like every national dish, and then some” before the sisters’ delighted eyes and taste buds. In between burps (Fisher and Barr were shown the very un-American gesture of belching and slurping to show one’s appreciation for a meal), the two gals were squired from one national and religious monument to another: ornate temples, giant, wise-eyed Buddhas, koi-plump ponds, consummate gardens, as well as to schools, both cooking and secular. Fisher later commented, “After two weeks in Japan, I must admit with real astonishment that if I could eat as I did there, under my friend’s gentle guidance, I would gladly turn my back on Western food and live on Japanese *ryori* for the rest of my life.”

This total immersion in the Japanese way of eating and of living changed M.F.K. Fisher. Admirers of her work boldly underscore her sojourns in France, particularly in Aix-en-Provence, Dijon and French Switzerland. And those places without question transformed her post-Victorian palate into a richly aware, diverse and continental one. But Japan, too, altered her profoundly, giving her new eyes and a new stomach, opening her mind and her sensibilities to another way of seeing, of tasting, of experiencing what, how and why people eat. To Fisher, her time in Japan made it clear that a
national cuisine and its inhabitants are
“inexorably meshed with aesthetics and
with religion, with tradition and history…
It is evocative of seasonal changes, or of
one’s childhood, or of a storm at sea…”

Fisher’s preface to Japanese Cooking: A
Simple Art, a jewel of food writing, re-
veals this education as well as her lasting
affection for her dear Tsuji and his for
her. In it, Fisher details her discovery that
Western food can dull rather than awaken
the senses. Her taste buds blossomed
under the lightness of Japanese meals,
the lack of unnecessary starches and
sugars in Japanese sweets, the “clean” of
them as well as the clean, fresh focus of
every recipe prepared for her and Barr.

Outside of her writings, she took all
she had learned to the American eater,
becoming a self-assigned apostle of the
gustatory gospel of Japanese eating. In
the days and weeks and years that fol-
lowed her stay in Japan, she brought
news of it happily to the Bay Area, to
Southern and Northern California and
beyond using her influence to educate
a public ignorant of the wonders of a
cuisine it had long been denying itself.
After the publication of Tsuji’s book in
1980, a work now considered by many a
holy book of Japanese cuisine, visitors to
Fisher’s home discovered, too, a different
Fisher, her own table now set with sim-
plicity. Gone were the 3-4-5-course meals
resplendent with sauces and frostings
and creams. In place of the heavy
French recipes of the past were two or
three unadorned food items—prawns
scooped fresh that very day from the
sea, a bowl of baby artichokes, some
tossed greenery—all lovely in their color,
candor and honesty. Friends and guests
found her outfits and her dwelling
more Easternized as well—brilliant,
vivid caftans, kimonos, sashes and
comfortable sandals, fewer sachets
and potpourri-laden tables. In her
mind and heart had blossomed an
altered view of what denotes “sensuous.”

Legendary editor and Japan scholar,
Kim Shueftan, who, along with trans-
lator Mary Sutherland, helmed the
Tsuji/Fisher project for Koshanda Press
confirms that “Mary Frances went
out and lectured about it, extolling the
benefits and virtues of Japanese food, even mentioning it during personal appearances and book-signings that had nothing to do with Shizuo’s book.” In short, “she became mad for Japan.” M.F.K. Fisher didn’t singlehandedly make the nation aware of authentic Japanese food but she did do her part to ensure that eaters knew of its merits and about Tsuji’s defining work. As Shueffan explains, “if [Mary] believed in your work, she’d move Heaven and Earth to promote it.”

Today, Japanese cuisine holds a timeless, honored place in the American mindset and on the global stage. Even in small, provincial areas such as the one in which I live, Japanese restaurants are everywhere: three very good, busy ones lie within a mile of each other. The years have yielded Tsuji’s and Fisher’s book the reputation of a classic not only of Japanese cookbooks but of cookbooks period. One cookbook enthusiast I know calls it, “a book delivered to earth by celestial realms.” M.F.K. Fisher internationalized American eating habits. She spent most of a lifetime educating us in the ways of developing a happy, satisfied, well-rounded palate, one that can appreciate both Dijon and Osaka. And for me, personally, as well as for so many others, that is everything. ■

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