

The Power of Food

Students and Local Women Cooking Together in Rural Japan

By Susanne Klien and Stephanie Assmann

All of us have several meals a day, yet few among us have thought about the power of food and how it affects a region's culture, history, and people. Different people like different food—something we noticed during our program titled Local/Global Food as Revitalization in a small rural town called Shintotsukawa, located two hours northwest of Sapporo, a city with a population of 1.9 million and located in the center of Japan's northmost island Hokkaidō.

Local/Global Food as Revitalization is a three-year project planned for the years 2015 to 2017. The first year of the program in 2015 began with a more general theme: the mission for students was to develop ideas about how to revitalize Shintotsukawa and attract tourists. Student suggestions included cycling tourism, hiking tours, and culinary tourism. Culinary tourism was also proposed by locals attending an explanatory session of the project and was therefore chosen as a theme for the 2016 program. This second year of the project was organized in close cooperation between Hokkaidō University and the Municipal Agency of Shintotsukawa, more specifically the Section for the Promotion of Industry and Tourism, with funds provided by the latter. In addition, we obtained a one-year research grant by the Hokkaidō Development Association (*Hokkaidō Kaihatsu Kyōkai*) to implement the program and conduct pertinent research. Although the focus of this article is the 2016 program, the project will continue for one more year in 2017. Currently, themes for 2017 are being discussed.

One objective of our program is to expose students to facets of rural life that contrast Japan's national rhetoric of growth and progress. After a period of high economic growth from 1955 to 1973, the prefectural government responded to population decline through merging municipalities, creating infrastructure projects, and fostering rural tourism. However, these policies were only partially successful or outright failures. Shintotsukawa represents the struggles of peripheral regions, with problems such as fertility decline, an aging population, and outmigration. The population of Shintotsukawa declined from 7,249 inhabitants in 2010 to 6,840 inhabitants in 2015, but the town is still vibrant with an intact infrastructure, and the main industry is agriculture.¹ Three-generational farming families in spacious houses lead self-sufficient lifestyles. Efforts of the municipal government of Shintotsukawa to facilitate change through the exchange between locals and students reflect the expectations of the national government. However, residents enjoy a high quality of life and remain reluctant to change. Furthermore, the town attracts at least some urban migrants who resettle in alternative communities or as entrepreneurs. Shintotsukawa also demonstrates how migration shapes culinary styles. After a flood in 1890, 2,000 people migrated from Totsukawa in southern Japan to found Shintotsukawa in Hokkaidō and brought *sasazushi* and *meharizushi*, two sushi specialties that are still eaten there today.

Program participants included mostly students who were affiliated with the Modern Japanese Studies Program, a four-year undergraduate program for international (i.e., non-Japanese) students at Hokkaidō University (Hokudai). Learning through experience is an essential trait of the



Photo 1: Students on a one-day preworkshop trip to Shintotsukawa to inspect the local sausage maker Wurst Yoshida. Source: All photos in the article are courtesy of the authors.

Modern Japanese Studies Program, which accommodates students from multicultural backgrounds who spend a significant amount of their undergraduate years studying Japanese in a conventional classroom setting.

All participants were undergraduate students; this included first-year, second-year, and fourth-year students with varying Japanese-language skills. The program was open to other university departments; therefore, two students—native Japanese speakers from different disciplinary backgrounds (law and planetary science) who come from outside Hokkaidō—attended the program as well. In addition to the authors, the faculty consisted of a teaching assistant from Hokkaidō and a visual documentation expert from Tokyo. English was spoken primarily unless local residents or representatives of the municipal government were present. Reasons for joining the program varied: some students hoped to learn more about rural life, as they had never left Sapporo during their studies in Japan; some had an interest in food; others had taken part in the first program in 2015 and wished to come back to Shintotsukawa and see the locals again.

The educational mission of the 2016 program was threefold. First, food was a starting point to engage with a variety of Shintotsukawa residents and to make a contribution to the rural community. The main task for the students was to create dishes that combined their respective culinary heritage with an innovative approach to existing foodstuffs in Shintotsukawa. To this end, students worked in teams and collaborated with local women farmers. This arrangement required good communication skills and flexibility. Second, in addition to the preparatory lectures and cooking sessions with local residents, students had a chance to experience local food habits and everyday culinary life during a visit to a family farm and inspections of various restaurants and agricultural facilities. The farm visit allowed students to experience the local culinary culture firsthand and ask the locals questions about the history of local foods. Students also inspected rice paddies, tomato farms, and storage facilities for agricultural equipment. Students invariably enjoyed the farm visit, as it afforded insights into the everyday lives of farmers that they could not have gained through textbooks or class. The third objective of the program was to enable students to experience rural life firsthand through a combination of farm visits, informal encounters with various people living in Shintotsukawa, and visits to several places of interest such as the local sausage shop (Photo 1). Regular



Photo 2: Results of the pre-workshop cooking exercise on July 2, 2016, on Hokudai campus.

feedback sessions with faculty during the program helped students analyze and contextualize their experiences and observations.

The 2016 program consisted of the following: the two course organizers' preparatory lectures at a university campus on pertinent themes, a one-day trip to Shintotsukawa in order for students to gain a first impression of the town and its residents, a half-day preworkshop cooking exercise in early July with local women farmers on the university campus (Photo 2), and the three-day workshop in Shintotsukawa in mid-July (Photo 3 and Photo 4).

Professors Stephanie Assmann (food-related topics) and Susanne Klien (revitalization and community engagement) conducted four preparatory lectures that encompassed themes including an introduction to Japanese food, food consumption, slow food, regional revitalization, and community engagement. Lectures were approximately forty-five minutes long, followed by classroom discussion. As most students, including the Japanese students, had not studied food-related themes in class before, the discussion was very lively. Students were particularly interested in the definition of what exactly constitutes Japanese food, as global interactions make regional culinary traditions less distinct.

The one-day trip to Shintotsukawa in May was carried out with the following aims: first, we provided opportunities for students to get a visual impression of Shintotsukawa; second, students met locals and asked them about culinary habits; finally, students visited various food-related shops and spoke to the shop owners in order to tease out more concrete information about the local food culture.

In early July, students first conducted a half-day preworkshop cooking exercise with local women farmers on the university campus, followed by a three-day workshop in Shintotsukawa later in mid-July. During this three-day workshop, students engaged in a variety of activities, including a farm visit, a visit to the local folk museum to learn about the local history of migration, an inspection of a sacred Shinto religious site located near the mountains, lunch at a local sushi restaurant, a meeting with two nonlocal regional revitalization troupe members, and a visit to a recently established restaurant. At the end of day two, students and faculty discussed their observations at the local library.

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The main task of the three-day workshop was to prepare dishes in collaboration with local women farmers and present them to a local audience in Shintotsukawa.



Photo 3: Students enjoying the panoramic view of Shintotsukawa and environs on the roof of the regional West Sorachi Water Works Bureau.



Photo 4: Students during cooking preparations on the final day of the workshop, July 18, 2016, in Shintotsukawa.

in Shintotsukawa. Three student teams consisted of three members each, all from different countries. Each team provided the background and concept of their dishes. Since teams presented fusion dishes that linked local ingredients to their respective culinary backgrounds, and thus included tastes, forms, and combinations that were unfamiliar to local residents, students explained the concept, background, and goal of their dishes to the local public prior to the tasting.

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The final presentations were conducted in Japanese. All teams started with a self-introduction, talked about their impression of Shintotsukawa, introduced their recipes, discussed the challenges and merits of teamwork, and ended with comments about what they had taken away from the experience.

Team one presented Karelian pies, a Finnish specialty usually made of rye flour—but rye flour was replaced with local buckwheat flour for the workshop—and rice porridge covered with an egg-butter sauce. The pies were presented with grilled vegetables. Furthermore, team one created a minestrone soup made of grilled asparagus, eggplant, and zucchini. Team two chose three dishes that were served as appetizers or finger foods: (1) thinly sliced and peeled zucchini was rolled and filled with thin Japanese noodles called *men* and topped with mini tomatoes, (2) champignons were topped with a meat filling spiced with coriander and lots of garlic, and (3) *ume-nigiri*, small round rice balls, were made of Japanese plum served with a paste made of *shiso* (a Japanese herb) leaves. The students explained in their presentation that the dynamic shape of the noodles resembled the local Toppu river; hence, their dish appropriated local landscapes into the food. Team three presented small and spicy rice balls (*o-nigiri*) made of *sakura-ebi* (small shrimp), pumpkin, and *shiitake* mushrooms, and topped with *nori* seaweed. Their second dish was a Vietnamese soup made of Vietnamese fish sauce (*nampla*), carrots, onions, mushrooms, and tomatoes, served with rice topped with onions and *katsuo-bushi* bonito flakes.

The 2016 program was concluded by a third visit to Shintotsukawa in October that year, when students presented their dishes at the local autumn festival. The festival was a big success—lunchboxes with selected dishes developed by the teams sold out completely.

We hope that the project strengthened ties between the students and the local population, enabled students to experience another facet of rural life, and refined their perceptions of life in rural Japan. We would like to express our thanks to the Hokkaidō Development Association for sponsoring the project; and Mayor Yoshinobu Kumada of Shintotsukawa town, Vice Mayor Tōru Kobayashi, and the members of the Municipal Agency of Shintotsukawa, Section for the Promotion of Industry and Tourism, who dedicated their time to organizing the program. We are grateful to the host families Shiraishi, Kudo, and Asakawa, and the local women farmers Miyoko Shiraishi, Aiko Yoshida, Toyo Hara, and Yuko Uemura, who generously shared their time and culinary knowledge with our students. ■

NOTES

1. "Report of Heisei 20-Year Census (Final Report)" [Heisei 27-nen kokusei chōsa kekka (gaisū) hōkoku], *Shintotsukawa Town* website, accessed August 11, 2016, <https://tinyurl.com/kxotsbv>.

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