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Final Thesis

**Deconstructing Eating Models in
Contemporary Japan:
Between Hōshoku, Food Literacy and
Sustainable Practices**

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Abstract

This thesis examines sustainability, food education, and cultural heritage through the case of the Gastronomy Management program at Ritsumeikan University in Kyōto. In recent decades, globalisation, urban expansion, and changing patterns of daily life have reshaped Japan's relationship with food. These transformations have been exacerbated by the spread of convenience-oriented consumption, reflecting a society marked by time scarcity, new labour structures, and growing individualisation.

Scholars describe this shift through the notion of *hōshoku* (崩食), the “collapse” of traditional dietary models. In response, governmental and civil actors have promoted alternative frameworks, such as *Shokuiku* (食育) and the growing Slow Food movement. At the core of these initiatives lies the concept of food literacy and its transformative impact on consumers' approach towards responsible consumption.

In this context, the Ritsumeikan case provides a valuable example of how university-level education seeks to address these challenges. The thesis' objective is to portray contemporary Japanese dietary patterns and to analyse how the Gastronomy Management program integrates cultural, historical, scientific, and economic perspectives on food.

The study adopts a mixed approach. A qualitative analysis, based on document review of the program's English and Japanese online materials and a semi-structured interview with the faculty director Masayoshi Ishida, aiming to explore how sustainability is framed institutionally. A quantitative analysis, conducted through the administration of an online survey – distributed to Gastronomy Management course students – allow to deep dive into their perspectives on sustainable food systems and their everyday eating practices.

The findings reveal that while students demonstrate a high level of food literacy and strong sustainability awareness, they continue to experience a significant gap between their knowledge and their daily eating practices. Time constraints, economic limitations, and university life emerge as key factors limiting the practical translation of sustainability-oriented values. The study therefore suggests that higher education plays a crucial role in shaping food awareness and professional identities, yet educational exposure alone is insufficient to transform practices without supportive structural conditions. By doing so, the thesis contributes to ongoing debates on sustainable food system by highlighting the relationship between food knowledge and everyday material constraints.

要旨

本論文は、京都に所在する立命館大学の食マネジメント学部を事例として、サステナビリティ・食育・食文化の継承について考察するものである。近年、グローバル化や都市化、生活様式の変化により、日本人の食との関係は大きく変容してきた。とりわけ、利便性を重視した消費形態の拡大は、時間的制約や、新たな労働環境や、個人化の進行といった社会的背景を反映し、食生活の変化をさらに加速させている。

こうした状況は「崩食」として論じられ、伝統的な食生活モデルの「崩壊」が指摘されてきた。それに対し、政府および市民社会は、「食育」や、スローフード運動をはじめとする取り組みを推進している。その中心には、フードリテラシーの向上が責任ある消費者行動につながると考えられている。

本研究は、立命館大学の事例を通じて、高等教育がこれらの課題にいかに対応しているか検討する。具体的には、現代日本における食生活を明らかにするとともに、食マネジメント学部が、文化・歴史・科学・経済の各視点を取り入れながら食教育の特徴を分析することである。

研究方法として、質的および量的手法を組み合わせた混合研究法を採用した。質的分析では、英語と日本語の学部の公式資料の文書分析と、学部長石田正義氏への半構造化インタビューをもとに、サステナビリティがどのように扱われているかを検討した。量的分析では、同学部の学生を対象に持続可能な食システムに対する認識と日常の食実践に関するオンラインアンケートを行った。

その結果、学生は高いフードリテラシーと強いサステナビリティ意識を有している一方で、知識と日常の食行動との間にギャップがあることが明らかとなった。本研究は、このギャップを個人の意識不足ではなく、日常生活における時間的・経済的制約や大学生活の環境といった構造的な原因との関係から捉え直す点に特徴がある。本研究は、高等教育が食への意識形成と専門性の育成に重要な役割を果たしていることを示している。しかし、教育のみでは日常の行動を変えるには十分ではなく、環境面での支援も必要であることを指摘する。以上より、本論文は、食に関する知識と日常生活における物質的制約との関係性を明らかにすることで、持続可能な食システムに関する議論に貢献するものである。

Introduction

At the turn of the twenty-first century, alongside processes such as economic growth, urbanisation and the globalisation of food systems, a significant shift in food consumption patterns has taken place, first in high-income countries and subsequently in developing countries. These transformations, defined by researcher Barry Popkin as the “nutrition transition”, describes the shift from traditional diets based on fresh, local foods to diets with greater variety, availability and accessibility of processed and ultra-processed foods that are low in nutrients and high in energy density. These products are usually easy to obtain, for example in supermarkets, restaurants, vending machines or by ordering on web platforms.¹

This phenomenon is progressively becoming a global issue linked to modern lifestyles: people’s lives are becoming more and more busy and hectic between accelerated work and study rhythms, longer commuting times, cumulative social fragmentation and the changing family structures. As a result, complains about lack of time or energy to cook healthy meals due to high levels of daily stress are becoming the social norm.² In the meantime, food environments have evolved with the expansion of fast-food chains, the rise of convenience stores such as Japanese “konbini”, and the growing availability of ready-to-eat meals have made food more accessible than ever.³

In Japan, these structural and environmental transformations have contributed to the emergence of the phenomenon called *hōshoku* (飽食).⁴ Often translated as “overabundance” or “gluttony”, *hōshoku* describes a condition in which abundance leads to the development of adverse behaviours towards food: meal skipping, fast eating, solitary consumption and the growing reliance on convenience foods. In the end, these factors are often associated with

¹ P. SILVA; R. ARAÚJO; F. LOPES; S. RAY, *Nutrition and Food Literacy: Framing the Challenges to Health Communication*, *Nutrients*, 15, 4708, 2023. pp. 8-9

² UEDA, Haruka, *The post-war Japanese eating model: A sociological exploration of semi compressed food modernity*, *International Sociology*, Vol. 39(4), 2024. pp. 468-473

³ P. SILVA; R. ARAÚJO; F. LOPES; S. RAY, “Nutrition and Food Literacy...”, cit., pp. 8-9

⁴ HASHIMOTO Naoki, *hōshoku to Kuzure-shoku no shakai-gaku joron*, *shoku no senmonka* blog, 2020, [飽食と崩食の社会学 序論入門 食の社会学](#), Accessed: 30/11/2025

橋本直樹, 「飽食と崩食の社会学 序論」、*食の専門家 Blog*, 2020, [飽食と崩食の社会学 序論入門 食の社会学](#), Accessed: 30/11/2025

nutritional imbalance, excessive food waste, and health issues, setting the stage for what scholars have described as a growing *food illiteracy*.⁵

In this context, Japan presents itself as an interesting case study because, since the early 2000s, these tensions have prompted both civil society and public institutions to seek alternative responses. Movements such as Slow Food Japan and initiatives like Food Action Nippon have promoted a renewed focus on local products, seasonality and sustainability, articulating what Kōsaka defines as a form of “post-McDonaldisation”.⁶ At the institutional level, food education policies under the framework of *Shokuiku* have emphasized the interconnection between health, food culture and responsible consumption, particularly through early educational interventions.

Although existing research has examined primary education programmes in depth, the role of higher education as a systemic catalyst in shaping food literacy, professional responsibility, and sustainable practices in the food and beverage industry remains relatively unexplored. Filling this gap is essential to understanding how contemporary Japanese society can overcome the contradictions of *hōshoku* towards more thoughtful, sustainable, and culturally rooted food practices.

With this in mind, this thesis aims to study the relationship between food literacy and everyday eating practices in the Japanese university context, with particular attention to the role of the university as a space for mediation between acquired knowledge, the structural constraints of everyday life, and actual behaviours. Through the case study of the Gastronomy Management degree program at Ritsumeikan University in Kyōto, the research aims to explore how a curriculum explicitly oriented towards food, sustainability, and gastronomic culture is received by students and whether, and to what extent, this training influences their daily eating practices. Furthermore, it is interesting to consider any tensions between students’ perceptions of sustainable eating and the practices they actually implement. These discrepancies will be analysed using the theoretical framework of Social Practice Theory (SPT), which connects material factors, skills, and meanings to understand the relationship between individuals and social life.⁷

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Katsuaki KŌSAKA, “Posuto`Makudonarudo-ka' jidai no yukue: Fāsutofūdo sangyō no jizoku kanōsei no mosaku” (Toward the Sustainability of Fastfood Industry: The post-McDonaldisation thesis), *Bunkyo University, Bulletin of Living Science*, Vol.29, 2007, pp.49-59

小坂勝昭、「ポスト・『マクドナルド化』時代の行方: ファーストフード産業の持続可能性の模索」、文教大学、生活科学研究、巻 29、2007 年、p. 49-59

⁷ Mary GREENE, *Social Practice Theory*, in *Vocabulary for Sustainable Consumption and Lifestyles: A Language for Our Common Future*, Routledge, 1st edition, 2020. p. 106

Therefore, the following research questions have been formulated: *How does higher education shape students' food awareness, and to what extent does food literacy translate into everyday eating practices under the constraints of university life?* and *How do students enrolled in Gastronomy Management programme perceive their role as future professionals in relation to sustainable food systems?*

In order to answer these questions, a mixed-method approach is the best way to obtain both qualitative and quantitative data. Moreover, the integration component will allow for a deeper, holistic understanding of the topic through the analysis, interrelation, and comparison of data from the two different study methods.⁸

This thesis is divided into four chapters:

The first chapter aims to provide a theoretical and conceptual framework for the topic. To do so, it opens with an analysis of the historical evolution of the concept of *social responsibility*, from its ethical and philanthropic origins to the development of modern concepts of sustainability, including corporate social responsibility, ESG criteria, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Then, the chapter focuses on the socio-ecological impact of the food and beverage sector, stressing its central role in contemporary debates on sustainability. In this context, the concept of food literacy is introduced as a tool capable of influencing both individual dietary behaviours and its social and environmental consequences. The chapter concludes with the introduction of Japan as the primary case study, analysing the cultural reception of sustainability through concepts of harmony within society and nature.

The second chapter delves into the Japanese context, analysing the transformation of Japanese food culture within the processes of globalisation and modernization. It focuses on the changes that have occurred since World War II, resulting from a so-called “Westernization” alongside the evolution of food production systems and the reorganisation of daily life. Particular attention is paid to the rise of convenience food culture, starting with the spread of American fast-food chains and *konbini*. The chapter concludes with the introduction of the concept of *hōshoku*, describing the contemporary state of food abundance that is leading to the deconstruction of traditional dietary models.

The third chapter analyses the social, cultural, and institutional responses that Japan has attempted to adopt in response to the phenomena described in the previous chapter. First, the tradition of *washoku* is taken as an example of a cultural countermeasure, considering its

⁸ Courtney A. MCKIM, *The Value of Mixed Methods Research: A Mixed Methods Study*, Journal of Mixed Methods Research, Vol. 1, 2, 2017, pp. 202–222

recognition as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity and its structural limitations. Second, the Slow Food movement is examined to show up its social and educational relevance. Finally, the analysis focuses on institutional responses, studying *Shokuiku* policy and its outcomes. This chapter aims to emphasize the potentiality of food education as a tool for promoting sustainable food practices.

The fourth chapter presents the empirical research conducted for this thesis. It introduces Social Practice Theory as an analytical framework and presents the methodological approach and data collection strategies. The results of the quantitative and qualitative analyses are presented with the aim of highlighting the relationship between food literacy and awareness and the daily eating practices of Japanese university students. The chapter concludes with a comparison of qualitative and quantitative data to address the hypotheses outlined in the chapter.

All in all, by analysing the university environment, this study will establish a connection between food literacy and the actualization of students' eating habits. Finally, it will attempt to understand how higher education can contribute to the transformation of food systems, considering its role both as a site of knowledge production, and as a precious resource for training professionals capable of mediating between sustainability, market dynamics and consumer demand.

CHAPTER 1

– Conceptual Framework

1.1 – Social Responsibility in the Age of Sustainability

In recent decades, increasing attention has been paid—across academic, economic, and political spheres—to the social responsibilities that companies, public institutions, non-profit organisations, and even academia should uphold in order to ensure a positive environmental and social footprint for future generations. These responsibilities, often born out of a need for cohesion, fairness and sustainability, have gradually contributed to building an ethic of awareness and social responsibility, which recognises that every individual (and community) has an active role to play in positively influencing the human and environmental context in which they live.

In contemporary society, every individual, as a consumer, makes daily choices that reflect, to varying degrees, an ethical and environmental orientation. More and more often, products present on the market carry labels such “organic”, “ethically produced”, “made from recycled materials” or “vegan”, clear signs of a growing interest towards sustainable consumption choices. In this sense, both individual citizens and public and private institutions are being encouraged to adopt socially responsible behaviour.

However, the definition of ‘social responsibility’ remains the subject of widespread debate. Scholars Duckworth and Moore describe it as an ideal, a goal of perfection that is unlikely ever to be achieved, even though it is useful as a benchmark for stimulating a process of continuous improvement.⁹

One of the most widely accepted definitions is the one provided by the International Organisation for Standardisation (ISO) in its ISO 26000 standard – *Guidance on Social Responsibility*:

⁹ Holly Alison DUCKWORTH, Ann Moore ROSEMOND, *Social Responsibility : Failure Mode Effects and Analysis*, Taylor & Francis Group, 2010. p. 18

“The responsibility of an organization for the impacts of its decisions and activities on society and the environment, through transparent and ethical behaviour that contributes to sustainable development, health and the welfare of society”¹⁰

In other words, social responsibility is the duty of an organisation for the impacts generated by its decisions and activities on society and the environment. Through a transparent and ethical behaviour, the organisation can impact greatly to the promotion of sustainable development, health and social well-being of its society.

Moreover, this definition describes the capacity and opportunity that companies, public institutions, non-profit organisations and educational institutions to improve their social and environmental behaviour. However, it also emphasises that social responsibility is not a legal obligation, but a voluntary choice: commitment to socially responsible practices depend on the discretion and initiative of each organisation.¹¹

Furthermore, the definition highlights the inseparable connection between the social and environmental spheres, as one cannot exist without the other. Social responsibility, therefore, is not limited to the adoption of “green” labels or slogans but involves the construction of an ethical and relational fabric that can protect both the community and the environment that surrounds it.¹²

The purpose of ISO 26000 is to serve as an international reference document, providing a common basis for assessing and improving the social responsibility performance of organisations. In 2006, during the Sydney conference, seven thematic areas and seven key principles of responsible behaviour were identified, which gained broad global consensus.

The thematic areas (Fig.1) include a wide range of internal organisational practices, from (1) *organisational governance* and (2) *labour practices*, up to covering practices external to the organisation like (3) *including environmental*

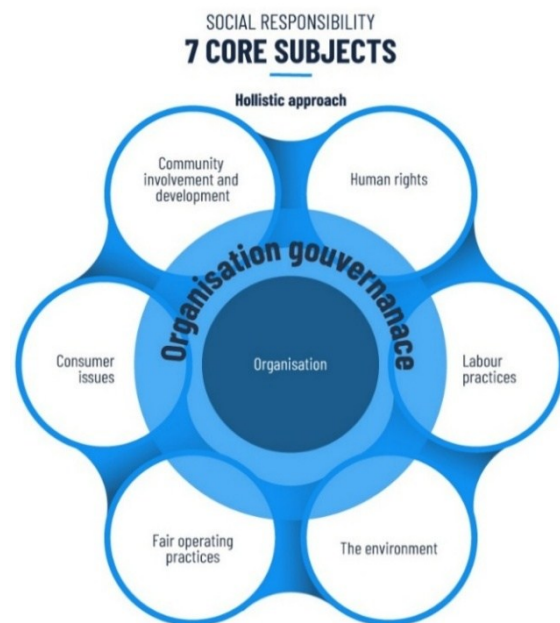


Figure 1 Schematization of Seven Core Subjects of Social Responsibility.

Source: François Robichaud, 2024.

[What is ISO 26000? Learn more with Borealis!](#)

¹⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 19-20

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

protection, (4) community involvement and (5) consumer issues.

In parallel, the so-called ‘key principles’ provide behavioural guidelines that organisations are expected to follow, emphasising (1) *accountability*, (2) *transparency*, (3) *respects for stakeholders* and (4) *human rights*. Taken together, these elements make social responsibility appear as an integrated approach that links the conduct and the social & environmental impact of a given organisation.

Furthermore, the thematic areas of Social Responsibility can be understood as the main challenges that organisations are called upon to address, while the seven principles represent the behavioural guidelines through which to tackle them in an ethical and sustainable manner. Therefore, the two categories are inevitably interconnected: the former define the what – i.e. the areas of action – while the latter establish the how, i.e. the operational and value-based approach necessary to improve overall performance in terms of social responsibility.¹³

As will become clear in the rest of this chapter, the principles and issues outlined in ISO 26000 are not entirely new concepts, but rather represent the evolution of a historical process of social awareness and responsibility, whose origins can be traced back to management practices and, even earlier, to philanthropic practices in the 18th and 19th centuries.

1.1.1 – From Philanthropy to Corporate Social Responsibility

The term “*social responsibility*” became widely used during the 1970s, when organisations of various kinds began to recognise that, like businesses, they had a responsibility towards society and the environment and, as such, could make a significant contribution to sustainable development and collective well-being.¹⁴

However, concepts similar to what we now call *Corporate Social Responsibility* (CSR) were already being discussed in the 18th and 19th centuries. Like any socio-cultural construction rooted in a society’s ethical framework, the meaning and expression of CSR have evolved significantly over time. Today, it represents a specific form of social responsibility applied to the corporate sphere and is, in all likelihood, a more familiar term than its broader counterpart, *Social Responsibility*. As noted by sociologist Pitirim Sorokin in his “*Social and*

¹³ *Ibid.* pp. 22-25

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

cultural dynamics”, social change is inherently tied to transformations within a broader social system and thus unfolds over a sustained temporal arc.¹⁵

According to several scholars, such as Carroll and Acquier, the development of a “Proto-CSR” aligns particularly well with the Anglo-American and European contexts, reflecting their distinct institutional and cultural frameworks.¹⁶ Scholars often trace the earliest forms of *Social Responsibility* back to ancient Roman law, when the first corporations operated in support of the poor and the sick through municipal and religious institutions. These practices persisted into the 18th and 19th centuries, especially in societies where the Christian religion and guild systems played a significant social role.

It was under the English Crown during the Victorian era (1837-1901) that philanthropic movements saw significant growth. In a society marked by widespread poverty and low levels of education, charitable acts and mutual aid initiatives became true moral obligations toward the community.¹⁷ A proper “*fashion for humanity*” (or *love of mankind*) spread among citizens¹⁸, a fashion that expressed a growing sense of responsibility towards the community.

The British theologian John Wesley, for example, urged: “*Gain all you can... Save all you can... Give all you can*”, encouraging the upper and middle classes to donate part of their wealth to the poorest. Even the French historian Hippolyte Taine observed with amazement that: ‘*an Englishman considers “public affairs” to be “his own affairs”*’, pointing out that between 1840 and 1861, of the £13 million spent on education, only £4 came from the State.¹⁹

In this way, we can trace the earliest manifestations of social responsibility, first in the entrepreneurial context, and also in community-based institutions, which acted as precursors to modern organisational ethics.

Another element that contributed to the emergence of SR was the undergoing Industrial Revolution, which, from the second half of the 18th century, began to transform the country’s economic system through the introduction of capital as a new form of wealth. The resulting technological innovations, the shift from agriculture to industry and the urbanisation led to a profound shift in the internal social structure. This, in turn, gave rise to new forms of labour that had both a positive and negative impact on the living conditions of the emerging working

¹⁵ Pitirim SOROKIN, *Social and cultural dynamics*, 4 voll., New York, 1937-1941, p. 156

¹⁶ Robert PHILLIPS, Judith SCHREMPF-STIRLING and Christian STUTZ, *The Past, History, and Corporate Social Responsibility*, Journal of Business Ethics, Vol. 166, No. 2, Thematic Symposium: Historic Corporate Responsibility, 2020, p. 204

¹⁷ Agudelo M.A LATAPÍ,, Jóhannsdóttir, L. & Davídsdóttir, B., *A literature review of the history and evolution of corporate social responsibility*, Int J Corporate Soc Responsibility, 4, 1, 2019. p. 3

¹⁸ Gertrude HIMMELFARB, *The Age of Philanthropy*, The Wilson Quarterly (1976-), Vol. 21, No. 2, 1997. p. 50

¹⁹ Ibid. pp. 49-50

class. Within this troubled context, new unions (called *trade unions*) and associations formed by middle-class workers began to gain a foothold claiming for improved working conditions and envisioned a renewed harmony between industry and labour. Similar initiatives during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries reflected a growing concern for the moral dimension of economic progress, anticipating later institutional approaches to social responsibility.²⁰



Figure 2 Labour organisation protest

Source: The Remedial Herstory Project

[24. 1850-1950 Industrial Revolution - THE REMEDIAL HERSTORY PROJECT](#)

Although the formalisation and conceptual problematisation of SR was not formally articulated until the mid-twentieth century, its foundations were already being laid through these philanthropic and socially driven practices. In fact, the 1930s and 1940s – a twenty-year period defined by Carroll as the “Period of Corporations” – marked a turning point, as businesses increasingly assumed an institutional role in serving social needs. In the meantime, the figure of the manager started to hold internal leaderships duties, while encompassing responsibilities towards society at large, with a particular emphasis on credibility and accountability.²¹

²⁰ Archie B. CARROLL, *A history of Corporate Social Responsibility: Concepts and Practices*, In Andrew Crane, Abigail McWilliams, Dirk Matten, Jeremy Moon & Donald Siegel (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Corporate Social Responsibility*. Oxford University Press, 2009. p. 22

²¹ *Ibid.*

The 1950s marked a turning point in the heated academic debate. In 1953, the scholar H.R. Bowen, in his work «*Social Responsibilities of the Businessman*» formulated for the first time the definition of Social Responsibility (SR), earning him the title of “Father of CSR”:

“[...] it refers to the obligations of businessmen to pursue those policies, to make those decisions, or to follow those lines of action which are desirable in terms of the objectives and values of our society.”²²

Along the same lines of thought as Bowen, a few years later, Heald (1957) added:

“The recognition on the part of management of an obligation to the society. It serves not only for maximum economic performance but for humane and constructive social policies as well”²³

The core of these first definitions lay in draw attention to the economic power wielded by companies and, consequently, the desirability of their social engagement. Moreover, it was argued that adopting a socially responsible conduct could generate long-term benefits and profits. However, such outcomes could be achieved only through voluntary commitment, rather than coercion or mere legal compliance.²⁴

Along this evolutionary path, *social responsibility* shifted from a philanthropic and moral ideals to a true managerial paradigm. In the years that followed, however, CSR gradually established itself as an autonomous discipline, defining more structured models for integrating ethical and environmental principles into business strategy.

1.2 – The Roots of Sustainability: From the End of the Holocene to the Rise of the Capitalocene

From the 1800 to the present day – in the span of just two hundred years – humankind has revolutionized its societies and its way of thinking through a rampant industrialisation and

²² H.R. BOWEN, *Social responsibilities of the businessman*, Harper & Row, New York, 1953. p. 6

²³ M. HEALD, *Management's responsibility to society: The growth of an idea*, The Business History Review, 31, 4, 375-384, 1957. p. 380.

²⁴ NIGRO, PETRACCA, *La Corporate Social Responsibility: dalle origini all'approccio situazionista. Focus sui processi di isomorfismo e di decoupling*, 2016., pp. 12-17

the surge of capitalism, placing up to 12,000-year-long Holocene epoch. Many natural scientists attribute the beginning of the new era, the Anthropocene – also called the “Age of Humans” – to around 1800 (first stage) with the onset of industrialisation and the expansion of fossil fuel use. The second stage, on the other hand, is generally marked by the mid-twentieth century, a period also known as *The Great Acceleration*, which saw significant economic growth, intensified consumption of resources and, consequently, exponential demographic growth. The concept of the Anthropocene, therefore, highlights the extent to which human activity has become a geophysical force, capable of reshaping the Earth’s natural systems through the unsustainable exploitation of energy, land, and materials.²⁵

Scholars, however, do not attribute the blame for this planetary degradation to humankind in an abstract way, but rather to modern bourgeois society, or rather to capitalist methods of production. This system, based on three key principles: unlimited growth, capital accumulation and economic competition, has generated forces of production and technologies that are beyond human control. Just like Marx’s famous metaphor, this society seems “*a sorcerer who can no longer control the powers of the nether world he has conjured up*”, In other words, the man who placed so much trust in productive forces that promised prosperity ended up having them turn against him with a gruelling prospect: ecological collapse.²⁶

“*By pushing the Earth system too far, we risk critical biological and physical systems, such as forests and ice caps, reaching a point of no return, radically altering their state and functions.*”, This was the comment made by Swedish scientist Johan Rockström during his Nobel Prize ceremony for the environment. Rockström, with his Theory of *planetary boundaries* identifies the natural systems that support life on Earth and the changes that can be safely made to them without altering life. Exceeding safety limits, he says, means accelerating their deterioration by triggering irreversible and unmanageable changes in the functioning of biophysical systems and, therefore, in our societies.

Unfortunately, according to one of the latest reports, humans have already exceeded six of the nine boundaries and, according to one of his most recent interviews: “*The only way to solve the climate crisis is to phase out fossil fuels and simultaneously transform global food systems.*”²⁷

²⁵ Ann-Kristin BERGQUIST, *Business and Sustainability: New Business History Perspectives*, Working Paper 18-034, Harvard Business School, 2017. pp. 5-6

²⁶ Ulrich BRAND & Markus WISSEN, *The Imperial Mode of Living: Everyday Life and the Ecological Crisis of Capitalism*, Verso, 2021 pp.22-24

²⁷ Tiziano RUGI, *Premio Nobel per l’ambiente” a Johan Rockström: ha individuato i planetary boundaries*, “Economiacircolare.com”, 2024. <https://economiacircolare.com/premio-nobel-ambiente-johan-rockstrom-planetary-boundaries/> Accessed: 06/11/2025

In this complex context, there are scholars who propose a step forward from the dominant narrative of the Anthropocene, considered too abstract and “human-centric”. Thus, scholar Jason W. Moore states that, from an anthropocentric perspective, humanity is treated as a single entity – “the human enterprise” – an abstract entity that “has destroyed nature” and its purity. This view, however, blinds us to the real historical and social causes of the ecological crisis – capitalism, inequality,

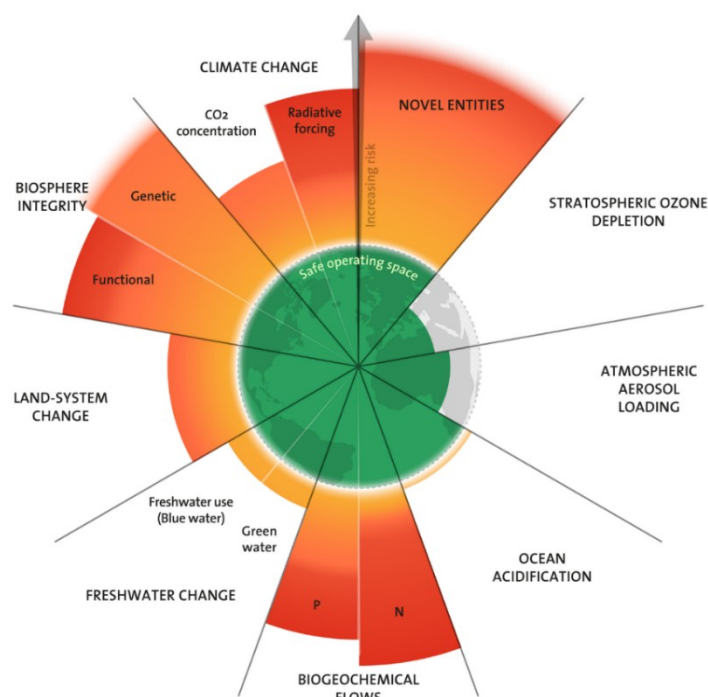


Figure 3 2025 update to the Planetary boundaries

Source: Azote for Stockholm Resilience Centre, based on analysis in Sakschewski and Caesar et al. 2025

colonialism, racism, etc. On this regard, he proposes to talk about a *Capitalocene* (or Age of Capital), since not all human beings bear equal responsibility for the destruction of the environment, but rather a specific economic and political system.²⁸

These theoretical reflections on the Anthropocene and Capitalocene find clear expression in the environmental history of the twentieth century: the unlimited pursuit of growth inherent in industrial capitalism has not only transformed Earth’s systems on a planetary scale, but has also produced tragedies that have revealed the price of human progress. Industrial expansion and the uncontrolled use of fossil fuels, for example, have become direct causes of environmental degradation, leading to serious pollution crises that have profoundly affected both ecosystems and human health. Among the most notable cases were the massive automobile emissions and oil spills caused by U.S. and European chemical industries, as well as the disaster of Minamata caused by illegal mercury emission of petrochemical manufacturer Chisso Corporation.

These disasters generated two important outcomes: on the one hand, corporations started to grow environmental awareness, on the other, governments recognized the urgent need to implement policies aimed at environmental protection.

²⁸ Jason W. MOORE, *The Capitalocene, Part I: on the nature and origins of our ecological crisis*, The Journal of Peasant Studies, 44:3, 594-630, 2017. pp. 596-597

1.2.1 – The Minamata Case

Ever since the pre-World War II period Japan had its record of pollution crisis that trace back to the Meiji Era (1868-1912), period in which the country's samurai regime gave way to rapid industrialisation and modernisation to align itself with the standards imposed by colonising countries such as the United States. Even then, local governments had attempted to introduce modest environmental regulations in response to popular protests, but these developments were put aside with the advent of the Second World War. Post-war Japan, on the other hand, was characterised by high levels of pollution caused by industry – on one side – and by the demands of citizens in large urban centres such as Tōkyō and Ōsaka – on the other.²⁹

One of the environmental disasters that left a deep scar on Japanese history is the infamous *Minamata case*, a significant example that revealed the intimate connection between industrial activity, food systems and human health. This is Japan's most emblematic case of mercury poisoning, which devastated the small town of Minamata between the 1950s and 1960s. This event gave rise to the so-called “Minamata Syndrome”, also known as “Minamata Disease” (*Minamatabyō*) or “Chisso-Minamata Disease” (*Chisso-Minamatabyō*). Minamata is a small fishing village located on the east coast of Kyūshū in Kumamoto Prefecture. The small town developed around two important water sources: the Minamata River on one side, and Shiranui Bay on the other. It was this abundance of water that attracted the interest of the giant Chisso Corporation, a petrochemical factory that, between 1932 and 1958, spilled an unknown quantity of mercury into the drainage canal at Hyakken Harbour, contaminating the water, flora and marine fauna of the entire area.

The diet of the citizens of Minamata and neighbouring villages was based on the consumption of fish, crustaceans and molluscs, so over the course of two decades, thousands of people came into contact with the highly toxic substance. In this sense, the Minamata disaster illustrates how food functions as a material interface between the environment and the body: what was consumed daily and perceived as natural and safe became the medium through which environmental degradation translated into widespread illness, disability and death.

²⁹ Simon AVENELL, *Japanese Industrial Pollution and Environmental Injustice*, Transnational Japan in the Global Environmental Movement, 2017. pp. 24-26

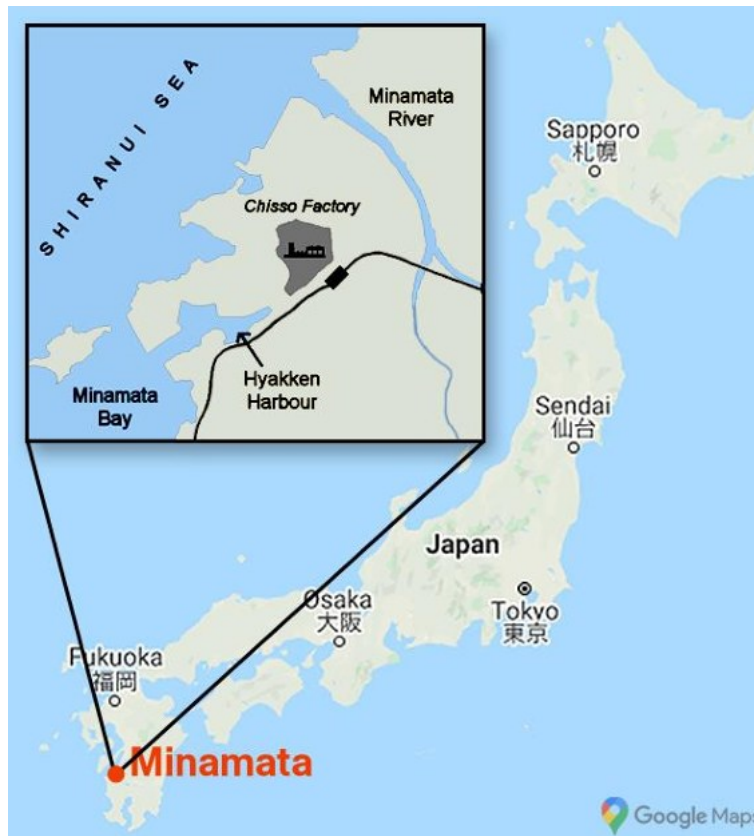


Figure 4 Map of Minamata, illustrating the Chisso factory and its effluent routes.
Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Minamata_map_illustrating_Chisso_factory_effluent_routes2.png

During the 1950s, strange things began to happen in Minamata: the seaweed stopped growing, fish began to float dead in the waters of the bay, and cats began to “dance”. This strange phenomenon gave rise to what the townspeople called *dancing cat fever*, which steadily started to affect the town’s felines, pigs, chickens, dogs and even humans. The latter began to lose sensation in their hands and feet first, then, the disease developed with convulsions, loss of speech, paralysis and, in many cases, death. The mortality rate among those suffering from this strange disease and its symptoms was enormous: around 35%.³⁰

Researchers at Kumamoto University, after visiting patients affected by the disease, concluded: ‘*Minamata disease is probably due to heavy metal poisoning, presumably caused by the ingestion of fish and shellfish.*’ In 1958, it was discovered that the entire area of the Hyakken Harbour canal was saturated with mercury, so much so that the company decided to build a recycling implant, though not with the scope of cleaning up the environment, but to recover the expensive material. Further evidence came from tests conducted by the director of

³⁰ Hisashi YOKOYAMA, *Mercury Pollution in Minamata*, Springer, 2018. p. 11

the company's medical centre, Hajime Hosokawa: all the cats that had been fed food mixed with sludge residues from the bay contracted the disease.³¹

The petrochemical industry did everything it could to cover up the truth, and so it remained until the 1970s. In the meantime, the problem continued to develop to such an extent that another tragedy emerged: the discovery that mercury accumulated in the bodies of pregnant women concentrates – even years later – in the placenta, seriously compromising fetal development. The prenatal mortality rate was high, and the children born afterwards suffered from severe hypoplasia causing blindness, deafness and microcephaly problems.³²

Chisso Corporation denied its guilt in the Minamata case for a long time, even going so far as to deny the existence of the disease. However, after 1969, the company was officially found guilty and ordered to pay compensation to the victims. For years, the company was supported by both the national government and Kumamoto Prefecture, and even today it enjoys a good reputation because, despite the tragedy, it contributed to the economic prosperity of the city and, in part, of the entire country.³³

Decades later, numerous victims and their families continue to seek justice, denouncing the slowness of the proceedings and the inadequacy of the compensation awarded, demonstrating – once again – the difficulty Japanese institutions have in fully acknowledging their responsibilities.

This episode reveals how environmental disasters constitute ecological crises and, more importantly, profound human, social and moral ruptures, exposing the consequences of industrial negligence, institutional silence and the suppression of truth. For this reason, the Minamata case demonstrates how food can become a site where broader structural tensions become visible.

Although contemporary Japan faces challenges of a different nature, the food system continues to reflect deeper social transformations. Today, the issue is less one of contamination and more one of changing consumption patterns, social reorganisation and the growing tension between ecological awareness and the structural constraints that shape everyday eating practices – themes that will be explored in the following chapters.

³¹ Ibid. pp.18-19

³² AVENELL, “*Japanese industrial pollution...*” p. 28

³³ Douglas ALLCHIN, *The Poisoning of Minamata*, in University of Minnesota, 2000

1.2.2 – The Emergence of Global Environmental Governance

As mentioned above, growing awareness of the environmental damage caused by industrialisation and uncontrolled development led, starting in the 1970s, to the formation of a global movement aimed at protecting the environment and human health. It was thanks to pressure from citizens, scientists and environmental movements that environmental sustainability began to be discussed in the media, in research, in schools, in universities and even within businesses and institutions. Within this evolving debate, food systems progressively emerged as a central arena where environmental concerns, public health and everyday consumption practices intersect, linking sustainability to issues of production, distribution and consumption. In response to environmental disasters such as Minamata, these movements led to growing demand for international cooperation, laying the foundations for the emergence of a global environmental governance system.

A decisive first step in this direction was taken at the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment held in Stockholm in June 1972. The pretext for this first meeting was: ‘the need for a common outlook and for common principles to inspire and guide the peoples of the world in the preservation and enhancement of the human environment’³⁴, placing a human-centric focus on the discourse from the very beginning. The final document introduced twenty-six guiding principles that established the foundations for international environmental policy and cooperation. In the second chapter of the same report, the *Action Plan for the Human Environment* defined three key areas of action: global environmental assessment (Earthwatch programme), management of environmental activities, and international measures to support national and local actions.³⁵

Twenty years after the conclusion of the Stockholm conference, the United Nations met for a second time in Rio de Janeiro (June 1992) at the Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED). In this report, 27 principles are presented along the same philosophical lines as those formulated in Stockholm, among these, principle 1 reaffirms the right of human being “to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature”.³⁶

In Rio, the international community officially proclaimed the beginning of the “era of sustainable development”, seeking to address the so-called “double crisis” – environmental and

³⁴ United Nations, *Report of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, Stockholm, 5–16 June 1972*, UN Doc. A/CONF.48/14/Rev.1, New York : UN, 1973. p. 3

³⁵ Ibid. p. 6

³⁶ United Nations, *Report of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio de Janeiro, 3–14 June 1992*, A/CONF.151/26 (Vol. I), 12 August 1992. p. 3

development – by promoting a new global vision. Through this vision sustainability started to be framed not just as an environmental matter, but also as a matter of responsible consumption and behavioural change. As a result of this conference, two fundamental documents were approved: the Rio Conventions, dedicated respectively to climate change and biodiversity; and Agenda 21, the first action plan for sustainable policies at global, national and local levels.

Despite the promising start, many critical voices were raised at the time of the Rio Convention: scholars such as Brand and Wissen pointed out that the structural causes of the ecological crisis had been largely ignored – one of these being the so-called “capitalist globalisation”. According to the scholars, the Rio Convention ended up placing excessive trust in market mechanisms while neglecting the crucial role of social policies and structural reforms in promoting genuine sustainability. Furthermore, issues such as the gap between the countries of the North and the countries of the South were largely overlooked, raising concerns about global inequalities in environmental governance.³⁷

In 1997, under the guidance of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the Kyōto Protocol was adopted, which for the first time imposed an obligation on industrialised countries to limit and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. This agreement established the principle of “common but differentiated responsibilities”: a particular degree of responsibility was placed on industrialized nations, considered of “major burden” for their high levels of air pollution.³⁸

In the years following, the strengthening of the global climate justice movement, the growing promotion of renewable energy and, finally, the 2015 Paris Conference marked a new turning point in global environmental governance. The latter proved particularly important because it set a stringent goal of limiting global warming to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels and pursuing efforts to limit the increase to 1.5°C.

In summary, from the Stockholm Conference to the Paris Agreement, the international community has attempted to build a global environmental governance system based on multilateral cooperation, shared responsibility and an integrated approach to development. Within this framework, the relationship between global sustainability goals and everyday practices became central, stressing the importance of translating international principles into concrete behavioural change. Along this line of thought, in 2015, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were first introduced becoming a further step towards defining a universal model

³⁷ BRAND & WISSEN, “*The Imperial Mode of Living*”, cit., pp. 12-15

³⁸ United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), *Kyōto Protocol*, https://unfccc.int/Kyoto_protocol accessed: 08/05/2025

of economic, social and environmental sustainability. In particular, SDG 12 (responsible consumption and production) shifted attention toward everyday practices and individual behaviour, emphasising the role of education and awareness in promoting sustainable lifestyles. This broader framework provides the context for analysing how sustainability principles are translated into food-related knowledge, institutional strategies and daily practices, themes that will be explored in the following chapters.

1.3 – ESG and Sustainable Development Goals

In recent decades, public and private institutions, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and even the community have been swept up in a wave of enthusiasm for sustainability.

However, especially in the managerial sphere of CSR, due to its ethical-voluntary nature, based on the concepts of “compliance” and “voluntariness”, it remains a concept with several flaws. For this reason, with the turn of the new century, there has been an attempt to move to a more concrete and measurable approach: the Environment, Social and Governance standards (ESG).

Indeed, as previously mentioned with the definition of *social responsibility*, while CSR focuses on the impacts of a company’s behaviour on society and the environment, ESG represents its natural extension, as the “environmental” and “social” dimensions correspond to the impacts identified by CSR, while “governance” addresses the organisational practices that guide a company’s complex behaviour. This shift reflects a broader attempt to translate ethical principles into measurable practices, linking sustainability to values, concrete behaviours and institutional change.

The term ESG was first mentioned in 2004 in an article created by the joint thinking of the United Nations Global Compact – the world’s largest corporate sustainability initiative – and the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. ESG standards, therefore, develop alongside CSR and are a natural extension of that concept. Nevertheless, one of the main discrepancies of ESG standards from modern CSR lies in their emphasis on measurable performance. If CSR reporting has been gradually defined as an ‘easy tool for companies’ greenwashing’, a company adhering to ESG standards is expected to publish its goals with

quantifiable results. Therefore, these reports should show the true activities and achievements of a company, making performance more transparent and accountable.³⁹

Beyond corporate governance, sustainability has also become embedded in everyday consumption patterns. Consumers are progressively encouraged to make responsible choices, linking environmental awareness to daily practices such as purchasing behaviour, lifestyle decisions and food consumption. This growing emphasis on individual responsibility reflects a broader transformation in the relationship between sustainability discourse and everyday life.⁴⁰

A further milestone in the institutionalisation of sustainability can be traced in the employment of United Nations' Agenda 2030, adopted in 2015 and divided into 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), designed to guide corporate practices, and to serve as a universal framework for governments, non-profit organizations, academic institutions, and civil society as a whole.



Figure 5 The UN's Agenda 2030, focus on the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The purpose that the 2030 Agenda sets itself is to emphasize, with an holistic view, the interconnection of the economic, social and environmental spheres, indispensable elements for responsible, concrete and sustainable development. Among the goals, particular relevance for the present research is assumed by SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), which

³⁹ United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Building a Sustainable Future: A Business Handbook for ESG*, UNDP, 2023. https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2023-/building_a_sustainable_future_esg_business_handbook.pdf. Accessed: 17/05/2025

⁴⁰ McKinsey & Company, *Consumers care about sustainability—and back it up with their wallets*, 2023. <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/consumer-packaged-goods/our-insights/consumers-care-about-sustainability-and-back-it-up-with-their-wallets>. Accessed: 17/05/2025

explicitly addresses patterns of consumption, resource use and waste reduction. By focusing on the relationship between knowledge, awareness and everyday behaviour, SDG 12 places individual practices and lifestyle choices at the centre of sustainability transitions. This perspective provides an important framework for understanding the role of food literacy and responsible consumption in shaping sustainable food systems.

However, the formulation of the SDGs has not been immune to criticism from the scientific and academic world, which questions whether these frameworks effectively address the root causes of global inequality and environmental degradation. Among them is Nakatsuka Takeshi, in his essay “A History of Japan’s Climate Adaptations” (*Kikō tekiō no Nihonshi* 『気候適応の日本史』) explores the relationship between climate and history, asking what humanity can learn from its past. He argues that with the renewal of social systems (productive, legislative and technological), new problems inevitably arise, including climate change. Technological and systemic innovations have greatly expanded the carrying capacity of the environment. With this in mind, Nakatsuka argues that the SDGs are a manifestation of contemporary capitalism, a system that incorporates ethical and environmental concerns in order to ensure its own survival. He defines the SDGs as “the opium of modern society” (*Gendai no ahen*, 現代の阿片), that is, as a justification for uncontrolled economic development and growth, without actually resolving the underlying issues: capitalism.⁴¹ At the same time, Brand and Wissen argue that the SDGs are a form of “ecological modernisation”, i.e. an attempt to make capitalism greener without actually transforming it. The two scholars, drawing on Kaplan’s concept of the global North and South, explain that the global ecological and social crisis is an effect of the “imperial way of life” led by societies in the North (and global elites) towards those in the South, which is based on relationships of domination and exploitation masked by comfort and technological progress. This perspective permit to recognise how everyday consumption practices, including food consumption, are embedded in global systems of inequality and resource extraction.⁴²

Although attempts have been made in recent decades to shift towards so-called “socio-ecological transformation” (i.e. a shift towards sustainability), Brand and Wissen argue that this is insufficient if Northern institutions intend to remain sustainable at the expense of the South. Therefore, without a process of self-criticism and the formulation of a new model of society,

⁴¹ NAKATSUKA Takeshi, *Kikō tekiō no Nihonshi* [A History of Climate Adaptation in Japan], Tōkyō: Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 2022, pp. 206–219

中塚武、『気候適応の日本史』、東京：吉川弘文館、2022年、pp.206-219

⁴² BRAND & WISSEN, “*The Imperial Mode of Living...*”, pp. 31-50

there is a risk of ending up with mere “green capitalism”, an ecological modernisation that maintains the same global hierarchies.⁴³

These critiques highlight a central tension between sustainability discourse and everyday practices, showing how awareness and institutional frameworks do not automatically translate into behavioural change. This tension is particularly relevant for analysing food-related practices, where knowledge, structural constraints and social norms interact.

In this complex reality, scholars call on us, as a society as a whole and not as individuals, to do what Joachim Hirsch calls “radical reformism”: not to reform capitalism, but to change its very logic. This idea finds concrete expression in sectors such as food and beverage, where everyday production and consumption choices embody the contradictions of contemporary economic models. Within this framework, the food system emerges as a key site for observing how sustainability principles are negotiated, translated and sometimes constrained in everyday life, providing the conceptual basis for the following analysis.

1.3.1 – The ecological impact of F&B Industry

As pointed out by numerous scholars, the methods of application of SDGs vary greatly between sectors as each has its relatively unique supply chains, hence distinct supply chain issues.⁴⁴

The food and beverage (F&B) sector, for example, constitutes an emblematic case as it clearly shows the sharp dichotomy between waste and sustainable development: on the one hand, it embodies the excesses of globalisation causing overproduction, waste of materials, and unhealthy lifestyles; on the other, it holds an enormous potential in terms of sustainable development through the valorisation of local traditions, short supply chains, and responsible consumption of resources. In fact, under the broad umbrella term of “food and beverage industry” take part numerous sectors such as production, processing, packaging, distribution, retail and consumption – making it a key arena in which sustainability principles are translated into everyday practices.

The Food & Beverage market is dynamic and constantly growing and, when considered in relation to other industries such as the hospitality one, it contributes significantly to global economies. In the United States, for instance, the foodservice industry contributes more than

⁴³ Ibid. pp. 24-25

⁴⁴ Michael J. MALONI and Michael E. BROWN, *Corporate Social Responsibility in the Supply Chain: An Application in the Food Industry*, Journal of Business Ethics, Vol. 68, No. 1, 2006. p. 35

\$900 billion annually to the US economy, accounting for approximately 4% of GDP.⁴⁵ Similarly, it accounts for about 30-50% of revenue in many hotels, positioning itself as a resourceful profit generation department.⁴⁶ Such features reveal the scale of the F&B sector's socio-ecological footprint, reinforcing scholars' calls for profound structural change.

The relevance of the sector is further reflected in its environmental impact. Today, the food sector is responsible for approximately 26% of total global greenhouse gas emissions, but what is alarming is that approximately 6% of these emissions comes from food losses and waste alone. Most of these (about 15%) occur along the supply chains (during storage, transportation, and processing), the remaining 9% comes from consumer waste and retailers.⁴⁷ Furthermore, more than 60% of the world's total packaging waste is food packaging. Taken together, the F&B industry position itself as one of the most resource-intensive domains of contemporary economies.⁴⁸



Figure 6 Graphical representation of greenhouse gas emissions produced by the food sector; food waste accounts for 6%.
Source: Our world in Data, *Food waste is responsible for 6% of global greenhouse gas emissions* - Our World in Data

In response to these trends, some major food chains are running campaigns to demonstrate their commitment to environmental sustainability. Yet many businesses, especially smaller companies, remain hesitant about 'green-oriented' investments as they can be costly and could lead to a general rise in services' prices, putting their market competitiveness at risk.

⁴⁵ OZBURN T., *Annual sales of retail food and beverage stores in the U.S. 1992-2024*, Statista, 2025. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/197619/annual-food-and-beverage-store-sales-in-the-us-since-1992/>. Accessed: 17/10/2025

⁴⁶ Ward ABIGAIL, *The Food & Beverage Industry: A Comprehensive Overview*, EHL Insights, 2025. <https://hospitalityinsights.ehl.edu/food-and-beverage-industry> Accessed: 17/10/2025

⁴⁷ J. POORE, & T. NEMECEK, *Reducing food's environmental impacts through producers and consumers*, *Science*, 360(6392), 2018. pp. 987-992.

⁴⁸ Hannah RITCHIE, Pablo ROSADO, and Max ROSER, *Environmental Impacts of Food Production*, Published online at OurWorldinData.org, 2022. <https://ourworldindata.org/environmental-impacts-of-food>. Accessed: 03/09/2025

In short, according to several scholars, companies are divided into ‘*Proactive CSR*’ users and ‘*Passive CSR*’ users, the latter limiting their actions to minimum legal compliance. This distinction reflects broader tensions between economic constraints, ethical responsibility and changing consumer expectations within contemporary markets.⁴⁹

But then again, food production and waste are only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to issues related to the food sector. In fact, several studies report that this is a problem rooted in society: contemporary consumers contribute significantly to this phenomenon through their habits and cultural practices.⁵⁰ One of the most deeply ingrained habits in human dietary patterns, for example, is the consumption of foods strictly associated with high greenhouse gas emissions, most notably meat and dairy products. Such consumption patterns are not born only from individual preferences but also by social norms, economic accessibility and structural constraints. Reducing the consumption of highly processed and resource-intensive foods, adopting plant-based alternatives and limiting waste are among the behavioural changes promoted within sustainability discourse.

However, as Schulze points out, it is not enough to address these issues solely from a macro perspective without considering the complexity of individual behaviour, including personal capabilities, subjective motivations, and structural constraints.⁵¹ This highlights the gap between environmental awareness and actual practices, a central issue in contemporary sustainability transitions.

“Transforming food systems,” says António Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations, “is essential to achieving all sustainable development goals”.⁵² The concept of “Food systems” refers to the complex set of processes, actors, and resources involved in the production, processing, distribution, and consumption of food.

These systems have a significant impact on economic, political, and socio-cultural dimensions, and, given their cross-cutting nature, it is essential that they function in a balanced and efficient manner. When a plurality of food systems coexists in a fragile state, other areas (such as education, health, the economy, and human rights) are also at risk of becoming unstable.⁵³

⁴⁹ Yeonsoo KIM, *Consumer Responses to the Food Industry's Proactive and Passive Environmental CSR, Factoring in Price as CSR Tradeoff*, Journal of Business Ethics, Vol. 140, No. 2, 2017. pp. 308- 318

⁵⁰ Mary G. McDONALD., *Food Firms and Food Flows in Japan 1945-98*, World Development, Vol. 28, No. 3, 2000, pp. 487-51

⁵¹ Jelena LONSKA, Lienite LITAVNIECE, Tatjana TAMBOVCEVA, *Shaping Sustainability Through Food Consumption: A Conceptual Perspective*, Sustainability, 17, 7138, 2025. pp. 4-8

⁵² Cfr United Nations Development Programme. *Supporting Food Systems Transformation Toward Sustainability and Resilience*. UNDP White Paper, 2024 pp. 7-21

⁵³ *Ibid.*

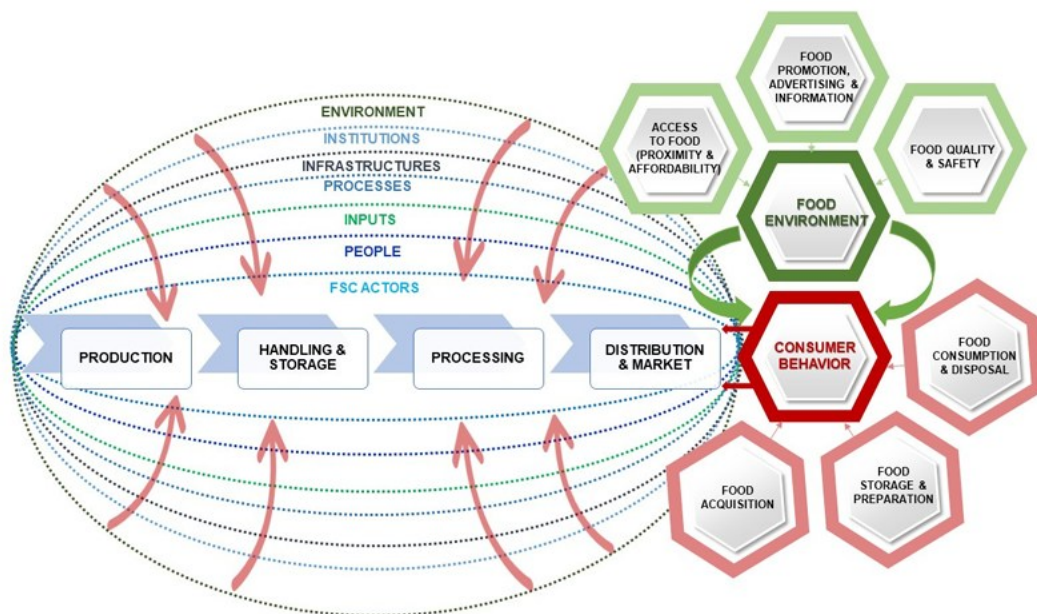


Figure 7 Schematic Framework of the food system and consumer behaviour
Source: Jelena LONSKA, Lienite LITAVNIECE, Tatjana TAMBOVCEVA, *Shaping Sustainability Through Food Consumption: A Conceptual Perspective*, Sustainability, 17, 7138, 2025. p. 4

Although food systems are addressed across multiple Sustainable Development Goals, SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) is particularly central to the present study, as it directly addresses consumption patterns, resource use and behavioural change in everyday practices. From this perspective, food-related challenges reveal the importance of the joint effort in transforming both production systems and also social practices, routines and – lastly – contemporary dietary habits.

1.3.2 – Food Literacy

Sustainability in food systems cannot be fully understood without considering the role of individuals' knowledge, skills, and everyday practices in shaping food-related behaviour. Within this framework, the concept of food literacy emerges as a key critical tool.

Shifting the focus from an entrepreneurial to a more educational dimension of sustainability shows how the engagement of institutions (such as universities and elementary schools) can impact the relationship humans—as consumers and citizens—have with food, the environment, and the habits they develop in a broader social context.

This is not something unheard of, there exist an entire branch of literacy dedicated to food: *food literacy*. This discipline is not limited to merely educating consumers to understand and interpret food labels (a skill that nutrition literacy focuses on), but focuses more on the

social aspect of food. Several scholars have focused on this topic, and various definitions have been formulated to describe this complex concept. Sumner states:

“Food literacy is the ability to ‘read the world’ in terms of food, thereby recreating it and remaking ourselves. It involves a full-cycle understanding of food—where it is grown, how it is produced, who benefits and who loses when it is purchased, who can access it (and who can’t), and where it goes when we are finished with it. It includes an appreciation of the cultural significance of food, the capacity to prepare healthy meals and make healthy decisions, and the recognition of the environmental, social, economic, cultural, and political implications of those decisions.”⁵⁴

while Block adds:

“... food literacy as more than knowledge; it also involves the motivation to apply nutrition information to food choices. Whereas food knowledge is the possession of food-related information, food literacy entails both understanding nutrition information and acting on that knowledge in ways consistent with promoting nutrition goals and *food well-being*.”⁵⁵

In concrete terms, scholars assert that *food literacy* is a genuine skill: those who possess it are able to read, understand and analyse information (labels, etc.); gather and share nutrition and food knowledge; shop for and prepare food; dispose of and reduce waste; and, therefore, make informed choices that can positively impact both individual health and society as a whole.⁵⁶

At the turning of twenty-first century, alongside processes such as economic growth, urbanisation and the globalisation of food systems, there has been a significant shift in food consumption patterns, first in high-income countries and subsequently in developing countries. This transformation, defined by researcher Barry Popkin in the 1990s as the “nutrition transition”, describes the shift from traditional diets based on fresh, local foods to diets with greater variety, availability and accessibility of processed and ultra-processed foods that are low in nutrients and high in energy density. These products are usually easy to obtain, for example

⁵⁴ J. SUMNER, *Food literacy and adult education: Learning to read the world by eating*, Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education, 25, 79–92, 2013. p. 86

⁵⁵ L.G. BLOCK; S.A.GRIER; T.L.CHILDERS; B. DAVIS; J.E.J. EBERT; S. KUMANYIKA; R.N. LACZNIK.; J.E.MACHIN; C.M.MOTLEY; L. PERACCHIO; et al. *From nutrients to nurturance: A conceptual introduction to food well-being*, Journal of Public Policy and Marketing, 30, 5–13, 2011. p. 7

⁵⁶ P. SILVA; R. ARAÚJO; F. LOPES; S. RAY, *Nutrition and Food Literacy: Framing the Challenges to Health Communication*, Nutrients, 15, 4708, 2023. pp. 8-9

in supermarkets, restaurants, vending machines or by ordering on web platforms.⁵⁷ What is happening, say scholars, is a dangerous surge in the phenomenon called “food illiteracy”.

This phenomenon is becoming a global problem linked to modern lifestyles: people’s lives are becoming day by day busier and hectic, and many complain that they do not have enough time or energy to cook healthy meals; due to high levels of daily stress, they end up consuming ready-made and ultra-processed products in pursuit of that false sense of well-being produced by large amounts of refined sugars and fats. However, these are just some of the factors that highlight a growth in food illiteracy. Over the last two decades, the rapid expansion of social media and online forums has contributed to the spread of another phenomenon known as *infodemic* (derived from the combination of the terms *information* + *epidemic*), or rather, the overabundance of information, both true and false, which overwhelms people and makes it difficult to find reliable sources and form an informed opinion. There are various reasons why people rely on the media: from searching for nutritional information about a particular food, to looking for recipes or meal ideas, to finding DIY solutions for needs such as weight loss, food allergies. This phenomenon, at times, lead to *misinformation* about the foods we eat and its effects on our health, as we often lack the scientific expertise to formulate a healthy and balanced diet for our specific needs.⁵⁸

Food health experts denounce two types of *food illiteracy*: the first is when people are unaware of what certain foods are and how to prepare them; the second is when people do not know the nutritional value of foods and are therefore unable to balance their meals effectively.⁵⁹

Greater importance should be placed on funding food literacy curricula, starting from primary schools. In fact, it is at this stage of life that individuals learn and develop habits that will stay with them for the rest of their lives. In schools in many countries around the world, children get to eat in school canteens, and this is where this important educational process begins. Furthermore, when parents regularly provide lunchboxes dominated by highly processed foods and sugary drinks, they may inadvertently reinforce unhealthy dietary habits from an early age.

Food illiteracy is not limited to health issues; it is also deeply rooted in economic and environmental spheres, as it is directly related to higher rates of food waste. These consumers tend to buy more than they can actually consume, particularly perishable products such as fruit and vegetables. As a result, wasted food (and money) further contributes to greenhouse gas

⁵⁷ *Ibid*

⁵⁸ *Ibid. p.9*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

emissions. These, in turn, fuel climate change, promoting phenomena such as drought, which again, compromise agricultural harvests. The result is a reduction in the availability of food resources and a consequent swell in supermarket prices.⁶⁰

Food illiteracy is deeply intertwined with patterns of social and economic inequality. Due to subaltern socio-economic conditions, there are still many societies where access to reliable information, nutritious food and sustainable consumption practices is severely limited. People from lower-income backgrounds or marginalised communities are more exposed to the risk of food insecurity and have limited access to fresh produce. This condition, exacerbated by deceptive marketing strategies that promote ultra-processed and low-cost foods, contributes to the consolidation of unhealthy eating patterns that are difficult to change.⁶¹

As a result, a vicious circle starts: a lack of food literacy leads to unhealthy choices, which in turn amplify health inequalities, economic vulnerability and social exclusion. Ultimately, these inequalities further hinder the acquisition of food knowledge and skills, perpetuating the cycle of food illiteracy.



Figure 8 Author's elaboration based on secondary literature on food literacy, social inequality & environmental sustainability

All of this evidence sounds like a clear alarm bell, indicating that there is an urgent need to improve food literacy. However, the commitment of individual citizens is not enough to achieve this: the joint collaboration of healthcare professionals, educators and community leaders is vital in creating targeted food education programmes. It is also essential that these initiatives are appropriate to any linguistic, social and economic context, in order to ensure fair and inclusive access to information and promote truly widespread food awareness.⁶²

⁶⁰ P. SILVA; R. ARAÚJO; F. LOPES; S. RAY, “Nutrition...”, pp. 9-10

⁶¹ *Ibid.* pp. 10-18

⁶² *Ibid.*

In light of the above, it is interesting to explore how countries address and acknowledge these issues. In my opinion, Japan is a particularly interesting case study due to its strong institutional commitment to food education and its cultural emphasis on the concept of harmony. In fact, Japan has a strong reputation for its long cultural tradition based on the principle of “wa” (in its meaning of *harmony*) and a deep respect for nature and food, elements that are reflected in public policies and school programmes dedicated to food education. In reality, however, the *Land of the Rising Sun* is undergoing rapid industrialisation, the pace of life in its society is more and more frenetic, and the spread of globalised eating habits has contributed to a profound transformation in the relationship between citizens and food. There is a real tension between “traditional” values and modernity, and therefore it is a perfect example for understanding how a highly developed and densely urbanised country can address the challenges of sustainability and food literacy in a constantly evolving context.

1.4 – Japanese reception of sustainability: the culture of harmony

When we think about the simplest and purest concept of sustainability, the first thing that comes to mind is the relationship that humans have with nature, other living beings and other human beings. In this context, Japan almost naturally emerges as a point of reference, thanks to its long cultural tradition based on harmony and balance between humans, nature and society. In Japanese, the character used to express the concept of harmony is *wa* 和, but depending on the context, it can take on nuances of meaning such as “something moderate and balanced”, “getting along” or “the reconciliation of a conflict”⁶³. In fact, one of its most common compounds is the word *heiwa* 平和, peace. It is no coincidence that the same character was chosen in 2019 for the inauguration of the current imperial era, *Reiwa* 令和: a name that can be translated as “beautiful harmony”.

Even the composition of the character is symbolic: wheat and mouth, representing the image of a mouth nourished by wheat, and therefore fullness, satisfaction and overall peace. For this reason, *wa* is one of the most cherished characters by the Japanese and, as also reported on the Japanese Government website, it has come to express the very spirit of its people.⁶⁴ In

⁶³ Katja TRIPLETT, *The discourse on wa or Harmony in Contemporary Japanese Religions and Society*, in *Religious Harmony: Problems, Practice, and Education*. Proceedings of the Regional Conference of the International Association for the History of Religions, edit by Michael Pye, Edith Franke, Alef Theria Wasim, Abdurrahman Ma'sud, International Association for the History of Religions, 2004. p. 179

⁶⁴ *Ibid*; *Wa*, Tomodachi Summer 2014, The Government of Japan, 2014, www.japan.go.jp/tomodachi/2014/summer2014/wa.html. Accessed 07/11/2025.

fact, *wa* is commonly used to refer to Japan itself, Japanese people and their culture, for example, in terms such as *wago* 和語 (native Japanese word) and *washoku* 和食 (Japanese cuisine).

Scholar Triplett points out that the concept of *wa* can be traced back to 720 A.D. in the classical literature of the *Nihon Shoki* (日本書紀, The Chronicles of Japan), which records the 17 moral guidelines of Imperial Prince Shōtoku Taishi. The first principle states: “*Consider wa as the most valuable*”⁶⁵, establishing itself as an important marker for Japanese national identity. Therefore, the Japanese strive to achieve *wa*, understood – according to its Confucian meaning – as the goal of maintaining a balance between individuals at different social levels and aspiring to healthy cooperation.⁶⁶

During the Asia-Pacific War (1941-1945), *wa* went from being a simple aesthetic and social ideal to a political tool for defining the Japanese “national essence”. During that period, strenuous efforts were made to express and define the distinctive characteristics of the Japanese people and what distinguished their “Japanese” way of life. In the government document published in 1937, *Kokutai no hongī* (国体の本義, Cardinal Principles of the National Entity of Japan), can be read: “*Harmony between god and man, harmony between man and nature, and mutual harmony among Japanese citizens are the foundation of a relationship between harmony and truth.*”, thus harmony becomes an ontological characteristic of the Japanese essence, meaning that Japan is by nature a country where divinity, nature and humanity coexist in balance. The text was distributed to schools of all levels, and educators were encouraged by the Ministry of Education to promote its content. The aim, explains T. Cross, was to cultivate and awaken a sense of national identity by saturating the nation with an official discourse on “Japanese-ness”.⁶⁷

In the context of war, harmony also became a justification for war, with the aim of restoring a harmonious universal order through the martial spirit and *bushidō*:

“This martial spirit is not [a thing that exists] for the sake of itself but for the sake of peace, and is what may be called a sacred martial spirit. Our martial spirit does not have for its objective the killing of men, but the giving of life to men. [...] War, in this sense, is not by any means intended for the destruction, overpowering, or subjugation of others; and it should be a

⁶⁵ TRIPLETT, “*The discourse on wa...*”. pp. 179-180

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Tim Cross, *Japanese Harmony as Nationalism: Grand Master Tea for War and Peace*, Fukuoka University Review of Humanities, vol. 41, no. 1, Fukuoka University, n.d., pp. 83-84

thing for the bringing about of great harmony, that is, peace, doing the work of creation by following the Way”⁶⁸

Therefore, this rhetoric was exploited in those years as a tool of social control, of sacrifice of the individual for the good of the group (if not of the State).

Later, in the post-war period, the concept of *wa* was revived as a form of national self-representation, reformulated to promote a new pacifist Japan and build an image of a spiritually pure and peaceful nation through campaigns such as “Peacefulness through a bowl of tea” (1973), which presented harmony as a cultural and “traditional” value.⁶⁹

Therefore, Japan has not only made harmony an aesthetic or moral value, but the very matrix of Japanese identity. It is no coincidence, in fact, that the archaic name for Japan was *Yamato* 大和, “Great Harmony”: a name that encapsulates the essence of a people who, over the centuries, have constantly sought to maintain a balance between the individual and the community, between humanity and nature, between tradition and modernity.

1.4.1 – “Omoiyari” and “Meiwaku o Kakenai”: Harmony within Society

Nowadays, the concept of harmony is often described as a central value in Japanese cultural and social discourse, permeating many aspect of society: books, religion, interpersonal relationships, and even business practices. To achieve harmony, individuals must be altruistic and empathetic towards others. Empathy (*omoiyari*, 思いやり) is another fundamental aspect that contributes to the formation of the Japanese social system. *Omoiyari* means “the ability to empathize with others” and, according to scholar R. Shelley, for the Japanese it is a virtue more important than the ability to be rational and practical.⁷⁰ It represents a form of relational and social empathy that goes beyond simple emotional understanding. It involves anticipating and understanding the needs and feelings of others, acting in such a way as to avoid causing discomfort or disturbance. (*meiwaku*, 迷惑).

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* p.84

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, cfr. 84-121

⁷⁰ Jane E. Kelley, *Harmony, Empathy, Loyalty, and Patience in Japanese Children's Literature*, *The Social Studies*, 99:2, 61-70, 2008. p. 61

In this regard, scholars Takeshi Hashimoto and Susumu Yamaguchi distinguish two ways in which Japanese people manage interpersonal relationships:

- **Harmony seeking**, that is, the tendency to maintain positive and harmonious relationships, avoiding conflicts;
- **Rejection avoidance**, that is, the desire to avoid rejection or social disapproval.⁷¹

Both of these tendencies serve to contribute to preserving group cohesion, reflecting the strong sense of interdependence and social sensitivity that characterizes Japanese society.

However, the ideal of social harmony also presents important tensions. In a society strongly regulated by linguistic and behavioural codes, unexpected or deviant attitudes may threaten collective balance and generate significant pressure on individuals. For this reason, numerous scholars have observed how, in this type of society, individuals might end up suppressing their personal desires to preserve group cohesion.⁷² What may appear as politeness can also reflect broader social expectations that guide individual behaviour.

This pressure manifests itself from an early age, through an ultra-competitive education system focused on academic success, and continues into working life, where it is reflected in the hierarchical system and long working hours. In fact, one of the distinctive features of Japanese corporate culture is the great reluctance of employees to take paid leave, and the reason for this lies precisely in the principle of *meiwaku o kakenai* (迷惑をかけない, do not cause trouble [to someone]). Many workers feel guilty about burdening their colleagues in their absence. As a result, the phenomenon of *zangyō* (残業, overwork) has gradually become normalised, to the point of becoming an expected practice, especially within elite organisations.⁷³

The complex dichotomy between harmony and social pressure, however, is not limited to human relationships; on the contrary, it extends to the entire system of interdependencies between humans and their environment. In this context, the pursuit of *wa* is essential for social good and cohesion, and especially for the entire ecosystem. From this perspective, sustainability may be understood not merely as resource management but as a broader orientation toward maintaining equilibrium between human activity and environmental systems. It is interesting,

⁷¹ HASHIMOTO, H. and YAMAGISHI, T, *Two faces of interdependence: Harmony seeking and rejection avoidance*, Asian Journal of Social Psychology, 16, 2013, pp. 143-144

⁷² KELLEY, “*Harmony, Empathy, Loyalty, and Patience...*”, cit., p. 62

⁷³ Kate BIRCH, *Why are Japanese employees so reluctant to take paid leave?*, BusinessChief, 2023. [Why are Japanese employees so reluctant to take paid leave? | Business Chief Asia](#) Accessed 08/11/2025

therefore, to examine how this vision translates into such finely Japanese concepts as that of *Satoyama*, a concept that expresses the importance of balance between human communities and the natural environment and illustrates how cultural understandings of harmony can inform contemporary discussions on sustainability.

1.4.2 – “*Satoyama*”: *Harmony within Nature*

The term *satoyama*, which derives from the two characters *sato* 里 (village) and *yama* 山 (mountain), originally referred to semi-managed rural landscapes located at the margins of human settlements. It is used to refer to the “Japanese landscape” and, over the years, has taken on an ever more broad and important meaning for Japanese culture. It represents the delicate but balanced relationship between humans and nature. For this reason, the *satoyama* landscape is part of broader environmental and sustainability discourses, including the preservation of local territories and culture, the improvement of human well-being and the promotion of ecological awareness through environmental governance and sustainable development policies.⁷⁴ In this regard, scholars Honda and Nakamura argue that *satoyama* should not be understood just as a physical landscape, but as a model of life in which the human community lived in harmony with nature, learning from it, managing it as an “environmental mosaic” (each component had a different function, but all were interconnected), thus preserving a rich biodiversity.⁷⁵

However, scholar Bulian challenges from this idyllic view, claiming the “*satoyama* myth”: today, *satoyama* is becoming a symbolic construct, an emotional projection that scholars such as Yumoto and Masami define as the “emotional vision of *satoyama*” or, from a critical perspective, “*satoyama* orientalism”.⁷⁶ Following, a clear example:

“If people ask about the heart of [the people of] Yamato, it is the blossoms of mountain cherry reflecting the rising sun”⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Giovanni BULIAN, *The Multilocality of Satoyama Landscape, Cultural Heritage and Environmental Sustainability in Japan*, Ca’ Foscari Japanese Studies, 2021. p. 114

⁷⁵ *Ibid.* p. 117

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* p. 128

⁷⁷ Regina M. BICHLER, *Harm and Harmony—Concepts of Nature and Environmental Practice in Japan*, Histories, 3. p.62

In this way, at the end of the eighteenth century, Motoori Norinaga described his vision of Japan and Japanese culture: a harmonious cohesion between human beings and nature, expressed through the image of cherry blossoms. This alluring imagery has not changed over time; on the contrary, it has continued to fuel the myth of the peculiar Japanese “love of nature”. However, this idea is not limited to Orientalist romanticism or enchanted tourists, but also includes Japanese scholars and, sometimes, the citizens themselves.⁷⁸

Motoori’s thinking echoes the values of Shinto thought, which, over time, has contributed to its spread and reinforced its meaning. The animistic nature of *shintō*, in fact, presupposes the presence of *kami* within natural elements or phenomena such as rocks, large trees, rivers and so on. However, this also includes a whole range of mythical creatures (*kappa*, *tengu*, *kitsune*, *tanuki*, etc.), wild animals and malevolent spirits existing outside the *satoyama*. In order to maintain peace in this delicate balance, humans were expected to worship at *shintō* shrines. By the Heian Period (794-1185), nature took on a positive character when many violent spirits were tamed and made guardian gods of agriculture and, thanks also to the contribution of Buddhist ideologies, human compassion extended to animals and plants. According to Masami, these ideas projected an image of pure, spiritual civilisation close to nature (*green orientalism*) onto Japan and, over time, led the Japanese themselves to internalise and “appropriate” this image in the form of *self-orientalism*, to benefit from it on a cultural and political level as a sort of ecological soft power.⁷⁹

However, phenomena caused by human activity that have alternated over several centuries, such as early deforestation, soil impoverishment through intensive agriculture, pollution incidents and massive urbanisation (especially in cities such as Tōkyō, Ōsaka and Nagoya), highlight a reality that contrasts with the romantic idea of Japan “in harmony with nature”. Since the early 1960s, when the disintegration of the human-nature relationship began to accelerate, there has been a growing public awareness of the loss of ecosystems (especially mountainous and hilly areas) that formed the *satoyama* and their importance. Thus, institutions began to work towards its preservation and in 2009, thanks to collaboration between the Japanese government and UNU-IAS (United Nations University – Institute of Advanced Studies), the *Satoyama Initiative* was drafted with the aim of promoting the socio-ecological model of *satoyama* globally.⁸⁰ On the other hand, at the local level, documents such as the National Biodiversity Strategy of Japan (2012-2020) and the Basic Plan for Food, Agriculture

⁷⁸ *Ibid*

⁷⁹ Cfr. BULIAN, “*The Multilocality of Satoyama...*”, cit., pp. 127-128

⁸⁰ Kazuhiko TAKEUCHI, *Rebuilding the Relationship between People and Nature: The Satoyama Initiative*, Ecological Research, 25.5, 2010. pp. 891-893

and Rural Areas endorsed by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF) seek to promote businesses that exploit indigenous natural capital and diverse ecosystem services for sectors such as agriculture, renewable energy and eco-tourism. Furthermore, the preservation of *satoyama* becomes a “community” phenomenon when numerous NGOs begin to participate in natural resource management projects (clearing of underwood, managing pastures and wetlands). These initiatives then expand to involve citizens as well, taking on an educational value in line with the philosophy of learning by doing in nature. Furthermore, many regions are working to promote the production and consumption of local resources (a model also known as *chisan-chisho* 地産地消).⁸¹ These initiatives therefore seek to reduce the country’s dependence on extraterritorial imports and strengthen the rural economy along with territorial identity. It is also important to note that these organic and biodiversity-friendly products are also highly appreciated in urban centres, creating an economic and sustainable link between cities and the countryside.⁸²

In conclusion, Satoyama is not just a symbol of Japan’s beautiful landscape or culture, but a system that has historically shaped the country’s food production practices, consumption of resources and, therefore, the eating habits of its inhabitants. Seasonal eating, local sourcing, the careful use of resources and the minimisation of waste were not just ethical choices, but real everyday lifestyle choices.

On the other side, *wa* is a complex concept with many facets that runs through Japanese cultural history, evolving from an ethical-spiritual ideal to a political stratagem and a cornerstone of contemporary sustainability. Many scholars have emphasised its orientalist nature, as well as its gradual transformation into a symbol and identifying feature of an entire society. In this context, *satoyama* is a model of coexistence between humans and nature, and although Japan has not always been consistent with this philosophy due to its fluctuating environmental conduct, today the country is mobilising institutions, NGOs and citizens towards ecological, educational and community practices. Japan, therefore, seems committed to realigning its contemporary policy with those much-celebrated ideals of balance and harmony, including through sustainable development and responsible consumption initiatives.

⁸¹ Aya KIMURA & Mima NISHIYAMA, *Alternative Agro-Food Movements in Contemporary Japan*, Tech. Bull. Fac. Hort. Chiba University, 59. p. 85

⁸² K. TAKEUCHI, K. ICHIKAWA, T. ELMQVIST, *Satoyama landscape as social-ecological system: historical changes and future perspective*, Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability, 19, 2025. pp. 36-38

CHAPTER 2 –

Japanese Modern Food Culture

2.1 – Japan in a Globalised World

Ever since the 1st century BC people and goods have been travelling from one continent to another for the purpose of trading, in what is now referred to as an ancient form of globalisation. Even then, global trade took place through various channels, the most famous of which was the Silk Road, which crossed mountains and deserts, connecting the Asian continent with Europe. In addition to this, there were also the steppe routes and maritime routes (including the spice route).⁸³ This phenomenon has never disappeared; on the contrary, since then it has continued to transform itself, thickening its paths by tracing imaginary lines between nation states. Scholar Samuel Kim offers the following definition to outline one of the modern meanings of *globalisation*:

“[globalisation is] a series of complex, independent yet related processes of stretching, intensifying and accelerating worldwide interconnectedness in all aspects of human relations and trans actions - economic, social, cultural, environmental, political, diplomatic, and security - such that events, decisions, and activities in one part of the world have immediate consequences for individuals, groups, and states in other parts of the world.”⁸⁴

Kim highlights the multidimensional aspects of globalisation, as it does not limit itself to trade dynamics and, instead, includes economic, cultural, environmental, politic and even security dynamics. It is an encompassing phenomenon formed by “independent” yet “interdependent” processes that urge the rapid transformation of nation-states. In this context, Japan poses itself as an interesting case, as the country has a long history of transnational exchanges’ dynamics (from trade with China to the maritime routes of East Asia), yet it elaborated its own conception of globalisation. The country, in fact, tried to resist the idea of

⁸³ Peter VANHAM, *A brief history of globalization*, World Economic Forum, 2019, <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2019/01/how-globalization-4-0-fits-into-the-history-of-globalization/>
Accessed: 17/11/2025

⁸⁴ William W. GRIMES, *JAPAN AND GLOBALIZATION: FROM OPPORTUNITY TO CONSTRAINT*, Asian Perspective, Vol. 23, No. 4, Special Issue on Globalization in East Asia, 1999, p. 169

globalisation, seeking to isolate itself from its negative effects (e.g. uncontrollable flows of capital and labour, identity tensions, loss of national sovereignty, etc.)⁸⁵, unlike what happened with the more widely accepted concept of *Kokusaika* (国際化, *internationalisation*). This is why a distinction must be made between the two terms. Scholars such as Kajita use the term *Kokusaika* to refer to a “controlled” process that impacts the international relations of a “nation-state” without threatening its national identity. It is a state response to external influences (through, for example, public policies to improve the country’s image) and allows for cultural exchanges that are, all things considered, “managed”.⁸⁶ For these reasons, this term has gained great popularity in Japanese political discourse since the 1980s.

This reality changed when, during the late 1990s, *guroobaruka* (グローバル化, globalisation) became the focus of heated debate. Scholars such as Yoshimi and Kang highlight the contradictions of this phenomenon: while on the one hand it reduces the effectiveness of borders by allowing for faster circulation of goods, capital and information, on the other hand it fuels a sense of anxiety within nation states, leading them to strengthen their “internal” borders through localism and nationalism.⁸⁷ In other words, globalisation is seen as a more disorderly, uncontrollable phenomenon that threatens national uniqueness. Hence, the term *kokusaika* remains central to Japanese academic discourse, as it perfectly integrates the concept of 日本らしさ (*nihonrashisa*, “Japanese-ness”)⁸⁸ and, for this reason, it is still of fundamental importance in public policy – including, in the field of food, in policies promoting *washoku* and the dissemination of *Shokuiku*.

The tension between globalisation, internationalisation and the preservation of cultural identity is not merely a theoretical construct: it is reflected in choices, practices and social representations and, therefore, also in food practices. Furthermore, it emerges with force in the Japanese context, where encounters with the outside world have historically generated profound changes, resistance and re-elaborations. The history of Japanese food, therefore, shows how processes of globalisation, controlled forms of internationalisation and demands for the preservation of “Japanese-ness” have intertwined over time, producing profound but never unilateral transformations.

⁸⁵ Cfr Ibid. pp. 168-169

⁸⁶ YAMADA Nobuyuki, *Bun'ya-betsu kenkyū dōkō (Kokusai) — 'Kokusaika' kara 'Gurōbaruka' e: 'Kokusai Shakaigaku' ni motomerareru mono* — [Research Trends by Field (International) - From "Internationalization" to "Globalization": What is Required of "International Sociology"], *Shakaigaku Hyōron*, 56(2), 2005, pp. 501–502
山田 信行、分野別研究動向(国際)―国際化から「グローバル化」へ:「国際社会学」に求められるもの一、社会学評論、56(2)、2005、pp. 501-502

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Cfr. Ibid.

The phenomena that characterise the contemporary world – from the spread of fast food to culinary hybridisation – are part of this long-standing dynamic and will be analysed in the following sections.

2.2 – Modern Japanese Dietary Pattern

Foreign culinary influences were first introduced to Japan in the 16th century, when the Portuguese brought beef, vegetables and sweets, among other things. Along with these tangible products, however, new knowledge and culinary habits were also introduced, which positively influenced Japanese cooking styles. In 1853, with the arrival of Commodore Perry and the US Navy in Japan, eating meat became a symbol of modernisation. In 1872, when news spread that Emperor Meiji enjoyed beef and mutton daily, the centuries-old ban on meat consumption was officially lifted.⁸⁹ As a result, meat production and cuisine became more refined, and numerous restaurants began to serve it on their menus. The very first dishes to cross the thresholds of these restaurants included *hayashi raisu* (beef hash with rice) and *kare raisu* (meat curry with rice). Since then, more products, knowledge and cultural innovations have been introduced into the country, and so people's eating habits have changed along with their culinary tastes.⁹⁰

These changes were not limited to the introduction of new ingredients and techniques, instead were part of a broader modernisation project known as *bunmei kaika*. At that time, the Japanese political elite used *yōshoku* (洋食, Western food) as a stratagem to demonstrate the country's progress. As writer Fukuzawa Yukichi observes, learning to eat “Western-style” meals became a truly political and cultural act.⁹¹

Following the end of the Second World War, further culinary innovations became part of everyday life in Japan, including Indian curry rice introduced by a British expatriate and cutlery used in European countries. Once introduced, coffee became one of the most popular beverages and, to this day, it is one of the most common and widely consumed beverages among Japanese consumers (with consumption as high as two cups per person per day). Beer was another popular drink among the Japanese: introduced in the 19th century by enthusiastic Japanese who had travelled to Germany and Holland for study purposes and claimed to have

⁸⁹ Katarzyna J. CWIERTKA, *Modern Japanese Cuisine: Food, Power and National Identity*, Reaktion Books Ltd, 2006. p. 24

⁹⁰ Michael ASHKENAZI and Jeanne JACOB, *Food Culture in Japan*, Choice Reviews Online, American Library Association, 2004. pp. 10-11

⁹¹ Katarzyna J. CWIERTKA, “Modern Japanese Cuisine...”, cit., p. 18

enlivened their studies with the infamous drink. In a short time, thanks to the support of German, Swedish and American brewers, famous brands such as Kirin and Asashi saw the light of day. Dairy products such as yoghurt and other fermented products also enjoyed success in the 1950s and were soon exported to other Asian countries.⁹²

These historical events, explains scholar Iwabuchi, showcase the curiosity and interest that the Japanese have always shown towards foreign cultures.⁹³ Nowadays, the contemporary Japanese diet is highly multicultural, influenced by numerous different cultures: Western-style breakfasts, American snacks, Japanese dinners. Despite this, as scholar Cwierka states, the basic structure remains Japanese: dishes are seasoned or accompanied by shōyu, dashi, miso, and the “rice + soup + side dishes” model typical of the Japanese diet remains unchanged. In other words, within every food – no matter what its origin – you can find a touch of “Japanese-ness”, so even if the exterior changes its form, the heart remains Japanese.⁹⁴

In conclusion, these historical transformations show that dietary practices have greatly developed through the centuries and, in the meanwhile, have been shaped by political, economic and institutional interventions. This is a fundamental perspective to take into account to better understand contemporary food practices as socially constructed manners rather than purely individual choices.

2.2.1 – “Kitchen cars” and the transformation of post-war Japanese diet

One particularly revealing example of how institutional interventions can – and have – shaped everyday food practices in post-war Japan is represented by the introduction of the so-called “kitchen cars”.

In the 1950s, during the American occupation of Japan, the first キッチンカー (*kitchen cars*) were created: mobile kitchen vehicles developed as part of the country’s nutritional reform policies. These *kitchen cars* were buses that travelled from city to city to demonstrate “nutritious, modern and economical” recipes, distribute pamphlets and offer samples.⁹⁵

Given their great popularity, between 1956 and 1960, the United States fully funded this initiative with two main objectives: to improve the nutrition of the Japanese people (*eiyo*

⁹² ASHKENAZI & JACOB, “Food Culture in Japan...”, cit., pp. 11-12

⁹³ Oana BIRLEA, *Japan’s Food Culture – From Dango (Dumplings) to Tsukimi (Moon-Viewing) Burgers*, East-West Cultural Passage, 20, 54-73, 2020. pp. 57-58

⁹⁴ Katarzyna J. CWIERTKA, “Modern Japanese Cuisine...”, cit., p. 176

⁹⁵ Nathan HOPSON, *Ingrained habits: the “kitchen cars” and the transformation of postwar Japanese diet and identity*, Food, Culture & Society, 23:5, 2020. p. 590

kaizen, 栄養改善) and to encourage the consumption of starchy foods. During those years, many Japanese cities still suffered from malnutrition, with a diet dependent on rice and low in protein. Thanks to the policy known as “food for peace” the Americans promoted “modern” ingredients such as bread, butter, milk and meat (i.e. American surpluses) and committed themselves to educating Japanese housewives in new culinary techniques. On the other hand, Americans managed to create new markets dependent on their products and strengthened the anti-communist alliance in the underlying context of the Cold War. Thus, in Japan between the 1950s and 1960s, there was a real ‘bread boom’ which, at the time, was considered even superior to rice (*bread over rice*).⁹⁶

However, although the new products were received with great enthusiasm, especially by women who considered them useful and affordable, there were also accusations from those who considered the initiative to be “forced Americanisation” with the aim of “destroying Japanese tradition”. Ōiso Toshio, doctor in charge of the health ministry’s nutrition section, responded to these accusations by saying: ‘If anything, I think I did a great job, given that I made the Americans use their money for Japan ... At first, Baum insisted that we use the money to promote wheat. But when I told him to take the long view, to recognise that as the Japanese diet grew richer, people would naturally gravitate towards wheat, he gave us the okay. [...] Real propaganda works without anyone realising it.’ In conclusion, it would seem that the so-called “American propaganda” was, in fact, of Japanese origin.⁹⁷



Figure 9 Kitchen car demonstration in Aomori (Courtesy of the Aomori Prefectural Museum)
source: Nathan HOPSON, *Ingrained habits: the “kitchen cars” and the transformation of postwar Japanese diet and identity*, *Food, Culture & Society*, 23:5, 2020. p.599

⁹⁶ Cfr. Ibid. pp. 593-594

⁹⁷ Ibid. p. 601

2.2.2 – Westernised School-Lunches and the impact on new generations

Another initiative funded by the US occupation authorities during the post-war years was the school lunches programme. Beyond addressing nutritional deficiencies, this initiative also functioned as a mechanism of socialisation that shaped children's food preferences, everyday practices and long-term consumption habits, as will be noted later.

At first, meals consisted of remaining stockpiles from the Japanese Imperial Army (canned meat and fish), but from the 1950s onwards, a directive stipulated that school lunches should provide 600 kilocalories with at least 25 grams of protein. Thus, the typical school lunch of a Japanese child in the 1950s was transformed into bread, milk and rice. In fact, milk was considered the perfect remedy for strengthening the malnourished bodies of children, while bread – which alone provided more than half of the calories and a third of the protein in the meal – and rice were supplied as agricultural surpluses from the US and Japanese governments.⁹⁸



Figure 10 School lunch centred on bread and milk, 1951

Source: Katarzyna J. CWIERTKA, Modern Japanese Cuisine: Food, Power and National Identity, Reaktion Books Ltd, 2006. p.158

As stated by *the Japan Times* newspaper: '[these children are] young enough to profit the most from taking wheat dishes: young enough to develop a taste that will last a lifetime'. Thanks to this initiative, around seven million Japanese children were preparing to become an

⁹⁸ Katarzyna J. CWIERTKA, "Modern Japanese Cuisine...", cit., pp. 157-158

innovative future consumer base with significant latent expansion potential. In fact, since children were introduced to these new flavours at school, they were likely to ask for them at home as well. A report states: ‘Children like bread and milk; they ask for it at home on days when they are not in school,’ and – thanks also to the kitchen bus programme – their mothers were now able to prepare delicious meals using these new ingredients.⁹⁹

In the following decades (as still today), school meals were upgraded with new and creative dishes such as deep-fried whale meat, deep-fried bread (*agepan*), spaghetti with meat sauce, boiled eggs, miso-flavored stew, stewed soybeans and pork, etc. In other words, Japanese children’s lunches perfectly reflected the social and political trends of those years, becoming a harmonious combination of Japanese and foreign elements.¹⁰⁰ In conclusions, this initiative demonstrate how broader socio-political structures shape everyday food-related behaviours and cultural meanings associated with consumption.



Figure 11 Elementary school children eating school lunch complementary of milk, rice and deep-fried meat, Mashiko, Tochigi, 1978
Source: Japan Sport Council, *Feeding the Nation: How Japan’s School Lunches Changed Through the Twentieth Century* | Nippon.com accessed: 21/11/2025

⁹⁹ Nathan HOPSON, “Ingrained habits...”, cit., p. 595

¹⁰⁰ Katarzyna J. CWIERTKA, “Modern Japanese Cuisine...”, cit., pp. 162-163

2.2.3 – Empirical Data

The historical events analysed so far – from early European influences to the Meiji modernisation project and post-war food reforms – demonstrate the ever-changing Japanese culinary practices and perceptions, phenomena strongly linked to consumers' choices regarding their daily diet. To understand how these trends have materialised, it is necessary to analyse the evolution of food consumption over the long term. The following section presents comparative data from the period of rapid economic growth in the 1960s to 2020, in order to visualise the extent of the dietary shift and place it within the broader process of food globalisation in Japan. As stated above, since the second half of the 20th century, Japan has undergone a process known as the *Westernisation of dietary habits*. This has led to what the Agricultural Policy Council defines as: 'a combination of the traditional dietary pattern based on rice, vegetables, fish and soybeans, with an heightened intake of meat, dairy products, eggs, oils and fruits'.¹⁰¹

The Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF) reports that since 1965, consumption of animal products has grown exponentially. One of the most striking examples is that, while meat consumption was less than 10 kg per person in 1965, it reached 40 kg in the 2000s, while total livestock products in 2020 exceeded 120 kg per capita. Milk and dairy products, symbols of post-war nutrition, have doubled in value over the past 50 years, reaching almost 100 kg per capita and establishing themselves as staple foods in the Japanese diet. Rice consumption is a whole different story, having seen a steady decline since the 1960s, going from 120 kg per capita to just 50 kg. This is a significant proof, as it attests to what scholars call "the decline of the rice-centered diet".¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ Haruka UEDA, *The post-war Japanese eating model: A sociological exploration of semi compressed food modernity*, International Sociology, Vol. 39(4), 2024. p. 468

¹⁰² Ibid.

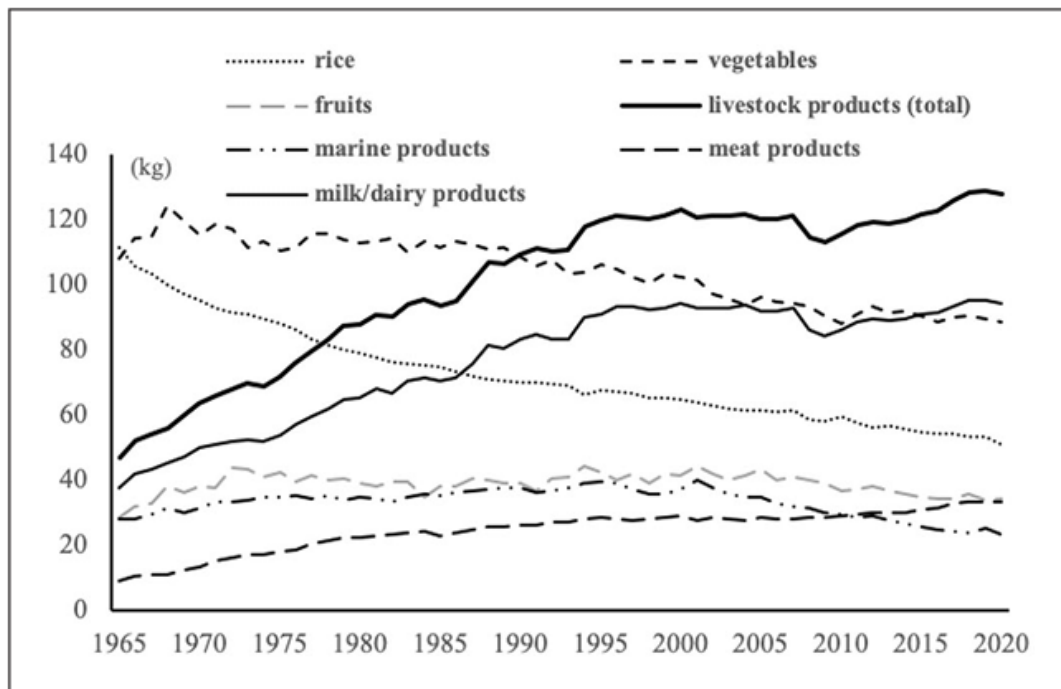


Figure 12 Per capita consumption by food item in Japan (1965-2020)

Source: Haruka UEDA, *The post-war Japanese eating model: A sociological exploration of semi compressed food modernity*, International Sociology, Vol. 39(4), 2024. p. 467

However, rice never actually lost its position as a staple food in Japanese daily meals; rather, this change symbolized an improvement in the standard of living. People began to consume less rice because they could now afford to include previously considered “luxury” foods such as meat, fish, and fruit (consumption of which increased by 30-40% between the 1960s and 1990s). Thus, between 1965 and 1975, the proportion of household expenditure on non-staple foods mounted from 49.6% to 52.3%, while staple foods declined from 22.2% to 13.1%.¹⁰³

Furthermore, during the 1980s, the Ministry of Health (MHW) outlined the composition of a typical (and nutritionally perfect) meal consisting of staple food + main dish + side dish(es), all accompanied by a soup (usually miso). This pattern is called *ichijū-sansai* (一汁三菜) and still today represents the example of an “ideal meal” due to its nutritional balance of protein-fat-carbohydrate (PFC ratio).¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ Katarzyna J. CWIERTKA, “Modern Japanese Cuisine...”, cit., pp. 158-159

¹⁰⁴ Haruka UEDA, “The post-war Japanese eating model”, cit., p. 468

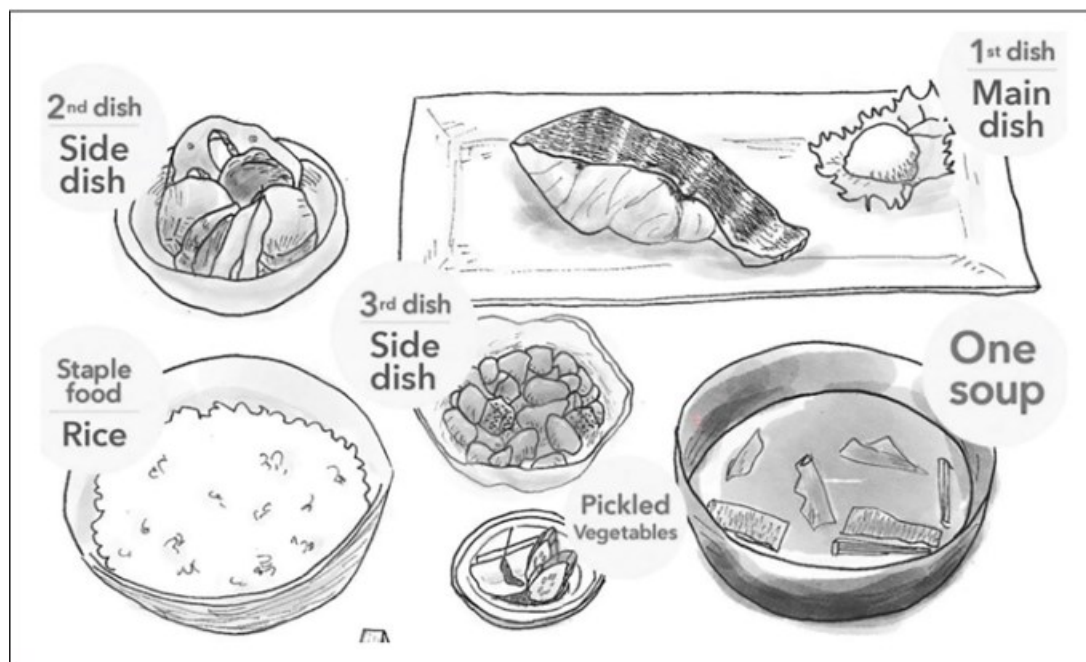


Figure 13 The *ichijū-sansai* and ‘staple, main dish and side dish(es)’ patterns, plus *furikake* (pickled vegetables)
 Source: Haruka UEDA, *The post-war Japanese eating model: A sociological exploration of semi compressed food modernity*, International Sociology, Vol. 39(4), 2024. p. 471

Although *ichijū-sansai* was institutionalized in the 1980s, researchers note that this balanced meal model didn’t yet reflect the population’s actual dietary habits at the time, but it did so later. In fact, between the 1960s and 1980s, only 40-60% of Japanese consumed two or more dishes at a meal, while less than 10% followed the *ichijū-sansai* dietary model.¹⁰⁵

It can be concluded that the data confirm that the postwar Japanese diet showed a significant shift toward a prototype of dynamic combination of new and traditional elements. While rice, miso, and fish continued to represent strong cultural symbols, elements such as meat, dairy products, and fats became harmoniously integrated. For this reason, despite the institutionalization of *ichijū-sansai* in the 1980s, social reality showed a growing openness to alternative modes of consumption, faster, more accessible, and in line with the new frenetic urban rhythms.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. p. 471

2.3 – The Rise of Convenience Food Culture

2.3.1 – Fast Food in Japan: Between Old and New

The birth of “fast food” is attributed to Southern California in the 1940s: a type of restoration that combines quality food service, cheap production and creative massive sales.¹⁰⁶ In a short time, thanks to its popularity the phenomenon spread rapidly throughout the United States and the rest of the globe. In 1971 McDonald’s opened its doors in Japan for the first time, in Tōkyō’s Ginza district. Today, Japan has the second largest number of McDonald’s locations in the world after the United States, and it easily ranks as the largest fast-food company in Japan.¹⁰⁷

However, as anthropologists such as Traphagan and Brown state, the success that fast food had in Japan would not be merely attributable to the *Americana* phenomenon, but rather to the propitious moment in which it was introduced: a period in which Japanese society showed a strong openness towards global innovations and new consumption models.¹⁰⁸ Scholars say, regarding the term *fast food*:

“The English term “fast food” (*fuāsuto fūdo*) has been adopted into Japanese. The foods to which it refers, however, or the shops where the Japanese version of fast food can be bought and consumed, are varied. Notably, they are not necessarily considered to be of American or other foreign origin. That is, many consider both the traditional and the more recent forms of fast food to be fully Japanese. McDonald’s, for example, is considered by many young and middle-aged Japanese alike to be a Japanese company.”¹⁰⁹

In other words, although today the term “fast food” is often associated with major American brands, in Japan the culture of fast food has much older origins, rooted in the country’s local culture. That is why, in everyday conversation, many consider both traditional and modern forms of fast food “Japanese”, regardless of their origin. McDonald’s itself, for some of the younger and middle-aged generations, is perceived not as a foreign icon, but as a

¹⁰⁶ Futoshi KOBAYASHI, *Eating fast food slowly? Cultural usage and meaning of fast food in America and Japan*, Nutrition & Food Science, Vol. 42 Iss 6, 2012. pp. 405-406

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ John W. TRAPHAGAN and L. Keith BROWN, *Fast Food and Intergenerational Commensality in Japan: New Styles and Old Patterns*, Ethnology, Spring, Vol. 41, No. 2, 2002, p. 119

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. p.121

brand now fully integrated into the national landscape.¹¹⁰ This perception reveals how the idea of fast food in Japan isn't simply the image of burgers and fries, but rather a broader set of eating practices with more ancient roots that have paved the way for the arrival of global models.

In fact, within Japanese tradition, there have been centuries-old modes of quick, cheap, and “on-the-go” consumption that share many of the functional logics of modern fast food. Traditional street food is served in classic *yatai* (屋台), small vans or mobile stalls that, even today, are often found around train stations where there is a greater influx of customers or in crowded shopping areas. The food sold ranges from octopus puffs (*takoyaki*), sweet fish waffles (*taiyaki*), caramelized fruit, stuffed meat buns (*nikuman*), steamed sweet potatoes (*yakiimo*), and countless other dishes that embody the Japanese tradition of “quick, cheap, tasty”.¹¹¹

Besides street food, eating at a counter is also a very popular way of consuming food in Japan. *Ramenya* (ラーメン屋) for example serve a hot bowl in just five minutes for only 500-600 yen. The very famous *kaitenzushi* (回転寿司) also adhere to this logic, restaurants that combine tradition and modernity with their speed of service. In these establishments, sushi is served on small plates that pass on a conveyor belt, so customers can help themselves, minimizing waiting times. At the same time, in their booth, customers can also take advantage of their own personal dispenser of tea, cutlery, sauces, and – often – palate-cleansing ginger. Prices are also much more affordable than traditional *sushiya* (寿司屋), ranging from 100 yen (about 55 cents) to 500 yen (about €2.77) per plate.¹¹² So, to sum up, American fast food exploded into already fertile ground, a perfect fit for these new trends.

The major American brands, as already mentioned, entered Japan in the 1970s and succeeded precisely thanks to a dynamic context, marked by changing Japanese habits and the growing trend of eating out.

It's true that, initially, brands like McDonald's and Kentucky Fried Chicken benefited from the appeal of their “American” image and particularly ingenious marketing strategies, but their initial success wasn't without its ups and downs. McDonald's, thanks to Fujita Den, managed to forge a fashionable and cosmopolitan image by opening in strategic areas such as the renowned Ginza and the old and prestigious Mitsukoshi department store. Furthermore, the novelty of eating standing up (an act that violates some of Japanese table manners) was

¹¹⁰ Cfr Ibid.

¹¹¹ ASHKENAZI & JACOB, “Food Culture in Japan...”, cit., pp. 127-129

¹¹² TRAPHAGAN and BROWN, “Fast Food and Intergenerational Commensality in Japan...”, cit., p. 121

perceived as chic by younger people.¹¹³ Similarly, KFC consolidated its popularity through a campaign called “Kurisumasu ni wa kentakkii!” or “Kentucky for Christmas!”, which transformed fried chicken into a real Christmas staple for many Japanese families.¹¹⁴

These strategies – however effective – would not have been sufficient on their own to guarantee the success of American chains. In fact, it was thanks to the “eating out boom” that they were able to consolidate their presence in Japan. Eating in restaurants before the 1970s was considered a luxury; now it became a part of daily life. In other words, eating out became one of the Japanese’s favourite pastimes, even more so than traveling, driving, or going to karaoke. Thus, sales in eating and drinking establishments went from 410 billion yen in 1960 to 12.135 billion yen in 1992.¹¹⁵

It’s important to note, however, that the growing popularity of American brands did not translate into a pure Americanisation of eating habits. On the contrary, in those same years, numerous Japanese companies created their own versions of the American model, hybridizing ingredients and applying indigenous gastronomic practices. Among these, the most emblematic example is MOS Burger, a chain that uniquely embodies the processes of *glocalization*, taking a format imported from abroad and adapting it to distinctly Japanese tastes, ingredients, and aesthetics.

Since its opening in 1972, MOS Burger has always strived to stand out from the competition with innovative menus, local, healthy products, and environmentally friendly policies. A striking example of this is its hit product: the *teriyaki burger*, the first on the market to combine ingredients such as meat and typically Japanese sauces in a single bun. But the *teriyaki burger* was only the first in a series of “unusual” dishes for a standard fast-food chain, followed by the iconic Rice Burger, which replaced the conventional slices of bread with pressed grilled rice; the *Japanese Burger Takumi Judan*, which combined the usual ingredients one would expect in a meat-based sandwich, bound together by a miso-based sauce; and “healthier” alternatives such as the *Natsumi Burger*, which once again replaced the bread with lettuce leaves.¹¹⁶

¹¹³ Emiko OHNUKI-TIERNEY, *McDonald's in Japan: Changing Manners and Etiquette*, Golden Arches East: McDonald's in East Asia, Second Edition, edited by James L. Watson, Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2006, pp. 154-155

¹¹⁴ Cfr. ZELLER, Z, *They're Lovin' It: How China and Japan Turned American Fast Food Into Global Phenomena*, The Columbia Journal of Asia, vol. 3, no. 1, 2024, pp. 51-52

¹¹⁵ Katarzyna J. CWIERTKA, “Modern Japanese Cuisine...”, cit., p. 165

¹¹⁶ Ibid. pp. 170-172



Figure 14 Mos Burger's hits: the teriyaki-sauce burger, the grilled rice (bun) burger, and the Natsumi burger

Source www.mos.jp, テリヤキバーガー | ハンバーガー | モスバーガー公式サイト, モスライスバーガー焼肉 | モスライスバーガー / ホットドッグ | モスバーガー公式サイト, モスの菜摘 (なつみ) モス野菜 | モスの菜摘 (なつみ) | モスバーガー公式サイト accessed: 27/11/2025

These examples perfectly illustrate what scholars call “the Japanese domestication of the global fast-food model,” that is the active adoption of a global trend (such as the burger) that—through processes of cultural reinvention—becomes a unique, local product that perfectly reflects the country’s identity.

Mos Burger’s popularity, however, isn’t limited to the originality of its products. Since the 1990s, it has strived to distinguish itself from other chains by placing particular emphasis on the quality and safety of its ingredients, thanks to its exclusive use of organic products and its strict hygiene management.¹¹⁷ Today, thanks to these characteristics, the Japanese fast-food chain has become the symbol of the so-called “Slow Fast Food”, because as the Japanese chain’s official website states, *eating good food makes you healthy in mind and body*:

「おなかがすいたら、
おいしいものを食べよう。
こころもからだも元気になれるから。」¹¹⁸

¹¹⁷ 「モスの安全・安心」 [“Moss Safety and Security”], *MOS Burger*, MOS Food Services, <https://www.mos.jp/omoi/#a-4>. Accessed 29/11/2025

¹¹⁸ 「おいしいものを食べよう」 [“Let’s eat something delicious”], *MOS Burger*, MOS Food Services, <https://www.mos.jp/cp/oishii/>. Accessed 29/11/2025

Translated from Japanese: “When you are hungry, eat something delicious. It will make both your mind and body feel refreshed.”

The introduction of fast-food chains in Japan introduced new meal prototypes and, secondly, gave rise to new hybridized forms of commensality. Scholars like Ohnuki-Tierney associate fast-food chains like McDonald's with the dynamics of "late capitalism". In Japanese tradition, food is a symbol of community and conviviality. Rice, for example, is a food served in large bowls placed at the centre of the table to be shared by all commensals. This concept, the scholar states, is far removed from the image of hamburgers, a food meant to be eaten individually and thus difficult to share.¹¹⁹

Moreover, the very first Golden Arch stores in the 1990s tended to have a structure that undermined commensality: they were small establishments with just twenty or so seats, all arranged at long counters facing the wall. Even later, when the stores began to expand, the overall number of tables in the dining area was much smaller than the number of individual stools. The scholar also noted that a large portion of the customers who frequent these places are busy salary men or women, people who come to eat alone, often in a hurry and standing in a corner on the first floor rather than going to the second floor where there are more seats. This attitude highlights, once again, the consequences of a daily life dictated by the rhythms of a capitalist society.¹²⁰

However, it's important not to fall into generalisations. Ohnuki-Tierney herself states: "Young people may convert McDonald's into a place to enjoy each other's company, but for most Japanese adults, McDonald's is simply fast food, 'fuel' for a busy workday"¹²¹. So, while it's true that fast-food chains foster individualism, there are cases in which these places can become true meeting places. As Traphagan and Brown observed, even fast-food places can become opportunities for sharing between families, friends, and partners: a family orders a hamburger from which the father and daughters take a few bites, a large portion of fries for four, and chicken nuggets, one for each. It also seems that Japanese are more likely to linger in fast-food restaurants for longer periods, sometimes even more than two or three hours. There is a wide variety of people: from groups of students (even 5 or 6 people) who spend time together after class to adults who meet to chat over a coffee or soft drink.¹²²

In conclusion, fast-food chains showcase a non-uniform consumption model, but rather a set of hybrid practices in which sociability, solitude, and functional needs coexist. The

¹¹⁹ Cf OHNUKI-TIERNEY, "McDonald's in Japan...", cit., pp.146-153

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ *Ibid.* p.153

¹²² TRAPHAGAN and BROWN, "Fast Food and Intergenerational Commensality in Japan...", cit., pp. 125-126

reorganization of contemporary Japanese eating and social practices thus showcases a complex society that seeks to balance frenetic lifestyles with moments of healthy conviviality.

2.3.2 – *The Konbini culture*

The rise of fast-food chains during the 1970s profoundly affected Japanese consumer habits through the introduction of new foods, new techniques, and times for eating away from home. But what consolidated and exacerbated this phenomenon was the introduction of so-called *Convenience Stores*, or *Konbini*, as they are colloquially known in Japanese. These stores, open 24/7, offer a wide range of services: from grocery products (except fresh fruits and vegetables, meats, and fish) to daily goods, fast food, magazines, and even permits to pay a bill or withdraw money from their ATMs. Simply put, no matter if it's day or night, these stores will always have some customers hanging around.¹²³

Since the 1990s, *konbini* have become an integral part of the daily life of many, so much so that they have been categorized as 'social infrastructure' (*shakai infura*, 社会インフラ) on a par with hospitals, banks and post offices; one Gen X witness even defines them as "the air you breathe".¹²⁴

Indeed, in Japan, the omnipresence of *konbini* can be compared to the air we breathe. Researcher Whitelaw claims that there were 23 stores within a 400-meter radius of his home in downtown Tōkyō: "I didn't need to wait for *konbini* to arrive; they came to me."¹²⁵ According to The Guardian newspaper, in 2024 there were an estimated 56,000 *konbini* spread across Japan.¹²⁶

As observed by Whitelaw—who during his reportage subsisted almost exclusively on ready-made meals: *obentō*, *onigiri*, bagged sandwiches, packaged hard-boiled eggs, instant ramen, or corn dogs—*konbini*'s food offerings go far beyond those of a simple convenience store. Although *konbini* companies invest considerable time, effort, marketing expense, and advertising to make their stores appear simply as small supermarkets, these spaces reveal a more complex social fabric. Their popularity is rooted in a daily routine marked by intense work

¹²³ Akinobu TERASAKA, *Development of new store types: the role of convenience stores in Japan*, GeoJournal, 1998, Vol. 45, No. 4, Methods in Retail Geography (1998), p. 319

¹²⁴ Gavin H. WHITELOW, *Konbini-Nation: The Rise of the Convenience Store in Post-Industrial Japan*, Consuming Life in Post-Bubble Japan: A Transdisciplinary Perspective, Edited by Katarzyna J. Cwiertka and Ewa Machotka, Amsterdam University Press, p. 71

¹²⁵ Ibid. p. 82

¹²⁶ Justin MCCURRY, *Coffee, sandwiches, underwear, beer: a day in the life of Japan's konbini stores*, The Guardian, 8 Nov. 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/nov/08/coffee-sandwiches-underwear-beer-day-in-the-life-japan-konbini-stores> Accessed 29/11/2025

schedules, long commutes, and a growing scarcity of time and energy to devote to home-cooked meals. The success of these stores therefore reflects a form of “convenience dependency” in a society that demands immediacy, simplicity, and always-available food because it cannot (or is unable) to slow down.¹²⁷

And so, *konbini* often become a real “third place.” American sociologist Ray Oldenburg defines “third places” as all those places that foster social interaction, such as gardens, squares, pubs, cafés, and even post offices. In other words, all those places that fall outside of the “first places”—one’s home, the most important place that will have a major impact on a child’s development—and “second places”—the workplace, which reduces the individual to a single productive task between competition and improving the material quality of life. In this context, third places are accessible and comfortable and can sometimes offer a form of psychological support. Similarly, *konbini* (and by extension, fast-food restaurants) become for many, places where they can catch their breath, pass the time, or simply escape, even for a few minutes, from the frenetic pace of urban life. In this sense, *konbini* culture is not simply about buying fast food, but also about producing new forms of small, everyday “refuges” within the Japanese urban landscape.¹²⁸

However, the reality is more complex than it appears at first glance. More and more people rely on *konbini* food on a daily basis, a habit that, according to Whitelaw, in the long run risks causing a form of “emotionally emptiness” and even depressive symptoms: “Carrying home plastic bags filled with plastic-wrapped food to reheat in the microwave, or to wolf down before they became cold, left me feeling bored and detached.”¹²⁹

This perceived psychological void is part of a broader criticism. With the rise of their popularity, more and more Japanese accuse *konbini* of promoting an unbalanced and unhealthy diet. A former national football coach even linked the decline in performance of the national team’s players to the overconsumption of convenience stores’ *obentō*.¹³⁰

Additionally, *konbini* are sometimes accused of fostering poor manners and bad behaviour in young people: 24-hour venues, constant stimulation, and the immediate availability of snacks and drinks contribute, according to some, to normalizing nocturnal and even potentially dangerous lifestyles. In extremis, some researchers observe that intense reliance on *konbini* for daily needs can lead to a form of behavioural reliance, which involves

¹²⁷ Cfr WHITELAW, “Konbini-Nation: ...”, cit., p. 82

¹²⁸ Ray OLDENBURG, *The great good place: cafés, coffee shops, bookstores, bars, hair salons, and other hangouts at the heart of a community*, Da Capo Press, 1989. pp. 39-44

¹²⁹ WHITELAW, “Konbini-Nation: ...”, cit., p. 82

¹³⁰ Ibid. pp. 80-81

a sort of emotional outsourcing of the care and support functions usually associated with the home environment. As Professor Miura Atsushi states:¹³¹

“I call the konbini a ‘mother’. If you leave the home and enter a konbini there will be food. Whenever and wherever you go there is always a mother looking after you. [Konbini] are [open] 24-hours [per day], in the worst-case scenario they are more convenient than a mother (*okaasan yori benri*). Food is lined up waiting. Saying ‘thank you’ is not necessary. Konbini are better than mothers.”¹³²

Konbini, therefore, become a kind of “mother substitute,” as predictable, comfortable, and non-judgmental places where one can escape the frenetic pace of urban life. For this reason, researchers like Shinji Taya state: “Konbini are not only handy; they become familiar and comforting. [...] It’s the perfect fit for the Japanese lifestyle.”¹³³

2.4 – Hōshoku: deconstruction of eating models

Countries in the “Global North” (i.e., the richest and most developed countries such as the USA, Canada, Western Europe, and Japan) are experiencing a long period called “gluttony and overabundance.” This means having enough food to eat to your heart’s content. It refers to a state in which you can get whatever you want. This concept is embodied in our supermarkets and convenience stores, where shelves are full of food, but not only that: we are surrounded by food.

As mentioned in previous chapters, Japan during the *Shōwa* (1926-1989) and *Heisei* (1989-2019) eras saw great social changes, and this was also reflected in the postwar Japanese diet. Thanks to the rapid economic growth of those years, national income augmented and the Engel coefficient (the share of food spent on living expenses) fell to 22% from its precedent 60% during the 1940s, meaning that Japan had finally achieved a rich and convenient dietary lifestyle in which anyone, everyone could eat whatever they wanted.¹³⁴

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Justin MCCURRY, *Coffee, sandwiches, underwear, beer: a day in the life of Japan’s konbini stores*, The Guardian, 8 Nov. 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/nov/08/coffee-sandwiches-underwear-beer-day-in-the-life-japan-konbini-stores> Accessed 29/11/2025

¹³⁴ HASHIMOTO Naoki, *hōshoku to Kuzure-shoku no shakai-gaku joron*, shoku no senmonka blog, 2020, [飽食と崩食の社会学 序論|入門 食の社会学](#), Accessed: 30/11/2025

In Japanese this concept is explained in the term *hōshoku* (飽食), gluttony or satiation.

The word *hōshoku* is made up of two characters: *hō* 飽, which means “to have enough”, “to lose interest” and *shoku* 食 of food, to eat (v.). In other words, the overabundance of food – and therefore the ability to eat whatever is acceptable – leads to a decline in interest in what one eats, consequently, causes the development of adverse behaviours towards food and can lead to a nutritional imbalance.¹³⁵

Domestic agriculture declined under the pressure of cheap imported agricultural products and the country’s food self-sufficiency rate fell to 40%, creating serious food security problems. Despite this, today people consume – and waste – large amounts of food.¹³⁶ Yasuda Naoko, a professor at Senri Kinran University in Ōsaka, affirms that Japanese food waste is double the global average. In 2010, approximately 17 million tons of food waste was generated in Japan, of which approximately 5-8 million (approximately 30-47%) was edible food waste. As much as 16% of this domestic waste is made up of leftovers, highlighting the clear situation of overabundance present in the country.¹³⁷

It is in this complex context that the term *hōshoku* becomes an ambivalent concept. In fact, the kanji for *hō* can also be rendered as “collapse, deterioration” 崩, and combined with *shoku* 食 it represents the deterioration of “traditional” food models. However, it is not simply an erosion of the diet (considered not very nutritious), but rather a corrosion of the nutritional, social and symbolic quality of the eating act.¹³⁸

These transformations see their roots in the expansion of market capitalism that developed in modern society. Japan is a society that is witnessing the development of various social phenomena such as changes in family life, rapid aging and the decline in births, as well as the intensification in single-nuclear households. In this context, current problems related to

橋本直樹、「飽食と崩食の社会学 序論」、食の専門家 Blog, 2020, [飽食と崩食の社会学 序論|入門食の社会学](#), Accessed: 30/11/2025

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ YASUDA Naoko, *Hōshoku kara Hōshoku no Jidai no Ima*, Kankyō Rakuza: Shoku no nagare wo Gaikan shitemiru, 2013, [rakuza13-06.pdf](#), Accessed: 30/11/2025

安田 直子、飽食から崩食の時代の今、環境楽座「職の流れを概観してみる」、2013, [rakuza13-06.pdf](#), Accessed: 30/11/2025

¹³⁸ Haruka UEDA, *The post-war Japanese eating model: A sociological exploration of semi compressed food modernity*, International Sociology, Vol. 39(4), 2024, p. 473

nutrition can be interpreted as a consequence of changes in economic conditions and social structure.¹³⁹

In the near future, the capitalist economy based on mass production and consumption is likely to reach its structural limits, preventing a transition towards a more sustainable economic model – a society that will require a revision of its eating habits.¹⁴⁰

In the following subsections, the main social drivers of the so-called *hōshoku* (崩食) will be analysed and an attempt will be made to outline the behavioural consequences and eating behaviour indicators that characterize contemporary Japanese society.

Social Drivers

• Urbanisation and Internal Migration

Post-World War II Japan experienced an unprecedented urban transformation. The rapid economic growth of the 1950s-1970s saw the expansion of three major metropolitan areas: Tōkyō, Ōsaka and Nagoya. More profitable job opportunities, the possibility of continuing one's higher education studies, are among the reasons that pushed many Japanese to move from peripheral areas to these epicentres. According to data from the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MIC), Japan has recorded three significant peaks in migratory flow: during the Oil Shock period (1960-1973), in the expansion phase prior to the bursting of the economic bubble (1972-1980) and, more recently, from the 2000s to today.¹⁴¹

The trend, however, was not homogeneous. The metropolitan areas of Ōsaka and Nagoya began experiencing net emigration during the 1970s and have remained largely stable since then. Tōkyō on the other hand continued to experience net immigration. During the 1960s the capital reached 388,000 arrivals per year, so in 2018 the capital had around 37 million inhabitants, equal to around 29% of the national population (Fig. 15).¹⁴²

¹³⁹ HASHIMOTO Naoki, *hōshoku to Kuzure-shoku no shakai-gaku joron*, shoku no senmonka blog, 2020, [飽食と崩食の社会学 序論|入門 食の社会学](#), Accessed: 30/11/2025

橋本直樹、「飽食と崩食の社会学 序論」、食の専門家 Blog, 2020, [飽食と崩食の社会学 序論|入門 食の社会学](#), Accessed: 30/11/2025

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism (MLIT). *Kokudo kōtsū shō hakusho: Dai 12 shō. Teitetsudō-kan no jinkō idō no dōkō*, 2020, www.mlit.go.jp/hakusyo/mlit/r01/hakusho/r02/html/n1112000.html

国土交通省、「国土交通省白書 第12章 定鉄道間の人口移動の動向」、2020

¹⁴² Ibid.

As Figure 16 shows, since 2014 all Japanese prefectures have recorded net emigration to the Tōkyō metropolitan area. Of these emigrations, the prefectures of Hokkaidō, Ichikawa, Yamanashi, Shizuoka, Kyōto and Okinawa represent over 90% of the total movements.¹⁴³

Such urbanisation has not only reconfigured the geographical distribution of the population, in fact, it has played a significant role in reshaping the daily habits of citizens. Significant commuting time and the growing dependence on metropolitan areas for work, study and services have with time redefined the rhythms of life, significantly impacting the way meals are prepared and consumed.

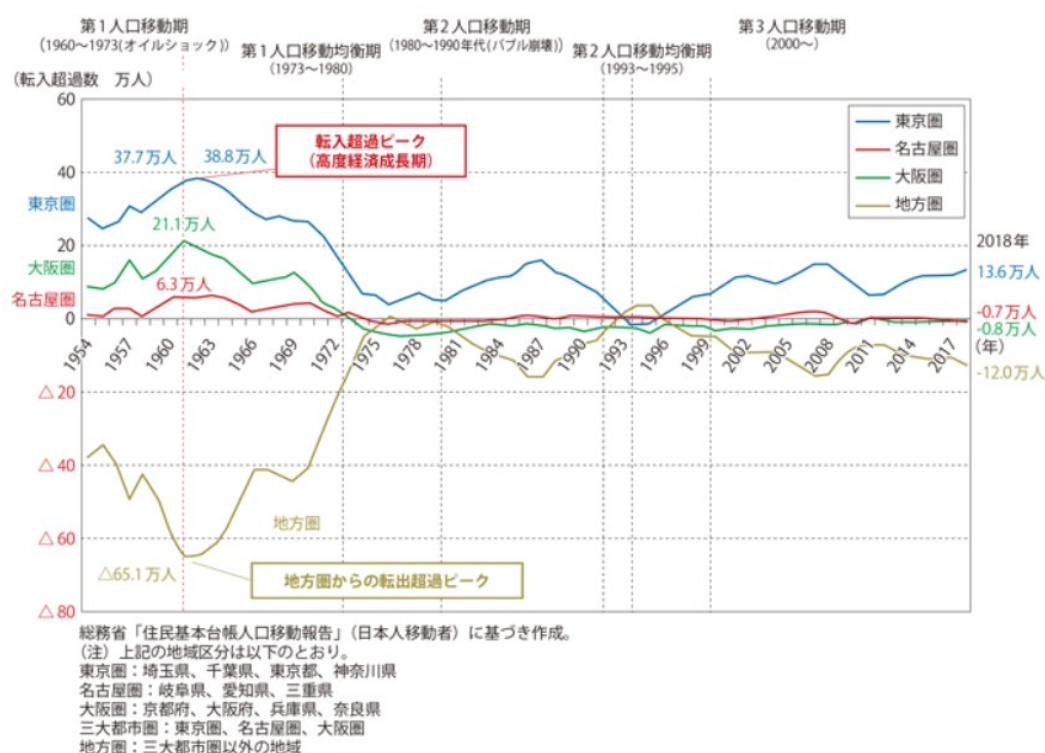


Figure 15 Trends in population movements (net inflows) in the three major metropolitan areas and regional areas, MLIT, 2020
<https://www.mlit.go.jp/hakusyo/mlit/r01/hakusho/r02/html/n1112000.html>

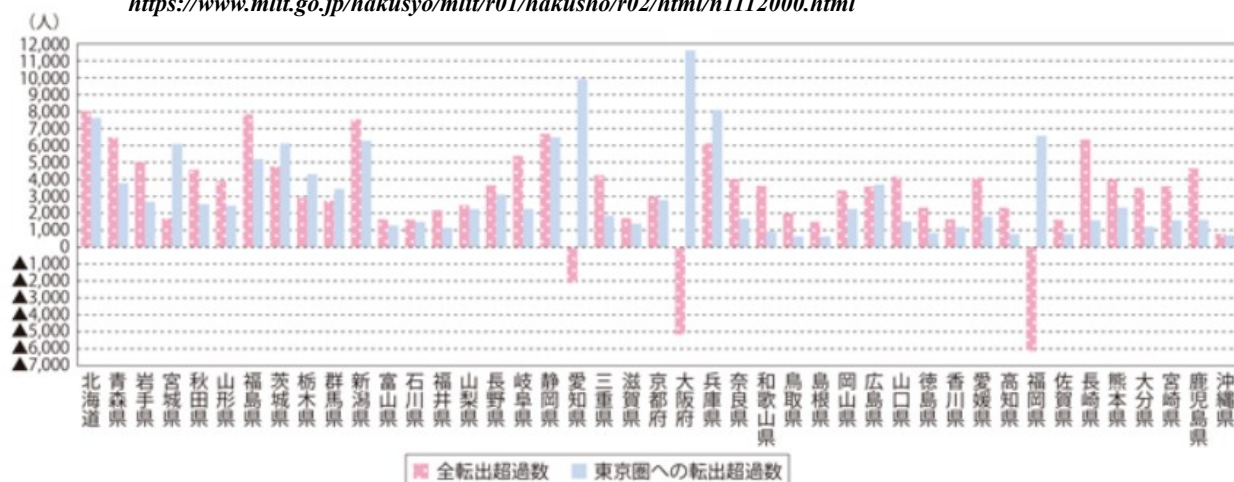


Figure 16 Number of people moving out by prefecture, MLIT, 2020

¹⁴³ Ibid.

- **Labour conditions and commuting**

One of the most unfortunate reasons why Japan is known around the world today is its long working hours. According to data collected by the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare (MHLW) in 1905 the average Japanese worker worked for approximately 3,100 hours per year, or almost 400 hours more than their American counterparts. This value remained unstable during the years of the Second World War, only stabilizing in the 1960s at around 2,400 hours per year. Although this represents a significant decline, it should be noted that during the same period, an American worker spent on average around 700 hours less per year at work. It is also important to note that from 1945 the MHLW began to collect data only from companies with 30 or more employees, thus excluding a significant portion of the workforce employed in small and medium-sized enterprises.¹⁴⁴ Considering that it is common to record longer working days precisely in the contexts of SMEs, it is plausible that the real number of hours worked was - and remains - higher than what the official statistics suggest. Only since the 1990s, thanks to policies to reduce the annual number of working hours to 1,800, has the figure stabilised. Despite this, Japan remains one of the countries with the highest number of hours worked per capita.¹⁴⁵

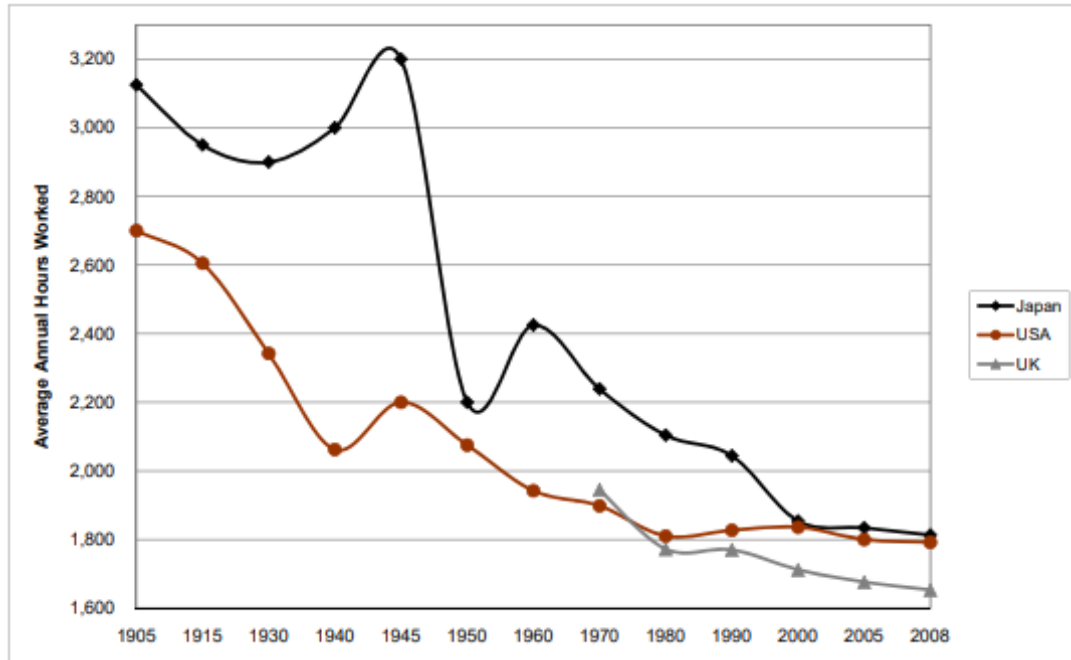


Figure 17 Average Annual Hours Worked, 1905 to 2008: Japan vs. USA and UK.

A.J. Jacobs, *Max Weber was Right about the Preconditions, Just Wrong about Japan: The Japanese Ethic and its Spirit of Capitalism*, The Open Area Studies Journal, 3, 12-29, 2010. pp. 14-15

¹⁴⁴ A.J. JACOBS, *Max Weber was Right about the Preconditions, Just Wrong about Japan: The Japanese Ethic and its Spirit of Capitalism*, The Open Area Studies Journal, 3, 12-29, 2010. pp. 14-15

¹⁴⁵ Atsuko Kanai, *"Karoshi (Work to Death)" in Japan*, Journal of Business Ethics, 2009, Vol. 84, Supplement 2: Working to Live or Living to Work, 2009. p. 210

A further element that contributes to the perception of lack of time in contemporary society is represented by commuting to the place of work or study. According to MIC data, on average, the daily commute takes an average of 57 minutes. As stated previously, urbanisation is pushing more and more people towards metropolises; therefore, it is not surprising that prefectures around cities such as Ōsaka, Nagoya and Tōkyō register higher averages. Within the Tōkyō metropolitan area, for example, Kanagawa averages 90 minutes (round trip), while Chiba and Saitama reach 75 minutes respectively.

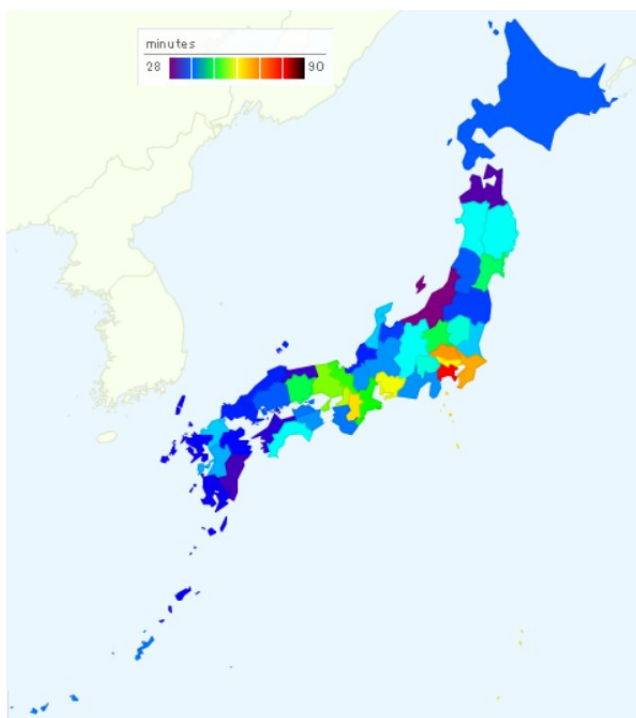


Figure 18 Average commuting time in minutes, MIC, 2011

Similar trends are also observed in the Kansai area: Nara stands at 70 minutes, Hyōgo at 59 and Kyōto at 50 minutes.¹⁴⁶

Considering these dynamics, it is clear how the intertwining of long working hours, extensive commuting and growing urbanisation has profoundly affected daily food practices. Preparing home meals requires time, energy and careful management of the family routine; on the contrary, fast food outlets and quick-service restaurant chains offer immediate, economical and easily accessible options. It is in this context that the shift from home-cooked meals towards quick, tasty and convenient solutions finds one of its most relevant structural causes.

• Changing Family Structure

Following the growing urbanisation of post-war Japan, family composition underwent a significant transformation, moving from the traditional *ie system* (家) – characterized by extended nuclei including mother, father, children and often grandparents – to the fragmented nuclear family (*kakukazoku*, 核家族). According to data from the MHLW (2016) nuclear families are now the predominant type, far surpassing the three-generation model. This trend

¹⁴⁶ Nbakki, *Commuting time of workers in Japan, 2011*, Hatenablog, 2014
<https://nbakki.hatenablog.com/entry/2014/02/20/124942> Accessed 02/12/2025

shows no signs of reversing: in 2016 the proportion of nuclear families reached around 80% (Fig. 19).

At the same time, the average size of family units has progressively reduced. If in the 1960s a “typical” family was made up of four or five members, in 2015 the average value stood at two or three members.¹⁴⁷ This is accompanied by the further normalisation of single-person households (*tanshin setai*, 単身世帯) made up of students, employees and salarymen who have moved to large cities: in 1985 they represented 21% of all families, but it is expected that by 2035 they will reach 37% (Fig. 20).

These changes while reflecting a new configuration of domestic structures, show new and different ways of organizing everyday life. Smaller groups and greater individual mobility weaken traditional models of preparing and sharing meals, contributing to the progressive diffusion of more individualized, rapid and functional food practices to the rhythms of contemporary urban life.

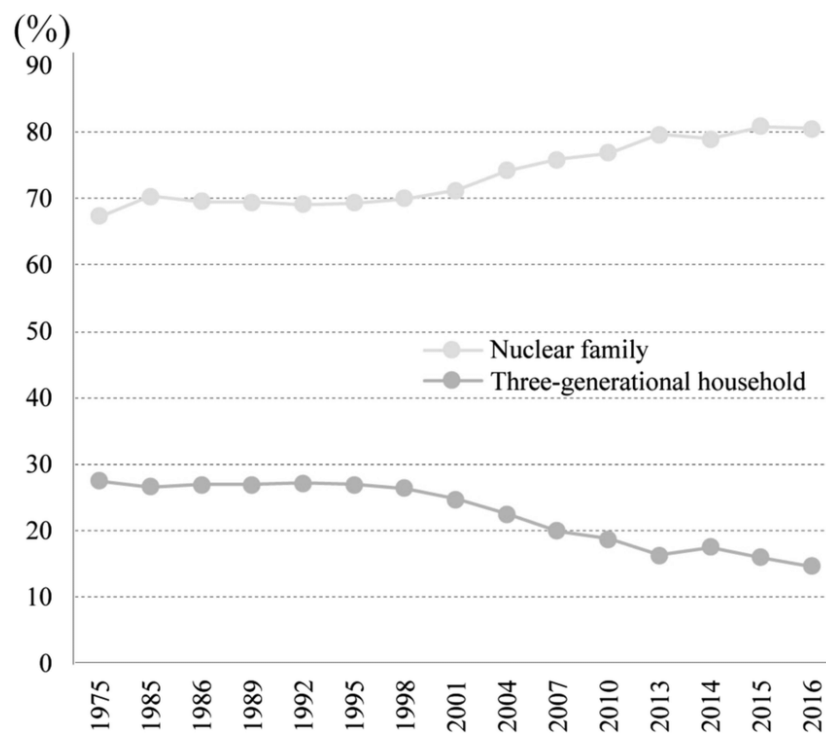
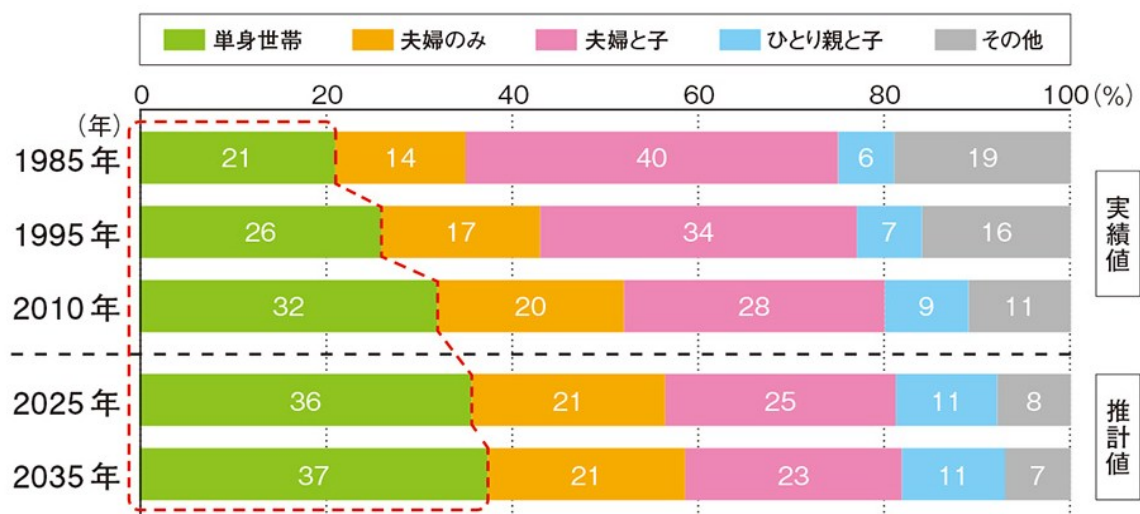


Figure 19 Percentages of nuclear families and three-generational households among households with children under 18 years of age in 1975–2016 MHLW, 2016

¹⁴⁷ Cfr. Haruo Matsubara, *The Family and Japanese Society After World War II*, The developing economies, pp. 500-507



(資料)実績値:総務省『国勢調査』時系列データ、
推計値:国立社会保障・人口問題研究所『日本の世帯数の将来推計』(2013)に基づき、みずほ情報総研作成

Figure 20 Changes in household types, MIC
<https://www.sendenkaigi.com/marketing/media/sendenkaigi/002230/>

Eating behaviour indicators

After having outlined some of the social factors that influence the shift in contemporary eating practices (urbanisation, labour conditions, commuting and changing family structure), the following part aims to outline their impact on eating behaviour indicators. Although they do not represent clinical indicators of health, analysing these behaviours can provide an important lens through which to understand how social transformations influence the quality of nutrition and its potential risks for individual well-being.

• Meal Skipping

Meal skipping has been reported as a public health issue all over the world, and Japan is no exception. According to a study conducted by health and nutrition experts, people reported having difficulty finding the time to sit down for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Due to intense work hours, long commuting times to go to school and work, the opportunities to stop to eat meals decrease to the point of disappearing.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁸ Mai MATSUMOTO, Naomi ISHIGE, Azusa SAKAMOTO, Aki SAITO and Shinji IKEMOTO, *Nutrition knowledge related to breakfast skipping among Japanese adults aged 18–64 years: a cross-sectional study*, Public Health Nutrition: 22(6), 2018. p. 1030

According to the Nutrition Survey drawn up by the MHLW, in 2020 14% of men and 10% of women had the habit of skipping meals, specifically breakfast. This mainly concerns men in their 20s. The historical root of this trend can be found by going back to the 1970s, already then, the incidence rate was highlighted within the 20-29 years old group which recorded around a quarter of the total. Over the decades, this trend builds up to reach 35% in 2017. However, the most alarming data is found within the other age groups where the percentage increase is significant. Men aged 40-49, for example, recorded a percentage rise of 20%, going from around 10% in 1977 to reaching 30% in 2019. This data highlights how the effects of *hōshoku* involve both the younger generations, and the older ones.¹⁴⁹

However, aside from the lack of time (or will) to eat every meal of the day, another determining factor seems to be nutrition knowledge. According to a study on the relationship between meal skipping and nutrition knowledge, participants with less nutrition knowledge tended to skip meals (especially breakfast) more frequently. This result, therefore, allows us to understand how greater nutrition knowledge is necessary to improve eating behaviours. Additionally, it highlights how different educational backgrounds could influence this nutrition knowledge.¹⁵⁰

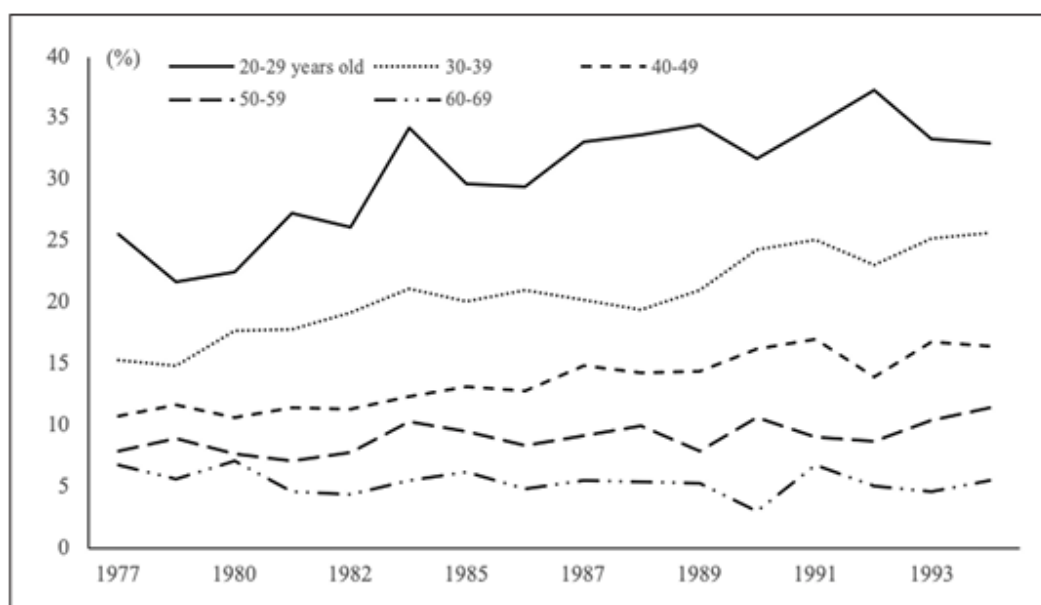


Figure 21 Male breakfast skipping rate (1977-1994), data from Nutrition Survey (MHLW, 2021)
Source: Haruka UEDA, “The post-war Japanese eating model”, cit., p. 474

¹⁴⁹ Haruka UEDA, “The post-war Japanese eating model”, cit., p. 473

¹⁵⁰ MATSUMOTO, ISHIGE, SAKAMOTO, SAITO and IKEMOTO, “Nutrition knowledge...”, cit., p.1031

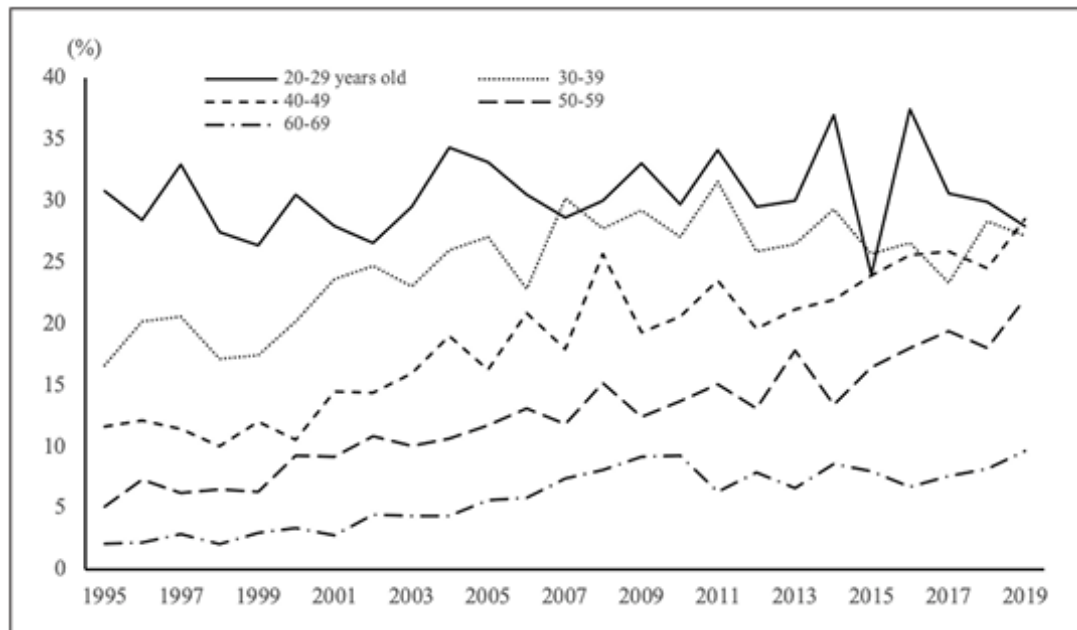


Figure 22 Male breakfast skipping rate (1995-2019), data from Nutrition Survey (MHLW, 2021)
Source: Haruka UEDA, “The post-war Japanese eating model”, cit., p. 474

- ***Eating out and taking in***

Amid the ‘60s and ‘70s economic expansion, the “eating out boom” experienced its peak. Eating out was no longer a luxury, so the habit of eating out took hold. According to the Expenditure Survey of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MIAC) the eating out rate rose from about 7% in 1963 to more than 15% during the 1980s. Since the 1990s, however, with the bursting of the economic bubble, this figure stabilized between 16% and 18%. It is in this historical period that another type of meal outsourcing began to take hold: *taking in*. In fact, the tendency to buy ready-made foods grew from 7% (early 1990s) to 13% (2019) (Fig. 23). A series of factors played an important role in justifying this upsurge: first of all, the strict work-life balance which led many people to prefer the consumption of ready-made foods during lunch to save up some precious time; this trend tends to strike particularly among men and the elderly, the latter as they are (often) associated with the growing phenomenon of single-person households.¹⁵¹

Furthermore, the growing popularity of food ordering apps should not be underestimated. Statistics say that in Japan significant growth is expected in the delivery and

¹⁵¹ Haruka UEDA, “The post-war Japanese eating model”, cit., p. 475

takeout segment, whose market is expected to reach ¥800 billion in the future. The success of this market finds its roots in the ever-increasing influence of mobile food delivery apps.¹⁵²

In recent time, more than 30 million users engage with such applications, such as Uber Eats (the most downloaded application in Japan) and Demae-can. It was during the COVID-19 pandemic that a download exploit was recorded due to safety regulations that recommended reducing travel outside the home as much as possible, including spending time in restaurants and cafés. The population's solution, therefore, was to rely on safer health options – leading to a spread in online orders by 25%.¹⁵³

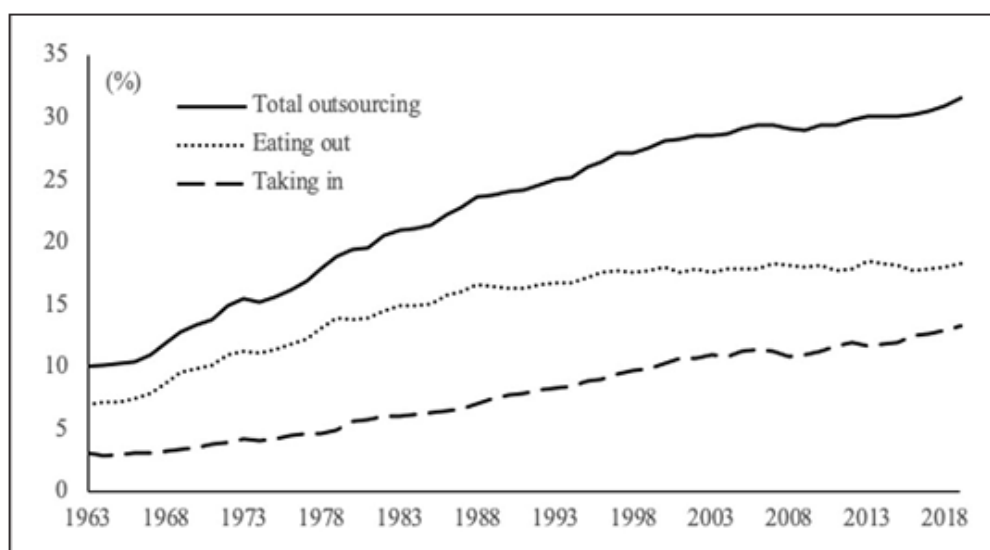


Figure 23 Rate of family meal outsourcing (1963-2019), based on Expenditure Survey (MIAC, 2019)



Figure 24 Logo of the famous food delivery app Demae-can and its motto of “happiness is just around the corner”
Source: Demae-can official website, 出前館、新型コロナウイルスの影響を受ける飲食店への支援を拡大
 ~配達代行手数料を7%助成し23%に~ | 出前館 | 株式会社出前館

¹⁵² Spherical Insights. *Japan Fast Food Market Size, Share, Forecast to 2033*. Spherical Insights, Feb. 2024, www.sphericalinsights.com/reports/japan-fast-food-market. Accessed: 12/12/2025

¹⁵³ Ibid.

- ***Simplification of meal pattern: solo eating (Koshoku) and quick eating***

If the characteristics mentioned above are considered overall, the data provided by the Nutrition Survey relating to the so-called simplification of meal patterns are consistent with the transformations described. In fact, already during the 1980s, around 67% of the population no longer practiced the ‘staple, main dish and side dish(es)’ pattern. Although this percentage decreased in 2009, a significant portion of the population - equal to approximately 38% - continued not to adopt this dietary pattern.¹⁵⁴

A further relevant element concerns the socio-demographic distribution of the phenomenon: men, young people and individuals belonging to lower income groups are more inclined to abandon this meal pattern. It is precisely within this segment of the population – the working population – that further factors in the *hōshoku* discourse are concentrated.

The long working hours that have characterized the working life of the average Japanese since the post-war economic growth have contributed to a progressive delaying of meal eating and the consequent decrease in time dedicated to eating. In fact, if in the 80s the mainstream starting time for dinner was “before 7pm”, only about ten years ago it became normal (and almost without choice) to eat dinner after 9pm.¹⁵⁵

These living conditions, combined with the advent of fast-food chains, favour rapid and functional consumption methods, leading these young and middle-aged workers to eat faster and faster. According to the *Time Survey* drawn up by MIAC, people between the ages of 20 and 49 dedicate, overall, less than 90 minutes a day to consuming meals. The generation gap appears significant when compared with the 75–79 age group, who spend on average at least 125 minutes overall (fig.25).¹⁵⁶

Finally, one of the most recently problematized phenomena in the Japanese context is that of *solo eating* (or *Koshoku*). This practice sees its roots well before the emergence of contemporary convenience-oriented lifestyles. Already in the 1980s and 1990s, a significant share of adults did not eat meals “with all family members”, especially during breakfast (about 46%) and dinner (about 28%). These data refer especially to men workers, denoting the absence of the father figure from the table. Since the 2000s, this trend has further intensified: according to a survey conducted by the Cabinet Office (CAO) and MAFF, the percentage of people who eat alone “almost every day” rose from 10.2% (2011) to 15.3% in 2017, reflecting broader

¹⁵⁴ Haruka UEDA, “The post-war Japanese eating model”, cit., p. 478

¹⁵⁵ Ibid. p. 476

¹⁵⁶ Ibid. p. 477

structural changes in work patterns, the composition of family units and forms of social intimacy.¹⁵⁷

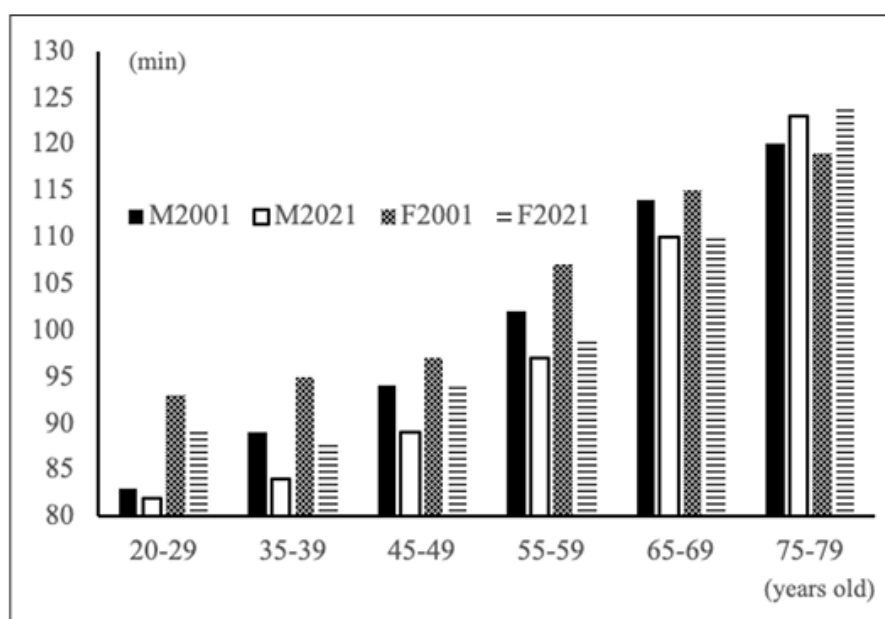


Figure 25 Meal duration per day (2001–2021), MIAC 2021

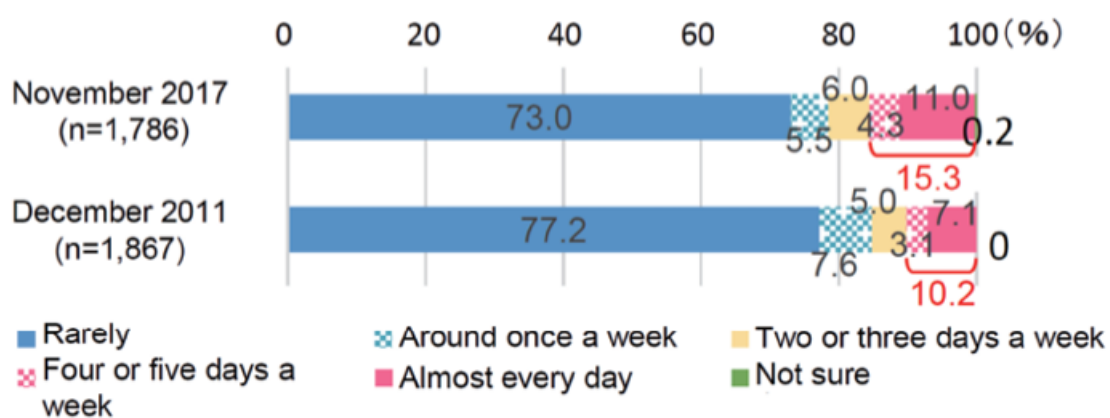


Figure 26 Frequency of eating every meal of the day alone, MAFF, 2017

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

2.5 – Concluding Remarks

As discussed in this chapter, food consumption in Japan has undergone profound changes over time, but this does not mean a complete break with the past. Staple foods such as rice, for example, have long been linked to cultural and sacred meanings. It has always been a symbol of Japanese “tradition”, to the point of becoming an emblem of national identity.¹⁵⁸ Its value was so strong that when fast food chains appeared, rice was not set aside but, on the contrary, was included in original offerings (such as Mos Burger’s “rice burgers”), becoming a paradigmatic example of cultural hybridisation and continuity within Japanese food culture.¹⁵⁹

Post-war industrialisation and subsequent urbanisation reshaped daily life, encouraging the spread of quicker and more convenient food solutions. By the 1960s, the idea of a quick meal had become routine for busy workers and students, who found it more practical to heat food in the microwave in just three minutes rather than preparing a full meal. As *the Japan Times* observes: ‘Today, we take our meals so much for granted that some busy people even choose to survive on biscuit-type “nutritional bars”’.¹⁶⁰

As demonstrated throughout this chapter, the normalisation of convenience-oriented eating has also generated growing tensions between dietary norms and contemporary practices. Scholars conceptualise this contradiction through the notion of *hōshoku* (崩食), which does not merely signal a decline in food quality, but rather the widening gap between idealised models of “eating well” and the structural constraints of modern life. Simplified meal patterns, solo eating, delayed meals and reduced time dedicated to eating reflect broader transformations in urban living, labour conditions and household structures, exposing the limits of post-war dietary expectations in present-day Japan.

Since the early 2000s, these tensions have prompted both civil society and public institutions to seek alternative responses. Movements such as Slow Food Japan and initiatives like Food Action Nippon have promoted a renewed focus on local products, seasonality and sustainability, articulating what Kōsaka defines as a form of “post-McDonaldisation”.¹⁶¹ At the

¹⁵⁸ Penelope FRANCK, *Simple pleasures: food consumption in Japan and the global comparison of living standards*, *Journal of Global History*, 8, 2013. pp. 95–116

¹⁵⁹ TRAPHAGAN and BROWN, “Fast Food and Intergenerational Commensality in Japan...”, cit., p. 119-134

¹⁶⁰ Yoko HANI, *Slow food, an attitude as much as a meal*, *The Japan Times*, 2006

‘<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/life/2006/10/31/lifestyle/slow-food-an-attitude-as-much-as-a-meal/>’. Accessed: 04/09/2025

¹⁶¹ Katsuaki KŌSAKA, “Posuto`Makudonarudo-ka` jidai no yukue: Fāsutofūdo sangyō no jizoku kanōsei no mosaku” (Toward the Sustainability of Fastfood Industry: The post-McDonaldisation thesis), *Bunkyo University*,

institutional level, food education policies under the framework of *Shokuiku* have emphasized the interconnection between health, food culture and responsible consumption, particularly through early educational interventions.

Although existing research has examined primary education programmes in depth, the role of higher education as a systemic catalyst in shaping food literacy, professional responsibility, and sustainable practices in the food and beverage industry remains relatively unexplored. Filling this gap is essential to understanding how contemporary Japanese society can overcome the contradictions of *hōshoku* towards more thoughtful, sustainable, and culturally rooted food practices, an issue that will be explored in depth in the following chapters.

Bulletin of Living Science, Vol.29, 2007, pp.49-59

小坂勝昭、「ポスト・『マクドナルド化』時代の行方: ファーストフード産業の持続可能性の模索」、文教大学、生活科学研究、巻 29、2007 年、p. 49-59

CHAPTER 3 –

Cultural, Social and Educational Responses

3.1 – Washoku as a cultural countermeasure

Japanese cuisine, or *washoku*, represents an important contemporary strategy for the growing fragmentation of eating practices discussed in the previous chapter. More than just a culinary tradition, Japanese society is now turning to *washoku* as a symbolic and practical reference for rethinking food culture. In a context where eating habits are fragmenting and lifestyles oriented toward convenience, rapid consumption and (often) unbalanced eating prevail—phenomena summarised in the concept of *hōshoku* (崩食)—*washoku* emerges as a sort of antidote.

The focus is not only on recipes or habits of the past, but on *washoku* as a model that promotes balance, seasonality, aesthetic awareness, and sociality in food consumption. The dish itself, the *ichijūsansai*, with its small portions, each linked to its own natural cycle, lends itself well to discussions related to food policies, education, and sustainability. In this sense, *washoku* does not directly oppose convenience-oriented lifestyles, but rather offers an alternative framework through which fragmented eating practices can be critically reevaluated.

Several characteristics distinguish the *washoku* tradition, some of which will be discussed below.

First, it's important to emphasize Japan's geographic conformation, which allows for diverse, fresh ingredients and respect for their individual flavours: the archipelago extends from north to south and is covered in a vast natural landscape, including seas, mountains, and villages. For this reason, different ingredients with local roots are used in distinct parts of the country. The same applies to preparation techniques and resource implementation, which vary from region to region. In this way, each region has developed unique flavours that maximize their local ingredients.¹⁶²

The second distinguishing factor is the importance of nutritional balance to support a healthy diet: as previously explained, the “traditional” Japanese diet is distinguished by its

¹⁶² The Washoku Association of Japan. *Washoku: Traditional Dietary Cultures of the Japanese*. Delicious Japan, https://delicious-japan.com/images/f_washoku_en.pdf, Accessed 20/12/2025.

eating plan based on staple foods + one soup + side dish(es), a plan that promotes nutritional balance and keeps animal fat intake low. This diet is internationally renowned because it is often perceived as the key to the Japanese population's longevity and low obesity rate.¹⁶³

Another key element is aesthetics, the expression of nature's beauty as the seasons change. For gourmands and tea ceremony practitioners, using products that have reached the peak of perfection (*shun*) within their season is of vital importance. Picking the first fruits of the season (*hatsumono*) is also an eagerly awaited event, as "first" of anything is an important aspect of Japanese culture—like, for example, New Year. It is such a sensational event that participating in the harvest of the first fruits of the season is said to extend one's life by 75 days. Moreover, aesthetic presentation is also of great importance, because a meal must be delicious and, above all, pleasing to the eye. Sensitivity, elegance, and art are some of the adjectives that characterize traditional dishes, often accompanied by flower arrangements, colours, and fabrics matching the season and occasion. Even the food itself must reflect the season, for example, reds and golds for autumn, whites for winter, and pink for spring.¹⁶⁴ These techniques express the beauty of nature and the changing seasons in a way unique to *washoku* culture.

Finally, *washoku* binds communities and families, as it has an intimate connection with New Year's Eve and all-year-round festivals. Indeed, sharing food at these festivals is a sign of gratitude toward nature, which is a blessing in itself.

Recently, it's fair to say, there has been a veritable rediscovery of *washoku* as a cultural heritage. First, thanks to the craze of pop culture—anime, manga, etc.—Japanese cuisine has become a subject of global interest. At the same time, globalisation and the opening of markets have made Japanese ingredients more readily available and accessible, allowing for a veritable "export" of indigenous Japanese culture. In response to these phenomena, however, various mechanisms have been put in place to safeguard Japanese gastronomic culture. Likewise, the creation of imagery linked to rice paddies, rural villages and artisanal food production has made it possible to build an identity model for contemporary Japanese society around *washoku*.¹⁶⁵ This process is summarised in the term "culinary nationalism", or the expression of the uniqueness of a particular nation's food.

¹⁶³ Eriko KOMIYA, *Washoku bunka no hogo keishō no torikumi* [Measures to Promote the Protection and Inheritance of Traditional Japanese Dietary Cultures], *Nippon Shokuhin Kagaku Kogaku Kaishi*, 67 (7), 2020, pp. 242-244

小宮恵理子, 「和食文化の保護・継承の取組」, 日本食品科学工学会誌第 67 巻第 7 号 2020 年, 242-244

¹⁶⁴ ASHKENAZI & JACOB, "Food Culture in Japan...", cit., pp. 20-23

¹⁶⁵ Giovanni BULIAN, *Il mito del "washoku": le ambivalenze della cultura gastronomica giapponese*, GeorgofiliINFO a cura di Accademia dei Georgofili, 2024, p.2

As Ferguson states, countries such as Japan and France can be defined as ‘culinary countries’ because, thanks to their uniqueness, the cuisines of these nations overlap with the identity of the nation itself. As a result, Japanese cuisine also becomes a tool for promoting trade, tourism and a genuine national soft power.¹⁶⁶

3.1.1 – Washoku as Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity

“[Washoku is a] social practice based on a comprehensive set of skills, knowledge, practice, and traditions related to the production, processing, preparation, and consumption of food. It is associated with an essential spirit of respect for nature closely related to the sustainable use of natural resources.”¹⁶⁷

This is how *washoku* was described in 2013 when it was officially named part of UNESCO’s Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Heritage. With this recognition, *washoku* entered the World Heritage framework, marking a crucial moment in the institutionalization of Japanese food culture.

From that moment on, the term ‘washoku’ began to travel beyond national borders and circulate throughout the world, appearing in local and international newspapers, cookbooks, gastronomic essays, and restaurant guides. The UNESCO inscription thus played a key role in transforming *washoku* from a culturally rooted set of practices into a globally recognized heritage, with symbolic, educational, and political values.¹⁶⁸

In this way, the inclusion of *washoku* in the World Heritage List became a tool for consolidating Japanese cuisine both nationally and internationally. Specifically, it played a strategic role in counteracting the processes of Western dietary homogenization and Westernization discussed in the previous chapter. More than a simple celebration of tradition, UNESCO’s recognition has helped reframing *washoku* as a legitimate reference model for

¹⁶⁶ Voltaire CANG, *Policing washoku: the performance of culinary nationalism in Japan*, Food and Foodways, 27:3, 2019. p. 234

¹⁶⁷ Ehara, A, *Washoku bunka to sono hogo to keisho [Washoku Culture inscribed on UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage List, and the way of its protection and promotion]*, Journal of Cookery Science of Japan, 48(4), 2015. p. 322

江原絢子. 「ユネスコ無形文化遺産に登録された和食文化とその保護と継承」. 日本調理科学会誌 Vol. 48, No. 4, 2015. p.322

¹⁶⁸ Katarzyna J. CWIERTKA, *Serving the Nation The Myth of Washoku*, Consuming Life in Post-Bubble Japan: A Transdisciplinary Perspective, Amsterdam University Press, p.90

Japanese food culture, encouraging renewed interest in all those food practices that existed before the large-scale Western influence.¹⁶⁹ As scholar Ehara states:

“I hope that the young people who will lead Japan into the future will not only understand Japanese and regional food culture, but also feel pride in it. Inheritance does not mean returning to the past; rather, it is important to inherit the spirit behind food while incorporating elements of a new era and reconstructing it.”¹⁷⁰

Ehara’s words are significant because they set aside the idea of “cultural heritage” as something static belonging to the past, instead emphasizing its dynamic and adaptive nature. She hopes that young people – the country’s future – can take pride in their cultural heritage, embracing its essence or “spirit.” By “spirit,” Ehara likely refers to the respect for nature, seasonality, and balance that distinguish Japanese culinary tradition, which therefore becomes a tool for developing new more sustainable and healthy lifestyles.

Against this background, *washoku* is often used as an example for a more sustainable food culture, with its emphasis on seasonal ingredients, local production, and minimal food waste. These ideals echo several of the SDGs presented in Chapter 1, such as health and well-being (SDG 3), responsible consumption and production (SDG 12), and the responsible use of natural resources.

All in all, it is clear how *washoku* “acts” (even if only implicitly) against *hōshoku*, positioning itself as an alternative language for talking about food, but also as a normative benchmark thanks to its characteristics of balance, seasonality and sociability.

¹⁶⁹ Ehara, A, “Washoku bunka...”, cit., p.95

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

3.1.2 – *Washoku's limitations and the importance of next generations*

To mark the fifth anniversary of *washoku's* inscription as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage, the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF) conducted a study on the changes and efforts made to promote *washoku* culture in Japan. The survey involved approximately 1,000 people raising children. The results showed that Japanese food culture promotes a positive image, promoting a healthy lifestyle, balanced nutrition, and allowing for the consumption of plenty of vegetables—all of which earned *washoku* its inscription as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2013. However, the negative aspects reported by interviewees should not be ignored, such as being excessively “time-consuming and troublesome”, the foods tending to be high in salt, or sometimes too simple for modern palates.¹⁷¹

These perceived limitations can be interpreted as important warning signals. In a contemporary food environment characterised by fast, convenient, and highly diversified alternatives (as discussed in Chapter 2), the existence of *washoku* should not be taken for granted. While the cultural and nutritional value of Japanese cuisine has been well recognized, its daily implementation appears to have structural challenges related to time, changing lifestyles, and evolving taste preferences.

For these reasons, the issue is not simply preserving *washoku* as a symbolic heritage, but rather creating conditions where its practices, etiquette, and values can be effectively transmitted to future generations.

The MAFF survey also reports that as of March 2020, approximately 48.0% of Japanese people (basically, one in two) have inherited and passed on traditional Japanese food culture, including cuisine and etiquette, to the next generation. Furthermore, it appears that the key figures in this teaching and transmission are most commonly the mother, followed by the grandmother and the teacher. These findings suggest the importance of home and school as places for the preservation of Japanese food culture.¹⁷² For this reason, in the following subchapters, I will illustrate how *washoku* is mobilized within policies – such as *Shokuiku* – in education and in public discourses as an effective response to *hōshoku*.

¹⁷¹ Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries. 「和食」のユネスコ無形文化遺産登録5周年! MAFF, www.maff.go.jp/j/keikaku/syokubunka/wasyoku_unesco5/unesco5.html, Accessed 19/12/ 2025

¹⁷² KOMIYA, “Washoku bunka no hogo”, cit., pp. 242-244

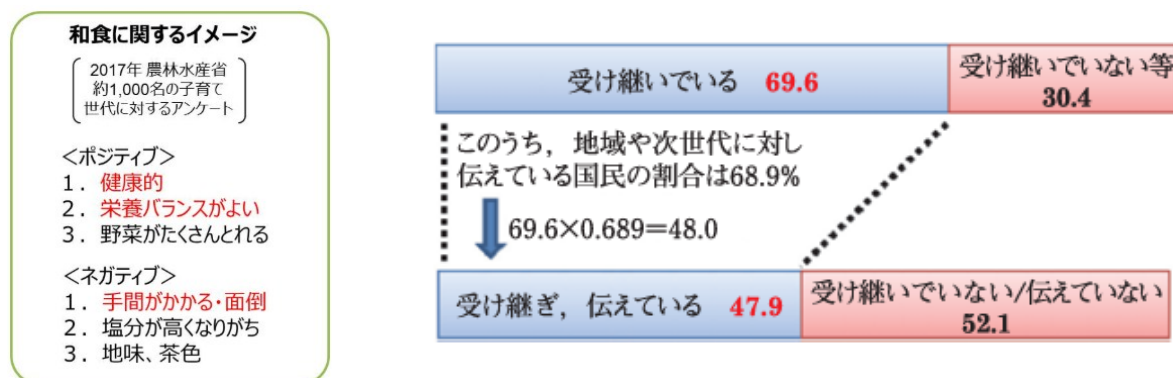


Figure 27 Percentage of people who inherit and pass on traditional cooking and etiquette that has been passed down in their local community or household, MAFF, 2020

3.2 – A social countermeasure: The Slow Food Movement

The Slow Food social movement was born in 1986, in a small northern Italian village called Bra, as a response to the turbulent political and social landscape of the time. Its founder, Carlo Petrini, had a clear idea in mind: to preserve distinct local cultures from the homogenization caused by industrialization and globalisation.¹⁷³

The political climate in Italy in the 1970s was turbulent. The emergence of social movements like the Labor Movement and the Autonomy Movement, aimed at denouncing inadequate working conditions, alternated with the violent actions of the Red Brigades. In this complex context, the Slow Food movement emerged as an expression of the forces of the Italian left and a rejection of the violence that was spreading across the country. For this reason, the first incarnation of Slow Food took the name “Arcigola”—rooted in the Italian Communist Party.¹⁷⁴

Another key factor in the birth of the movement was the opening of the first McDonald’s in Rome, in Piazza di Spagna. It was precisely the arrival of American fast food that triggered, in response, the need for a “slow food” culture:

“The choice to keep the phrase “Slow Food” in its English-language form in Italy was an ingenious twist. Those two words, a reaction to the Big Mac phenomenon, became

¹⁷³ Stephen SCHNEIDER, *Good, Clean, Fair: The Rhetoric of the Slow Food Movement*, College English, Vol. 70, No. 4, Special Focus: Food, 2008, p.385

¹⁷⁴ Ibid. p. 386

the best way to spread the group's philosophy. Another kind of food could exist, another way to eat, another way to comprehend the pleasures of life."¹⁷⁵

With this phrase, Slow Food presented itself as a good, clean, and fair alternative to the food consumption patterns that were emerging at the time. Resolving "the omnivore's dilemma," as scholar Michael Pollan called it, was the movement's primary goal. The crux of this dilemma lies in the question: "What should one eat?" With the advent of industrial agriculture, the challenge was not only to understand what was "good to eat," but also which foods were "good to think." In this context, the rhetoric of the Slow Food movement seeks to restore food to the center of human culture, since—as Petrini states—food is not merely a product to be "consumed": it is happiness, identity, culture, pleasure, conviviality, nutrition, local economy, and survival.¹⁷⁶ Food, therefore, becomes a political, economic, cultural, and agricultural expression of a country.

In its discourse, Slow Food emphasizes the uniqueness of each territory and its food products through the concept of "territory." This concept does not merely denote a geographical area, but rather the complex result of the interconnection between different natural elements (soil, air, climate, altitude, etc.) and human elements (local knowledge, traditions, agricultural practices, etc.). These elements are what distinguish local food products, precisely those elements threatened by industrial agriculture and the spread of monocultures. For this reason, Slow Food organizes various regional and national events and conventions to promote regional products.¹⁷⁷

One of the most successful conventions was the biennial Salone del Gusto, an event held in Fiat's former factory in Turin in 1996. It was there that "The Ark of Taste" was first presented. Petrini and the other Slow Food creators define this program as a visible enactment of the "Noah Principle" to redefine the relationship between humans and the natural world, identifying with the figure of Noah: the goal becomes to save the contemporary world from the excesses of modernization, no longer trying to change it. In other words, the goal is to "attempt to save what is on the verge of extinction, rather than pursue new things that we despise."¹⁷⁸ Thus was born the *convivium*, the basic structural unit of Slow Food, the social and organizational unit of the movement. It is the meeting point between members of the movement, activists, producers, and consumers. Within it, the local members of each *convivium* coordinate various food-related

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid. pp.387-388

¹⁷⁷ Ibid. p.389

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

activities: events, food and wine tastings, educational activities, or simple moments of conviviality. In essence, their goal is to spread the values of Slow Food at the local level. Food becomes conviviality, eating an excuse to slow down from the frenetic pace of life, and meeting other members an opportunity for growth. *Convivium* members are encouraged to advise food producers on how to improve their marketing and distribution strategies, thus raising awareness among local consumers.¹⁷⁹

The “Ark of Taste” also aims to focus on individual products, especially those at risk of extinction. This is how *Presidia* was created, tools for protecting and promoting local agricultural products and traditional production practices. *Presidia* are tied to the local area, production-oriented, and aim to support small producers with a particular focus on biodiversity. It is through this tool that Slow Food seeks to counter the homogenization of production that characterizes capitalist food systems.

However, it is important to note that Slow Food never opposes scientific knowledge or principles; what Petrini proposes is a “dialogue between realms.” It is a balance between traditional and scientific knowledge to achieve mutual benefit: protecting biodiversity and supporting local food communities are just some of the benefits that tradition can derive from scientific advances.¹⁸⁰

Any dialogue between realms, however, must be governed by certain principles: food must be good, tasty, and diverse, produced to maximize local flavors; it must be clean, which must be sustainable and respectful of the environment; and finally, it must be fair, which means it must be produced in a socially and ethically sustainable manner. By following these three principles, tradition and science can successfully preserve food that is both good to eat and good to think about.¹⁸¹



Figure 28 The logo of Slow Food with its snail, symbol of the slow journey, and the care in enjoying food, contrasting the frenzy of “fast food”.
Source: <https://www.slowfood.com/>

Over time, thanks to its programs and ideals, Slow Food managed to gain considerable international attention, constantly growing its membership, including celebrities (such as Prince Charles) and scientists (such as Vandana Shiva, founder and executive director of the Research Foundation for Science, Technology and

¹⁷⁹ Stephanie ASSMANN, *Reinventing Culinary Heritage in Northern Japan: Slow Food and Traditional Vegetables, Japanese Foodways, Past and Present* edited by Eric C. Rath and Stephanie Assmann, 2010, p.246

¹⁸⁰ Ibid. p.390

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

Ecology). In this way, Slow Food managed to establish itself in countries such as the United States, England, and most importantly, Japan.

3.2.1 – The movement in Japan: Slow Food Japan

The values and ideals of Slow Food Japan reached Japan in 1998, when they began to spread among a growing number of members, initially estimated at around 2,000. However, it was only in 2004 (also thanks to the success of the Salone del Gusto) that Slow Food Japan was officially recognized as the national governing body of the movement.¹⁸² Since its inception, the Japanese branch of Slow Food has been part of a context characterized by profound transformations in the food system, marked by the standardization of consumption, loss of biodiversity, and the progressive weakening of shared eating practices.

The movement's mission, stated on the official Slow Food Japan website, is clear: to protect, cultivate, and pass on delicious food to future generations. This goal is based on the understanding that every ingredient purchased daily and every dish that reaches our table is directly connected to broader global dynamics that cannot be ignored. Rapid climate change accelerates year after year, and thousands of living creatures and animals die due to natural disasters such as typhoons and devastating fires. While mass production and consumption continue in the Global North, those in the Global South face acute food crises. In this complex context, passing on delicious food to future generations and inspiring hope for the future of the planet by addressing food-related issues become the challenges of this nonprofit movement.¹⁸³

¹⁸² WATANABE (Saito) Megumi, *Surōfūdo no kore made to korekara, Nihon de no hiromari* [Development of Slow Food Movement and Mobilization in Japan], *Nihonchōrikagakukai-shi* (J. Cookery Sci. Jpn.) Vol. 55, No. 6, 2022, p.308

渡邊（齊藤）「めぐみ、スローフードのこれまでとこれから，日本での広まり」，日本調理科学会誌（J. Cookery Sci. Jpn.） Vol. 55, No. 6, 2022, p.308

¹⁸³ ビジョンとミッション | Vision and Mission.” Slow Food Nippon, 日本スローフード協会, <https://slowfood-nippon.jp/vision/> Accessed 23/12/2025

The Japanese movement maintains close ties with its Italian counterpart (which acts as an advisor on structure and administration), also joining the project known in Japanese as *Aji no Hakobune* (味の箱船, Ark of Taste). Unlike the international project, however, Japan has adapted the project's goals to its local needs, accepting only products that are produced on a small scale, have excellent flavour, have not been genetically modified in the production process, and have a long history. Besides, the product must have environmental, economic, and historical significance within its growing region. Last but not least, the product must be truly at risk of extinction.¹⁸⁴ 「未来に残したい味」 (*mirai ni nokoshitai aji*, “the flavour we want to preserve for the future”) this is the evocative phrase on the Slow Food Japan website that sums up the philosophy of the Ark of Taste: food as a living heritage, in which taste becomes a tool for transmitting cultural, environmental, and social values deemed worthy of being preserved over time.¹⁸⁵

Japan currently has approximately 83 products registered under the *Aji no Hakobune*, distributed throughout the archipelago from Hokkaidō to Okinawa. The number of registrations is gradually growing in an effort to protect more and more unique local food products and the environment surrounding them. Some of these include: the Haretsu corn (*Hachiretsu tōmorokoshi*) from Hokkaidō, *Hanazukuri daikon* from Yamagata Prefecture, Amarume green onion

(*Amarume negi*) from Miyagi Prefecture, Citrus fruit (*Yūkō*) from Nagasaki, and many others.¹⁸⁶ Many of these products have characteristics that make them incompatible with the efficiency and rationalization typical of industrial agriculture: they are difficult to grow, require specific technical processing, have limited resources, and have a flavour often considered “difficult” by younger consumers. Children, therefore, are less likely to eat them, and many fear that, if things don't change, these products could disappear with this immediate generation. Scholar Watanabe states: this food culture embodies the wisdom that has woven life through the connection between people and nature, including local resources, climate and geographic



Figure 29 Logo of the online magazine "Hakobune," affiliated with Slow Food Nippon. It showcases products registered in the "Ark of Taste" throughout the country. Source: <https://slowfood-nippon.jp/what-we-do/ark-of-taste/>

¹⁸⁴ ASSMANN, “Reinventing Culinary Heritage...”, cit., p.246

¹⁸⁵ 味の箱船 | Ark of Taste.” Slow Food Nippon, 日本スローフード協会, <https://slowfood-nippon.jp/what-we-do/ark-of-taste/>. Accessed 23/12/ 2025

¹⁸⁶ ASSMANN, “Reinventing Culinary Heritage...”, cit., p.247

conditions, ecosystems, ethnic groups, and languages. For these reasons, it is a heritage that must be preserved for future generations.¹⁸⁷

In parallel with the *Ark of Taste* project, Slow Food Japan is structured through a network of local communities spread across the country, currently numbering around sixteen. Each develops specific initiatives related to its own geographical and cultural context, demonstrating how the movement's principles can be expressed in different ways. The local community of Sapporo, Hokkaidō, for example, is focused on safeguarding Ainu culture and food by conducting research on the plantations found in the mountains and fields of those geographical areas. They also hold cooking classes for children and teach them how to prepare traditional dishes using ingredients originating from Ainu culture. In this case, Slow Food acts as a tool for protecting cultural minorities and their food knowledge.¹⁸⁸

Another unique example is Slow Food Mount Fuji, a community located in Shizuoka Prefecture, around Mount Fuji. Its members work with domestic and international travel agencies to create catalogues featuring slow food tour experiences, connecting tourists with local producers, chefs, distributors, accommodation facilities, restaurants, PR agents, guide-interpreters, and travel arrangers to create unique, sustainable experiences that respect and safeguard the local environment. Their goal is to deepen exchanges with Slow Food friends in Japan and overseas and to allow as many people as possible to experience the rich food, food culture, and biodiversity found around Mount Fuji.¹⁸⁹

Finally, the activities promoted by the Slow Food community in Suginami, Tōkyō, offer a concrete example of how the movement's principles are translated into everyday practices at the urban level. These initiatives can be interpreted along four main axes: food education, conviviality, critical awareness, and social cooperation. First, particular emphasis is placed on food education, through activities called “Slow Food sessions”—cooking classes for parents and children and meetings dedicated to taste education. These initiatives aim to develop a more conscious relationship with food, especially among urban consumers, encouraging them to understand the whole processes: from production to the cultural and environmental aspects, until the realization of the final product. Second, the convivial dimension is emphasized: collective dinners, informal meetings, and cooking parties are organized to create spaces for

¹⁸⁷ WATANABE (Saito) Megumi, “Surōfūdo no kore made...”, cit., p.309

¹⁸⁸ Conviviums / ネットワーク.” Slow Food Nippon, 日本スローフード協会, <https://slowfood-nippon.jp/conviviums/>. Accessed 23/12/2025

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

socializing, where food becomes a medium for connection, exchange, and shared learning, strengthening the sense of community among members.¹⁹⁰

Within the Suginami community, food takes a holistic perspective, in line with founder Carlo Petrini's idea of "looking beyond the plate." Through meetings and discussions, participants are encouraged to understand the food system as a whole, including economic, social, and environmental dynamics at both the local and global levels, thus recognizing Slow Food as an international movement.

Finally, great attention is paid to strengthening cooperation networks, promoting dialogue between generations, genders, and different fields, as well as connecting urban and rural areas, producers and consumers, and even between Japanese and international Slow Food chapters.

3.2.2 – *Slow Food and Food Education*

In addition to protecting products and local areas, Slow Food Japan places particular importance on education, recognizing that it is one of the most effective tools for reformulating contemporary food practices. This vision is the foundation of the Slow Food Education Manifesto, which sees education as a means of promoting flavours and biodiversity, while also conveying the values of social responsibility that should characterize everyday life. Slow Food Japan focuses particularly on children and their families, especially those with urban backgrounds, with the aim of informing first, and then cultivating a deeper, experiential relationship with food. The decision to target younger generations is based on the understanding that taste, eating habits, and the relationship with food are formed at an early age and tend to consolidate over time. In this sense, food education is not intended as the mere



Figure 30 The Ark of Taste - covers for four books
WATANABE (Saito) Megumi, *Surōfūdo no kore made to korekara, Nihon de no hiromari* [Development of Slow Food Movement and Mobilization in Japan], *Nihonchōrikagakukai-shi*, Vol. 55, No. 6, 2022, p.310

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

transmission of nutritional information, but as a cultural and relational process aimed at developing awareness of biodiversity, local areas, and local production practices.¹⁹¹

A significant example of Slow Food Japan's educational commitment is its publishing project for children. The initiative has led to the creation of a series of illustrated books (Fig. 30) developed through a participatory process involving local producers, chefs, conservationists, artists, and local families. As a test case, four local products were selected to create four volumes, each distinct in narrative and illustrative style: *Shottsuru Sandfish* from Akita Prefecture, *Shio-no-Katsuo* from Nishiizu City, Shizuoka Prefecture, *Shiokara Etari* Salted Fish from Nagasaki Prefecture, and *Funeuille* from Ginama, Kunigami Village, Okinawa Prefecture. This project, Watanabe states, embodies all three pillars of Slow Food: it serves as an educational tool to teach children about the importance of biodiversity and the production process, while also offering local producers and activists the opportunity to build valuable connections. Finally, it provides an opportunity for local governments and public institutions to raise awareness about these ingredients.¹⁹²

Another significant example of Slow Food's educational approach is its school lunch programs. In these contexts, schools, food producers, residents, and volunteers worked together to spread among younger generations a special appreciation for food culture and good eating habits. Yashiro Elementary School in Takahata (Yamagata Prefecture) stood out as a pioneer in applying Slow Food principles to school meals as early as 2002. The school is committed to using only fresh food; a typical lunch menu includes rice, milk, carrots, and onions. The results were encouraging from the early stages; according to the teachers, "children now leave much less food on their plates and seem to appreciate it more." Furthermore, direct contact with local producers, the teachers say, has made the children more interested in farming and the origins of the foods they consume daily.¹⁹³

Meanwhile, in Iwata, Shizuoka Prefecture, a nonprofit organization called *Kodomo no Mori* ("Children's Forest") holds cooking classes for children from age five to eleven. The organization's activities echo the association's philosophy, even stating: "Food is the single most important foundation of human life. We should at least have a good idea of where things come from before we put them in our mouths." Thus, the association's members hope to make

¹⁹¹ Slow Food, *Political Introduction to the Slow Food Education Manifesto*, 2010, [slow-food-education_manifesto.pdf](#), Accessed: 27/12/2025

¹⁹² WATANABE (Saito) Megumi, "Surōfūdo no kore made...", cit., p.310

¹⁹³ "The Benefits of Slow Food." *Web-Japan.org*, Cabinet Office and Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Japan, 20 Jan. 2003, [web-japan.org/trends01/article/030120sci_index.html](#). Accessed 27/12/2025.

children more interested in food by involving them in the preparation of rice, miso soup, and other small main dishes.¹⁹⁴

Overall, these initiatives demonstrate how Slow Food Japan's educational commitment is primarily local and community-based, prioritizing concrete and participatory experiences. Although these projects are limited in number, their value lies in their ability to create replicable educational models, in which food becomes a tool for local transmission, strengthening social bonds, and building a more conscious relationship between individuals, local communities, and the environment.

3.3 – An institutional countermeasure: The *Shokuiku* policy

The previous sections analysed the efforts of Slow Food Japan, a socially driven and community-based educational response to changing food habits. However, Japan offers an interesting example of a country that has placed food education at institutional level for decades. It is thanks to the joint collaboration of MAFF, MHLW, the Cabinet Office of the Japanese government, and the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) that the *Shokuiku* campaign was able to see the light of day. This campaign is also supported by several non-profit organizations in the country, such as *Food Action Nippon* (FAN) and *Slow Food Youth Network Tokyo*, associated with the Slow Food movement discussed in the previous subchapter.¹⁹⁵

Shokuiku can be literally translated as “nurturing through food”, highlighting its deeper educational feature – food as a means to cultivate physical health, cultural awareness, social values and long-term dietary habits. However, the term is more commonly translated into English as “food education.”.

The *Basic Law for the Advancement of Shokuiku* was implemented in 2005 and was based on three intellectual pillars: *chiiku* (知育, intellectual education), *tokuiku* (徳育, moral education), and *taiiku* (体育, physical education). The original purpose of the reform was to address several policy issues relating food systems to human health, as stated by the MAFF:

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Stephanie ASSMANN, *Culinary Politics in Japan: The Shokuiku Campaign*, *Gastronomica*, Vol. 17, No. 3 2017, pp. 15-23

“... lack of proper concern for food; an increase in irregular and nutritionally unbalanced meals; a rise in obesity and lifestyle-related diseases; an excessive desire for being slim especially among young females; outbreak of a series of incidents related to food safety; over-dependency on food from abroad; and, loss of traditional food culture in a globalization movement.”¹⁹⁶

Based on this preamble, *Shokuiku* established itself in Japan as an essential element of the daily life of its population. The *Basic Law of Shokuiku* lists the following components, which outline the campaign's mission:

“(1) To promote health in body and mind, as well as enriching human lives; (2) To support greater appreciation for and understanding of diet, including the various roles played by the natural environment and the people who produce, transport, and prepare food; (3) Voluntary movements for the promotion of *Shokuiku* should be developed nationwide; (4) Parents, educators, and daycare providers in particular should actively promote *Shokuiku* among children; (5) Understanding of dietary issues should be reinforced by taking advantage of all available opportunities at home, in schools, in the community, and elsewhere, to offer a variety of food-related experiences and activities; (6) Awareness and appreciation of traditional Japanese food culture as well as the food supply/demand situation should be promoted, and opportunities should be created for interaction between food producers and consumers, in order to revitalize rural farming and fishing regions, and to boost food production in Japan; (7) Appropriate information on food safety should be offered, to help people to eat proper diets.”¹⁹⁷

To achieve these ambitious goals, *Shokuiku* must become a national movement with the joint collaboration of national and local government efforts, as well as close coordination and collaboration among various community-level stakeholders such as schools, nursery schools, workers in the agriculture, forestry, and fisheries industries, food-related businesses, and volunteers. For this reason, the *Basic Law on Shokuiku* (Act No. 63 of 2005) required the government to annually compile a *White Paper on Shokuiku*, which would report on progress on the campaign's “Promotion Policies.” Regarding policies related to a healthy diet, the MAFF and MHLW are further responsible for the *Health Promotion Act and the Basic Law on Shokuiku*, and as such, several “Dietary Guidelines for Japanese” have been compiled to

¹⁹⁶ Catherine L. MAH, *Shokuiku: Governing Food and Public Health in Contemporary Japan*, Journal of Sociology, The Australian Sociological Association, Volume 46(4), 2010, p. 394

¹⁹⁷ KUROTANI K and SHINSUGI C., *Promotion of Shokuiku (Food and nutrition education) - Lessons learned from Japanese context*, Vigo: Organización de Productores de Pesca Fresca del Puerto de Vigo, 2019, p. 1

provide clear guidelines to the Japanese population regarding, among other things, the recommended daily serving for each food group.¹⁹⁸

Shokuiku promotion extends beyond the institutional level, including the home and schools (including nursery schools) as sites of practical intervention. *Shokuiku* promotion at home begins with campaigns such as “Early to bed, early to rise, don’t forget your breakfast”, implemented by MEXT and aimed at improving understanding of basic lifestyle habits for children. It continues with the nutritional guidelines developed by MHLW, such as “The Dietary Guidelines for Pregnant and Lactating Women,” “The Meal Delivery Guidelines at Child Welfare Facilities,” and many others. These guidelines aim to empower families, paediatricians, dieticians, and schoolteachers. Under the School Education Law and the School Lunch Law implemented by MEXT, teachers in elementary and junior high schools are encouraged to teach children the importance of a balanced diet for healthy development and take care to create school lunches with proven nutritional requirements given that – according to 2016 data – 99.2% of elementary schools and 89.0% of junior high schools were responsible for providing meals to their students daily. These schools are also encouraged to favour local products and to practice the basic concepts of environmental conservation movement: reduce, reuse, recycle (3Rs).¹⁹⁹

Shokuiku promotion also takes place at the community level through collaboration between public institutions, local governments, and private actors. Within the framework of *Health Japan 21 (second term)*, the MHLW promotes *Smart Life* projects, encouraging businesses to participate in food education as part of their CSR. These efforts also include nationwide dietary improvement campaigns that emphasize a “tasty, well-balanced meal” through messages such as “Plus one vegetable dish every day,” “Minus two grams of salt per day,” and “200 grams of fruit every day.” These initiatives illustrate how institutional dietary guidelines are translated into concrete, easily communicable practices. (Fig. 31).²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁸ Ibid. p. 12

¹⁹⁹ Ibid. p. 17

²⁰⁰ Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF), *Policies for the Promotion of Shokuiku (White Paper on Shokuiku)*, Government of Japan, 2018, [index-172.pdf](#), Accessed: 28/12/2025



Figure 31 Diet improvement campaigns including: “Plus one vegetable dish every day”, “Minus two grams of Salt per Day” and “with milk, for daily life”, MAFF, 2019

All of these policies and promotional activities reveal the core of the *Shokuiku* reform, which lies in the revaluation of traditional food habits. Within the institutional discourse, in fact, *washoku* is framed not only as a cultural heritage to be preserved, but also as an example for everyday eating practices. As previously stated, MAFF—within its *Shokuiku* initiatives—is engaged in numerous initiatives to pass *washoku* culture on to the next generation. One of these, the *National Washoku Championship for Children*, represents a creative opportunity to teach elementary school children about event foods and local dishes through an illustration competition.

Finally, noteworthy is the “Let’s Wa-Gohan” project, which represents the concrete transposition of *washoku* ideals into everyday practices through *Shokuiku*’s policy. Its goal is to enhance opportunities for children (whose palate will shape future food preferences) to experience Japanese cuisine in a familiar and convenient manner. Particularly, the project encourages businesses (food manufacturers, distributors, meal prep/restaurant operators, recipe site operators, and kitchen appliance manufacturers) to develop and sell products and services to expand the opportunities for children with busy parents to eat healthy Japanese food, focusing on the key words “familiar” and “easy”.²⁰¹



Figure 32 “Let’s Wa-Gohan” logo, MAFF, 2018

Shokuiku is a multifaceted reality that can be interpreted metaphorically as a large tree that can only grow in a healthy and balanced way through the combined efforts of multiple actors. Only through this shared commitment can *Shokuiku* develop flourishing “leaves” that encompass a wide range of positive outcomes. As illustrated in Figure 33, these include

²⁰¹ KOMIYA, “Washoku bunka no hogo”, cit., pp. 243

sociability and eating together, the maintenance of both physical and mental well-being, an understanding and enjoyment of the importance of meals, the ability to choose healthy foods and prepare them appropriately, as well as an awareness of Japanese food traditions and their transmission to others. At the core of this process lies a fundamental value: thankfulness, which connects food, people, and everyday life.

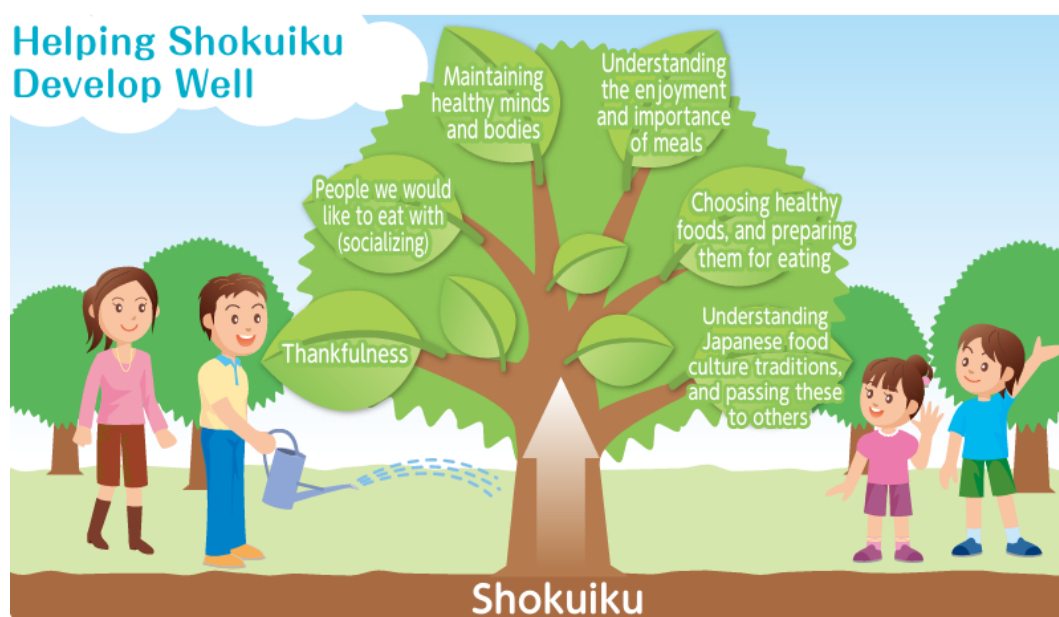


Figure 33 *Helping Shokuiku Develop Well* illustratory tree.
 “Shokuiku Guide.” Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF), Government of Japan,
www.maff.go.jp/j/syokuiku/guide/pdf/00_en_guide.pdf. Accessed 28/12/2025

3.3.1 – Japanese Food Guide Spinning Top

In December 2004 MHLW and MAFF collaborated to form a “Food Guide Committee” composed of 15 experts from nutrition science, food businesses, consumer organizations, and the media. The goal of this committee was to create an easy-to-understand tool that could help the Japanese population practice a healthy diet. The need for such a tool arose from the fact that only 22.3% of the public fully understood the “Dietary Guidelines for Japanese” released in 2000. Thus, the *Japanese Food Guide Spinning Top* was born (figure 34).

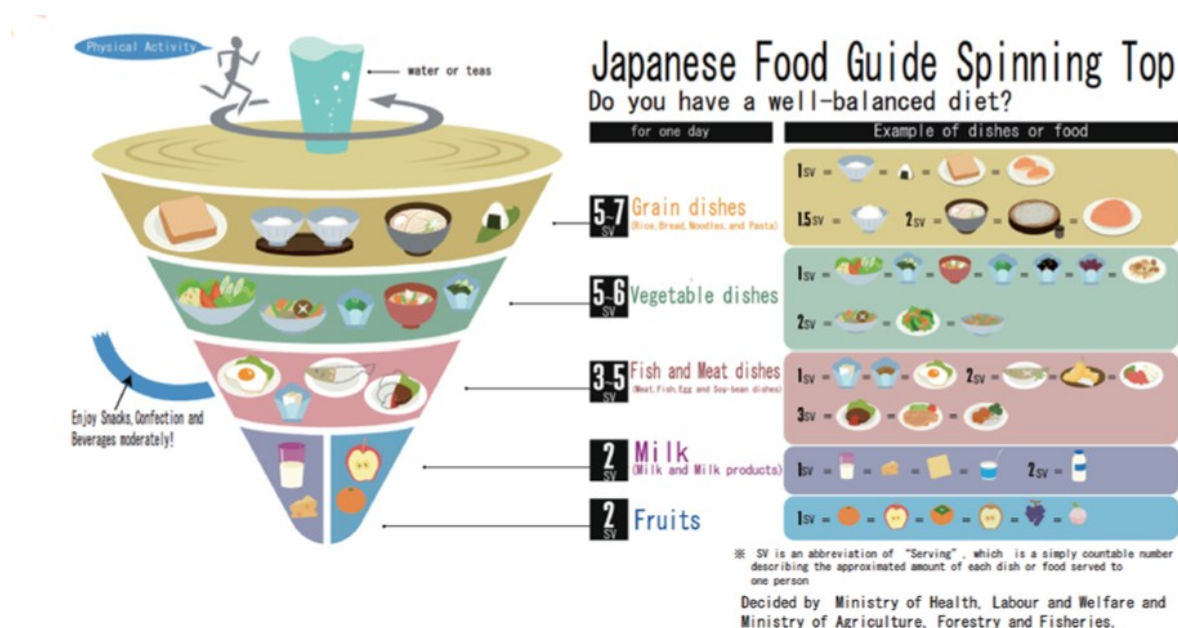


Figure 34 Japanese Food Guide Spinning Top

Source: KUROTANI K and SHINSUGI C., Promotion of Shokuiku (Food and nutrition education) - Lessons learned from Japanese context, Vigo: Organización de Productores de Pesca Fresca del Puerto de Vigo, 2019, p. 24

The chosen illustration is an inverted cone, inspired by the traditional Japanese spinning top, divided into categories: grains, vegetables, fish and meat, and – at the base – milk and fruits. The metaphor behind this illustration aims to highlight the importance of creating balance within daily meals, while its dynamic movement symbolizes the key role physical activity plays in maintaining a long-term healthy life. Water and tea form the axis of this spinning top, symbolizing their essential role in the diet; conversely, snacks, sweets, and other beverages are represented by the thread that starts the movement, thus conveying the message of consuming them in moderation.²⁰²

Unlike international food guides, the Japanese one also provides the recommended daily intake in the form of meals (rather than individual ingredients), making it easier for consumers to understand. The guide contains several examples of portions and meals, making it easier for individuals to balance their overall daily intake. According to this guideline, an adult should consume an average of approximately 2,200 kcal per day; however, information can be found depending on the individual's age, gender, and physical activity level.²⁰³

Thanks to recent studies on the association between adherence to the Food Guide and its health outcomes, it was possible to assess the scientific evidence of the initiative.

²⁰² KUROTANI K and SHINSUGI C., "Promotion of Shokuiku", cit., p. 23-24

²⁰³ Ibid. p. 25

Kurotani et al., at the Japanese Public Health Center, conducted a prospective study to investigate the adherence to the Food Guide Spinning Top among more than 79,000 adults (aged 45-75) with no particular history of chronic diseases, to assess the possibility of reducing mortality risk. Adherence to the Food Guide was assessed using surveys and official registries. The results of this research reported that higher adherence to the guide is associated with a reduced risk of all-cause mortality and cardiovascular disease. These findings, therefore, suggest that a balanced dietary pattern could be of great help in supporting the longevity of the Japanese population.²⁰⁴

3.3.2 – Outcomes of Shokuiku

As demonstrated in the previous subchapters, *Shokuiku* is implemented through policies, guidelines, and promotional initiatives that involve a wide range of stakeholders, from national institutions to local governments, educational settings, communities, and households. However, without analysing the concrete results of this policy, it is not possible to assess its true utility. For this reason, the following section presents several case studies conducted by Japanese researchers who have worked to demonstrate the concrete utility of the reform on dietary behaviours, health awareness, and food-related practices among primary school students and adults.

- ***Results in primary and junior-high schools***

In 2011, Nutrition education experts Tomoko Noma, Kanako Uchida, and Katsuyuki Yamasaki conducted a study of forty-five third graders from two elementary schools in Tokushima Prefecture. Over the course of six weeks, the students were evaluated using surveys that studied the evolution of their self-monitoring, cognitive, emotional, and behavioural characteristics toward their eating habits. Questions included: “Do you know your current eating habits?”, “Do you know what healthy eating habits are?”, “Are you able to make an effort to set your own goals and improve your eating habits?”.²⁰⁵

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.* p. 26

²⁰⁵ Tomoko NOMA, Kanako UCHIDA and Katsuyuki YAMASAKI, *Development of a Shokuiku Program for Elementary School Children and Evaluation of its Intervention Effects*, Journal of the Japanese Society for Food Education, Vol. 9, No. 1, 2015. pp. 54-56

Over the weeks, the students learned about their eating habits and began to identify potential problems that could be changed through constructive discussion with their groupmates. Furthermore, educational storytelling and visual tools were helpful in improving motivation and understanding of the relationship between eating habits and lifestyle-related diseases.²⁰⁶

The objectives set for this study were three: (1) self-monitoring of one's own eating habits, (2) developing knowledge on the relationship between health and eating habits, (3) controlling one's emotions and behaviours. Therefore, the results obtained from the statistical analyses of this study reveal an effective improvement in the self-monitoring and cognitive, emotional and behavioural characteristics of the students. In fact, they demonstrated to be more aware of their own health and how their personal diet can influence it.²⁰⁷

However, these improvements did not immediately translate into significant behavioural changes (such as a reduction in snacking). Therefore, it is possible to understand how short-term interventions are not sufficient to obtain significant changes. The study also highlights the crucial role that the family environment plays without the intervention and involvement of parents or caregivers, there are limited behavioural changes. The researchers conclude that the entire family should be involved in *Shokuiku* programs, and that these should start from the first years of primary school to obtain effective behavioural and lifestyle results.²⁰⁸

It is in light of these limitations that the need to find longer-term solutions emerges, capable of promoting ongoing and structured nutrition education. Thus, in 2005 (concurrent with the institutionalisation of *Shokuiku*), the *Diet and Nutrition Teacher system* was born. This system consists of appointing professionals, called school nutritionists, who are responsible for a wide range of tasks, such as: organizing and planning school menus; monitoring hygiene standards in food preparation and distribution; educating students on desirable diets; and fostering ties between relatives and local communities through school lunches. Specifically, these professionals manage dietary education issues in collaboration with families, teachers, school doctors or dentists, and other nutrition experts.²⁰⁹

In 2018, approximately 6,324 school nutritionists were deployed nationwide. According to MEXT data, positive results are being seen in schools where these professionals were present; however, the problem of personnel shortages persists. If this critical issue is resolved in the

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.* pp. 61-62

²⁰⁹ KUROTANI K and SHINSUGI C., “*Promotion of Shokuiku*”, *cit.*, p. 37-38

coming years, then MEXT's mission of "positioning Diet and Nutrition Teachers at the heart of future Shokuiku in Schools" will be accomplished.²¹⁰

- ***Results and struggles in adulthood***

Despite the active implementation of *Shokuiku* and school nutritionists in primary schools, national data show that young adults are the group with the lowest adherence to well-balanced meals (staple + main dish + side dishes). This gap is particularly evident in the 20-29 age group and, especially, among university students. Within this group, there is also an escalation in habits such as skipping breakfast, eating out, consuming ready-to-eat foods, and irregular lifestyles.²¹¹

Scholars Etsuko Kibayashi and Makiko Nakade conducted a study to analyse the relationship between *Shokuiku* lessons learned during childhood and current lifestyle behaviours—such as bedtime, snacking, and eating out. Through surveys regarding current eating and lifestyle behaviours, indicators of school *Shokuiku* were derived and compared between students living alone and students living with their families. The study's main findings highlight the effectiveness of *Shokuiku* during the school years, allowing students to maintain a well-balanced diet even at university.²¹²

However, these positive effects are often hindered by compromising lifestyle factors. Students living alone tend to have a late bedtime, often rely on ready-to-eat foods, and end up skipping breakfast; on the other hand, students living with their families tend to consume more late-night snacks. The researchers therefore argue that *Shokuiku* appears to strengthen self-efficiency, awareness, and nutritional skills, but this alone is not sufficient to counteract the growing environmental pressures, economic constraints, and lifestyle typical of the transition to adulthood. In the long run, *Shokuiku* represents a significant cognitive and motivational trait that, unfortunately, without institutional continuity and environmental support, tends to weaken with the transition to adulthood.²¹³

This theory is reinforced by research conducted by scholars Mizuki Kuwahara and Wonsub Eum, which aimed to establish a link between the food education experiences received during childhood and adolescence and eating behaviours in adulthood. The results of this

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ KIBAYASHI, E.; NAKADE, M. *Associations between Shokuiku during School Years, Well-Balanced Diets, and Eating and Lifestyle Behaviours in Japanese Females Enrolled in a University Registered Dietitian Course*, *Nutrients*, 16, 484. 2024. pp. 2-3

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ Ibid. pp. 8-9

research show how *Shokuiku* experiences in childhood have had a positive influence, even many years later, on the lives of Japanese people, who now have a greater interest in nutritional education and are more likely to eat nutritionally balanced meals.²¹⁴

However, it's important to note that this study found mixed results. Indeed, in adulthood, eating behaviours are influenced by structural and contextual factors such as working hours, economic conditions, and family composition. Therefore, *Shokuiku* does not in itself guarantee optimal eating practices in the long term, but it acts as an effective cognitive and value-building foundation.²¹⁵ Therefore, without continuous social and institutional support, this educational remnant risks being undermined. This reinforces the idea that *Shokuiku* should be conceived not as an intervention limited to childhood, but as an educational process that accompanies the individual throughout their whole life.

²¹⁴ KUWAHARA, M.; EUM, W., *Effects of Childhood Nutrition Education from School and Family on Eating Habits of Japanese Adults*, *Nutrients*, 14, 2517, 2022. pp. 8-10

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*

CHAPTER 4 –

Research

4.1 – Analytical Framework

To move beyond the simple study of individual attitudes or isolated behaviours, this study adopts Social Practice Theory (SPT) as its main analytical framework, allowing it to examine how shared routines and activities shape daily lives and societies. SPT, however, is not a single framework but rather a collection of different approaches rooted in the 19th and 20th centuries. Scholars such as Karl Marx and Martin Heidegger were the first to argue that human actions do not arise from nothing but are deeply connected to the social and material context in which we live.²¹⁶

Later, scholars such as Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens expanded this idea by introducing concepts such as *habitus* (a concept that states that habits are not individual's matters as they are influenced by social and cultural environment in which we grow up) and the circularity of social practices. On the one hand, they are influenced by society's rules and structures, and on the other, they also contribute to maintaining or changing them. With the arrival of the 21st century, SPT was gradually associated with concepts such as sustainable consumption and public health. Today, the theory has become an excellent lens through which to explore how it is possible to change such practices in order to promote more sustainable lifestyles.²¹⁷

As demonstrated by scholar Schatzki, numerous theories of practice have emerged over time, focusing on different aspects. To clarify this plurality of theories, Rechwitz identified the elements they had in common. In particular, he emphasized the importance of rules and social expectations in the analysis of human practices and highlighted the importance of material elements within social life. A social practice, in fact, can be interpreted as a set of actions shaped by shared knowledge, rules, and specific social structures.

²¹⁶ Mary GREENE, *Social Practice Theory*, in *Vocabulary for Sustainable Consumption and Lifestyles: A Language for Our Common Future*, Routledge, 1st edition, 2020. p. 106

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*

Starting from Rechwitz's ideas, scholars such as Shove, Pantzar, and Watson further explored these practices. According to them, to understand the relationship between individuals and social life, it is necessary to analyse practices as combinations of three key elements:

- **Materials**, meaning objects, technologies, and everything physically used;
- **Competencies**, which include skills, practical knowledge, and techniques;
- **Meanings**, meaning the values, ideas, and symbolic aspirations linked to that practice.

By analysing these three elements, SPT aims to connect society's structures with people's daily actions, using practices as a connecting point. Using these three elements would therefore allow us to grasp both the repetitive and changing aspects of social life. This approach makes it possible to understand how new practices arise, how existing ones are maintained, and, finally, how they change in response to various pressures (e.g., the introduction of new technologies or new policies).²¹⁸ Finally, the analysis of such practices also allows us to understand large-scale phenomena, since, by repeating themselves over time, they end up influencing broader social, economic and political processes.²¹⁹

• *Application of the Theory*

Social Practice Theory (SPT) is adopted in this study as a useful tool for grasping the complexity of contemporary food practices. The daily practices of individuals, understood as subjects embedded within numerous social structures and pressures, are analysed to conduct a social analysis. In other words, food practices are considered as a configuration of the dynamics of materials, skills, and meanings that drive the reproduction and transformation of lifestyles.

In this research, these elements are considered to understand how they manifest and interact in the daily experiences of university students. In doing so, the aim is to observe how the educational context can influence their evolution.

In this study, materials refer to the physical objects used in practices, the infrastructures and technologies that facilitate or limit certain actions. This study's surveys, therefore, through questions regarding access to a suitable kitchen, the time available for cooking, the types of meals consumed, and students' daily living conditions, allows us to understand how food

²¹⁸ Mena MESENHÖLLER, *Exploring the application of Social Practice Theory in technology-related research: A state of the art literature review*, Energy Research & Social Science, Elsevier, 126, 2025. p. 2

²¹⁹ GREENE, "Social Practice Theory...", cit., pp. 106-107

practices are not simply the result of individual choices, but are the product of material constraints and opportunities. Within the qualitative interview, the material dimension is addressed indirectly through reflection on the institutional and infrastructural context in which gastronomic education is inserted.

Skills, within the research, are closely linked to individuals' *food literacy* – as theoretical knowledge, and as the ability to apply these skills in everyday life's decision and practices. The survey includes questions regarding students' academic backgrounds, their perception of their role as professionals in the sector, and the role of the university in training them in this regard. This allows us to observe how academic knowledge is translated into concrete practices. Furthermore, the interview delves deeper, offering an institutional perspective on how skills are designed, transmitted, and valued within the program.

Finally, the meanings include conceptions of “eating well,” ideas of sustainability, and individual and collective responsibility. The survey, through questions related to the perception of food sustainability and the tensions between what they consider sustainable and what they practice daily, allows us to explore the attitudes (and the conflicts) that characterise the daily practices of young students. Furthermore, the interview allows us to better comprehend – through the teacher's perspective – the significance of gastronomic education and the changes in food practices in the context of globalisation.

The use of SPT, therefore, allows us to analyse the gap between knowledge of sustainability and daily practices, interpreted not as an individual contradiction, but as the result of the interaction between different elements – materials, skills, and meanings –that structure the practices themselves and influence individuals' possibilities for action.

4.2 – Research Methodology

- ***Research objectives***

This thesis aims to explore the relationship between food literacy and actual eating behaviours within the university environment, using the “Gastronomy Management” program at Ritsumeikan University in Kyōto as a case study. The choice of this program stems from its interdisciplinary structure, which integrates key concepts such as sustainability, food education, and cultural heritage, on the one hand, and economics, science, and culture on the other. This integration makes the program a suitable context for examining how sustainability-oriented knowledge can (or cannot) be translated into everyday practices.

The choice of the university as the context for analysis is justified by several factors. First, it is a non-compulsory educational institution that, therefore, does not impose behaviours but rather cultivates the autonomy and individual responsibility of its students. Second, the university is the first place where the typical pressures of adult life (such as time, money, and work management) begin to manifest themselves, even though individuals are not yet fully integrated into the workforce. In fact, it is the point at which the logic of capitalism begins to penetrate the daily lives of young people, also influencing their food choices. Finally, studying the university environment allows us to observe a relatively homogeneous group of individuals with similar educational backgrounds, thus reducing overly broad structural variables. Therefore, this study aims to examine the extent to which a high level of food literacy can contribute to sustainable consumption behaviours when students are immersed in the aforementioned dynamics of capitalist society.

Furthermore, this study aims to analyse how students enrolled in the Gastronomy Management program interpret their roles as future professionals who will soon enter the food and beverage sector. In this way, this study will attempt to understand how higher education can contribute to transforming food systems as a production of knowledge, and also as a precious tool for training professionals capable of mediating between sustainability, the market, and consumer demand.

This study is part of an already vibrant research landscape, which focuses largely on the early stages of life, particularly in preschools and elementary schools. Numerous studies have demonstrated that nutrition education during childhood contributes to improving multiple factors, such as food literacy, health awareness, and the attitude toward a balanced diet.²²⁰ Therefore, the importance of higher education as a systemic catalyst in training both responsible consumers and future professionals capable of influencing food systems is still understudied. Focusing on this academic gap, the following research aims to examine the discrepancy between food literacy and actual eating behaviours during a transitional phase of life in which acquired knowledge is confronted with contemporary economic and social logics.

²²⁰ NOMA, UCHIDA and YAMASAKI, “Development of a Shokuiku Program”, cit., pp. 54-56

- ***Research questions***

In order to address the gap identified in the existing literature, which focuses on early-stage food education, this research proposal aims to answer the following questions:

Q1. How does higher education shape students' food awareness, and to what extent does food literacy translate into everyday eating practices under the constraints of university life?

Q2. How do students enrolled in Gastronomy Management perceive their role as future professionals in relation to sustainable food systems?

These questions aim to focus on an exploratory and analytical approach rather than a normative one, to understand the tension that exists between the acquisition of knowledge and actual practices within the socio-economic conditions of contemporary capitalism.

- ***Methodological approach***

In order to answer these questions, a mixed-method approach is the best way to obtain both qualitative and quantitative data. Moreover, the integration component will allow for a deeper, holistic understanding of the topic through the analysis, interrelation, and comparison of data from the two different study methods.²²¹ In particular, the qualitative analysis will precede quantitative data in order to contextualise students' eating practices within the institutional and educational framework in which they are embedded.

Qualitative methods are employed to explore how sustainability and food education are framed within the Gastronomy Management program at Ritsumeikan University. This qualitative analysis will be divided into two parts: the first will be a document analysis conducted using the information available on the English and Japanese websites for the course. The analysis will highlight possible differences in communicating information, framing values and emphasizing sustainability. The second part will consist of semi-structured interview with the chief of faculty to permit a further exploration of institutional intentions, educational priorities, and perceived challenges. Letting the participant freely elaborate on his perspectives and experiences a structured framework will be provided.²²²

²²¹ Courtney A. McKIM, *The Value of Mixed Methods Research: A Mixed Methods Study*, Journal of Mixed Methods Research, Vol. 1, 2, 2017, pp. 202–222

²²² H KALLIO, A PIETILA, M JOHNSON and M KANGASNIEMI, *Systematic methodological review : developing a framework for a qualitative semi-structured interview guide*, Journal Of Advanced Nursing, Blackwell Publishing, 2016. pp. 1-10

Quantitative methods are used to research students' food literacy and eating behaviours through the administration of a survey. This survey will be distributed to students enrolled in the Gastronomy Management course. The survey will include short-answer questions, closed-ended questions, and Likert scale items to facilitate quantitative analysis; furthermore, it will be conducted online to simplify data collection and facilitate reaching the selected target audience.

Finally, a triangulation strategy will be applied, combining the qualitative findings from interviews and document analysis with the quantitative results obtained from the survey, enabling in-depth exploration of institutional food education, students' perceptions, and everyday eating practices, strengthening the analytical depth and validity of the research.

- ***Sampling strategy***

For the purposes of this research, the choice of target population is of fundamental importance. In order to answer the research questions and achieve the objectives set, this research aims to undertake an in-depth study that focuses on a small number of cases selected for a particular purpose (*purposive sampling*).²²³ For this reason, students enrolled in the Gastronomy Management degree programme were identified as the target population. However, given the difficulty of accessing the target population due to the researcher's physical and time constraints, a limited sample will be considered.

Although purposive sampling cannot be considered statistically representative for the analysis of a wider population, this choice was made to specifically collect information-rich cases.²²⁴

Another factor that was taken into consideration when selecting the reference population is the *homogeneous sampling*²²⁵, with the aim of focusing on a particular subgroup in which members share similar characteristics. In this case, the study deals with students of very similar ages (between 18 and 26), who are enrolled in the same degree course (Gastronomy Management) and who presumably share the same interests in the subjects studied.

After identifying the research sample, the most appropriate sampling techniques for this case study were defined. The first technique adopted was convenience sampling (or *availability*

²²³ SAUNDERS, M., LEWIS, P., & THORNHILL, A., *Research methods for business students*, 5th ed., Pearson Education, 2009. p. 323

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ Ibid. p. 321

sampling)²²⁶, which made it possible to carry out qualitative research with ease: the chief of faculty, whom the researcher previously knew, agreed to contribute to the research by participating in an interview. Afterwards, the main technique was employed: the *snowball sampling*²²⁷: the interviewee was asked to contribute by sharing the survey with his students first, and then with his colleagues' students. As a result, a sample of 47 respondents was obtained to carry out the quantitative analysis for the thesis.

4.3 – Qualitative research and analysis

- *Case Study Background*

As already mentioned, the case study selected for this research is the College of Gastronomy Management at Ritsumeikan University, a relatively recent and, at the same time, unique institution in the Japanese academic landscape. The course was established in 2018, following a long process of planning and institutional mediation, and is currently the first – and still the only – university programme in Japan to adopt a “comprehensive” and interdisciplinary approach to the study of food. In the past, several more traditional courses focused exclusively on nutrition or home economics, as stated by interviewee Masayoshi Ishida. Therefore, as will be explored in more detail in the following sections, this course aims to integrate cultural, managerial, technological and social perspectives into a single course of study.

Due to these characteristics, the College of Gastronomy Management is not a “typical” case; on the contrary, it is a programme strongly oriented towards the conceptual reinterpretation of food and its role in contemporary society. Precisely because of these peculiarities, the researcher believes that she can identify a particularly fertile context within this programme and among its students.

The latter, indeed, represent a particularly relevant group for investigating the relationship between university education, food awareness and daily practices.

As will be discussed later in the quantitative analysis of the survey, hypotheses such as the presence of high food literacy among students and its potential translation into more sustainable behaviours will be compared with the structural tensions that condition its effective implementation in everyday life. It is precisely within this “ideal” context – and its

²²⁶ Ibid. p. 324

²²⁷ Ibid. p. 323

contradictions – that the tensions between knowledge, institutional values and material conditions emerge most clearly, leading the researcher to undertake this study.

4.3.1 – Document Analysis

- ***Purposes, design and conduction***

Within qualitative case studies, document analysis is a useful tool for producing rich descriptions of a single phenomenon, event or programme.²²⁸ There are several reasons why this research method was chosen for this study.

Firstly, documents can help to outline the context in which the research is developed. In other words, documents provide background information useful to the researcher in understanding the historical and ideological roots of their case study. Furthermore, document analysis is useful for enriching the data from the main research.

Through document analysis, it is possible to trace the changes and developments of the phenomena studied, therefore, comparing them is essential to highlight their nuances. Finally, document analysis is essential to verify the findings obtained from other research methods. Therefore, triangulation (the combination of methodologies for analysing the same phenomenon) will be a fundamental element in summarising the research.²²⁹

For the purposes of this research, the documents selected for the analysis consist of institutional materials related to Ritsumeikan University's Gastronomy Management programme: the faculty's official website in English and Japanese.

The reason for choosing these is that they represent the official discourse through which the university outlines its educational and pedagogical objectives and the possible outcomes for its students. These documents are approached as useful background information for understanding the meanings that the university attaches to food, sustainability and professional responsibilities.

The decision to include both the Japanese and English versions of the faculty website was based on several reasons. Firstly, it allows us to examine how the programme is presented domestically, and which characteristics are given particular emphasis; secondly, it allows us to observe how the programme positions itself within an international framework and, therefore,

²²⁸ Glenn A. BOWEN, Document Analysis as a Qualitative Research Method, *Qualitative Research Journal*, vol. 9, no. 2, pp. 29

²²⁹ Ibid p. 30

which values are highlighted. This comparison is also important for understanding what kind of narratives are used to create (or not) expectations for its students as future professionals in the field of food and beverage.

- *Analysis*

Institutional framing of food and sustainability

From the very first screen, the faculty's principles and values are highlighted. In particular, the Japanese website does present its educational offerings, while attempting to outline the moral and symbolic nature of food. Food is not interpreted as a mere technical skill, but as a true social and value-based practice. In fact, the faculty's concept echoes the phrases: "Through food, we seek answers to the questions in the world" 「食を通じて、世の中のあらゆる問いに答えを求めようとしています」 and "food has the potential to greatly change the world" 「世界を大きく変える可能性を秘めています」.²³⁰ Therefore, the course places food as a real lever for social transformation, a frame that has the potential to shape the expectations that its students build around food and their future role. Gastronomy, as Dean of College Masayoshi Ishida states through Brillat Savarin's notion of "Physiologie du goût", is an interdisciplinary field covering all areas of social relevance, from history, physics, chemistry and culinary arts to commerce and economics.²³¹ It is in this concept that the values and *meanings* (to borrow from SPT theory) that the faculty intends to promote reside.

Through this brief analysis, it is possible to begin to piece together the picture that will later help us answer the questions: "How can the university shape its students' food awareness?" and, above all, allow us to understand the tension that exists between the ideals and expectations of its students and their real-life practices.

²³⁰ Ritsumeikan University: Faculty of Gastronomy Management, *Faculty Concept*, <https://www.ritsumei.ac.jp/gast/concept/> Accessed: 30/01/2026

立命館大学「食マネジメント学部」、学部コンセプト

²³¹ Ritsumeikan University: Faculty of Gastronomy Management, *Message*, <https://www.ritsumei.ac.jp/gast/message/> Accessed: 30/01/2026

立命館大学「食マネジメント学部」、学部長メッセージ

Competences and materials promoted by the programme

Both the English and Japanese websites present the course as a rich interdisciplinary platform with a strong international outlook. The structure aims to highlight the multiple approaches that can be taken to food studies, or food science, as an integration of three key aspects: management, culture and technology.

It is important to note that rather than treating food as a simple technical and economic object, this framework aims to position food as a complex social system: by combining an economic and managerial basis with cultural, historical and technical approaches, the programme seeks to equip its students with the skills necessary to address and interpret contemporary food-related issues in a holistic manner. Furthermore, it encourages students to not interpret food merely as a market commodity, but also as a historical, geographical and social resource. Therefore, food-related knowledge is not produced in isolated compartments, but is connected to different fields of study.²³²



Figure 35 Faculty's three academic fields intersection

Source: Ritsumeikan University, *Field of Study, Fields of study* | *College of Gastronomy Management* | Ritsumeikan University Accessed: 10/02/2026

²³² Ritsumeikan University, To learn about food, <https://www.ritsumei.ac.jp/gast/feature/fields/> Accessed: 30/01/2026

Figure 35, therefore, shows the graphic representation found on the faculty's official websites (English and Japanese), which clearly and simply illustrates the three areas of interest of the programme. Specifically, the "Management & Economics" area aims to teach its students "how to supply and consume food in a sustainable and effective way"²³³ through the study of supply chain mechanisms and food consumption in a globalised society, as well as the role of local regions. Some of the subjects in this section include Food Design Management, Distribution Management and International Economics.

The "Culture & Humanities" area poses a question to its students "what have we eaten throughout history and what are we having today?"²³⁴. To answer this question, through subjects such as geography of food, students study eating behaviours in Japan and overseas from cultural, geographical and historical perspectives in order to build a diverse and in-depth picture of gastronomy. Finally, the "Science & Technology" area asks the question "how do we perceive taste and safety?" with the aim of looking into food from sensory evaluation aspects, cognition, nutrition and culinary science.

But how is this theoretical knowledge put into practice? It takes shape in practical terms through educational spaces where it is possible to gain experience. Cooking practices, sensory evaluation and experimental observation are all elements that encourage them to interpret and understand food systems also in a sensorial manner; to look into food-related behaviour, preferences and biological effects through scientific methods. The concepts of sustainability and SDGs are also mentioned in the training programme. In the so-called environmental training rooms, sustainability objectives are translated into practice through activities such as food waste composting and various environmental assessments.²³⁵

In short, all these elements suggest that the faculty is committed to also train practical skills in environmental awareness and food literacy. Within the SPT, these elements translate into the *materials* and *competences* that form the actors in the case study of this thesis. Therefore, it is interesting to investigate the possible existence of a gap between material skills (provided by the university) and the practical-structural reality that characterises the daily life of students. These aspects will be analysed in the sections below.

²³³ Ritsumeikan University, Field of Study, [Fields of study | College of Gastronomy Management | Ritsumeikan University](#) Accessed: 10/02//2026

²³⁴ Ibid

²³⁵ Ritsumeikan University, Facilities and Equipment, <https://www.ritsumei.ac.jp/gast/feature/facility/> Accessed: 30/01/2026

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Construction of professional identities

One final important factor that emerges from the faculty's website is the way in which it is committed to offering its students models of identity that are useful for building their professional paths, motivating them and highlighting their social role. The faculty provides several aspirational paths from which its students can choose a variety of subjects to pursue their desires: whether it is building a society where food is more accessible, revitalising local communities through food, or exporting Japanese know-how and gastronomy abroad.²³⁶

What emerged from the content analysis of the website was the stated goal of training conscious consumers capable of reconciling individual and collective sustainability. However, the coexistence of a wide range of promoted competences, meanings, and material resources raises questions about how such ideals are internalised and translated into everyday practices. Therefore, in the following sections, through interviews and surveys, the researcher will attempt to examine the gap between institutional narratives and concrete experiences.

4.3.2 - Interview

- *Structure*

The interview conducted for the purposes of this research involved the participation of Masayoshi Ishida, Dean of Faculty and professor of Gastronomy Management at Ritsumeikan University. The researcher had the honour of meeting the professor during one of his speeches at the Italian pavilion at Expo Osaka 2025, where the professor briefly introduced the objectives and goals of his faculty to the public. Subsequently, the professor agreed to participate in the interview. The interviewee was therefore approached both as an institutional actor and as an intellectual figure, whose persona is closely linked to the development of food-related discourse in Japan.

Prior to the interview, the interviewee received an informed consent form containing a brief explanation of the research project, consent to record the interview, and all the rules regarding the use of the data obtained from it.

The interview lasted about an hour and was structured in a semi-structured format, allowing the interviewee to speak freely while maintaining a structured outline based on the

²³⁶ Ritsumeikan University, What you'll learn, <https://www.ritsumei.ac.jp/gast/can/learn/> Accessed: 30/01/2026
立命館大学「食マネジメント学部」、学べること

topics of the questions. The interview was conducted using the Zoom platform and, at the interviewee's preference, was conducted in Italian.

To ensure content validity, the questions were sent in advance to the thesis supervisor, who analysed them and provided suggestions and corrections to ensure the smooth running of the interview and refine the collection of information.

The questions were divided into three thematic clusters inspired by Social Practice Theory (SPT) with the aim of analysing meanings, competences and materials at both the institutional and pedagogical levels. Below are the questions developed by the researcher::

1. Meanings: Coming from humanistic studies, how did you find yourself in the world of Slow Food in Italy? What drove you to create the Slow Food Japan movement? What kind of atmosphere was there in Japan at the time? What goals did you set? How do the three fields (Management & Economics, Culture & Humanities, Science & Technology) intertwine with each other?

The questions in this section aim to explore the values and ideology underpinning the Faculty of Gastronomy Management, starting with the interviewee's academic background and subsequent involvement with the Slow Food Italia movement. These questions were designed to identify how sustainability, social change and related challenges are incorporated into the programme.

2. Competences: Tell me about your department. What are its goals? How is it different from other departments? Who helped you with this project? Subjects – What do you want your students to gain from them? What teaching method do you believe in? Do you think Shokuiku policies are a good countermeasure to this trend (hōshoku)?

This cluster of questions focuses on the educational objectives of the programme, with particular attention to the skills and competences it aims to instil in its students. This section aims to clarify the level of food literacy and critical thinking that is expected to be achieved through this programme. Finally, by mentioning topics such as hōshoku and Shokuiku policies, the researcher seek to understand how an institutional body such as the university positions itself within this complex framework, and how skills can be transformed into professional and everyday practices.

3. Materials: Were there any difficulties with this project? Why? Do you think modern lifestyles influence the eating habits of Japanese people, especially young people?

This last cluster seeks to lay the foundations for analysing the gap between skills and external constraints. After an initial question on institutional difficulties, it seeks to address

broader material arrangements such as time constraints, lifestyle pressures, and organisational challenges. In this way, it aims to contextualise the educational programme within contemporary Japanese reality.

- *Analysis*

The interview conducted with Professor and Dean of College Masayoshi Ishida was a valuable resource for understanding the institutional, cultural and epistemological meanings attributed to gastronomy as a field of knowledge, as well as for interpreting the practices that emerged from the survey data. Given the qualitative and interpretative nature of the research, findings are presented and discussed through thematic analysis, allowing the interview to function as an analytical framework rather than as an isolated testimony.

One of the first themes to emerge from this interview concerns the historical and cultural marginalisation of gastronomy as a field of knowledge. Professor Ishida uses traditional philosophy, through Platonic thought, this concept: according to Platonic thought, in effect, the material dimension of human life, miserable and secondary, is subordinate to the spiritual and intellectual dimension, as it is the one that comes closest to the ideal world. Within this vision, food, as something material inevitably linked to bodily functions, has traditionally been considered secondary, even deviant, and not worthy of academic attention.

According to the interviewee, this philosophical framework perfectly explains how, on the one hand, gastronomy has historically been considered taboo within academic discourse; on the other hand, it contextualises the resistance that institutions have in recognising gastronomy within modern education systems.

Starting from this image, the interviewee places his professional career within a series of initiatives aimed at emancipating gastronomy from traditional cultural and intellectual devaluation, dismantling the idea of food as a marginal or purely material sphere. In this context, Ishida joined the Slow Food Italia association in 2001, a period in which he claims to have proudly contributed to initiatives such as the *Salone del Gusto* and *Terramadre*.

Through the Slow Food movement, food is repositioned as a source of knowledge, an element of identity and a social practice with cultural value. As emerges from the interview, this experience represents for Ishida a moment of conceptual reworking of gastronomy, no longer understood as a strictly technical skill, but as a field of interdisciplinary knowledge.

In 2007, when he returned to Japan, he brought this awareness with him to his home country, founding the Slow Food Japan association. At this stage, his efforts focused on

spreading a new narrative about food, inspired by the Italian model but adapted to Japanese cultural specificities, through international cooperation projects and initiatives promoting local gastronomy.

This process of cultural and intellectual legitimisation of gastronomy was formalised institutionally in 2010 with the establishment of the Faculty of Gastronomy Management at Ritsumeikan University in Kyōto. As the interviewee pointed out, the process was not without its difficulties: institutional, financial and disciplinary obstacles characterised the initial stages of the process. Despite these challenges, the faculty gradually gained recognition, establishing itself as a national reference point in the field of gastronomic studies.

Three macro-areas have been identified: economics, culture and science, which are conceived not as separate compartments, but as interconnected dimensions of a single fluid core. This approach aims to highlight gastronomy as a technique, and as a social system.

This logic of integration also extends to the professional profile that the course aims to train: an institutional profile capable of coordinating and connecting different actors in the food supply chain, overcoming the sectoral fragmentation that characterises the world of food production and management. In this regard, Ishida points out that the sector suffers from a shortage of figures capable of communicating across different areas of expertise. The metaphor of the “conductor” he uses is particularly significant: “even though they do not actually play anything” – i.e. he does not embody a unique and specific technical skill – “they manage everyone”, meaning that this new figure will be able to understand the languages and needs of these different actors and coordinate them effectively. Students are thus trained to possess a sufficiently broad general knowledge to recognise critical issues and opportunities in complex contexts, activating specific skills when necessary. As Ishida states, “they are given the keys to open all doors”.

Another theme that emerged during the interview was the importance of traditional knowledge preserved by farmers, fishermen and local producers. Ishida emphasises that these figures are guardians of traditional knowledge that goes beyond the confines of academia and, therefore, should not be marginalised. In other words, food turns into a vehicle for values, practices and knowledge rooted in the territories of those communities. Given these premises, the university is committed to bringing together theoretical and practical, academic and traditional knowledge to create a harmonious dialogue. Visits to producers, fishermen and local food processing businesses are just some of the experiential activities promoted by the course: ‘Showing the reality of production is essential, because that is where very important knowledge is found’. In order to contextualise these findings, the student survey will allow us to explore

whether and to what extent the competences, meanings, and materials promoted by the programme are translated into students' expectations of their future professional development.

The interview later shifted towards an investigation aimed at analysing the interviewee's awareness of the ongoing socio-structural transformations that are shaping contemporary food practices.

"No one cooks, no one eats... this is modernity", the striking statement that the professor uses to summarise current eating habits in Japan. In recalling the lifestyles of the 1960s and 1970s, the interviewee describes a social context in which everyday life was structured around domestic conviviality characterised by the maternal figure, with cooking at home and shared meals representing a central element of daily routines. According to Ishida, these practices are progressively disappearing, particularly among younger generations.

The acceleration of this process, as also analysed in previous chapters of this thesis, is linked to broader structural changes within Japanese society. Among these, the transformation of the labour market, urbanisation, longer commuting times, and the progressive downsizing of the family unit have profoundly reshaped the temporal and spatial organisation of everyday life, directly affecting food-related practices.

Ishida traces the first clear symptom of this deconstruction of eating habits to the technical and symbolic evolution of a key household appliance: the refrigerator. He explains how, originally, due to mechanical and cooling requirements, the freezer compartment was located in the upper section. From the 1970s onwards, however, the freezer was relocated to the lower part of the appliance, partly to facilitate children's access to ice cream. Beyond its technical dimension, this shift is interpreted as a symbolic indicator of changing priorities within the domestic food environment.

Nowadays, Ishida continues, fresh produce is scarce inside standard refrigerators – especially in young people's homes – with the exception of basic ingredients such as carrots, potatoes, and onions, which are essential for preparing curry rice. Paradoxically, these ingredients do not even require refrigeration. As the interviewee states: 'The refrigerator is losing its functionality and its place in the home, to the point that it is disappearing and shrinking in size'. As a consequence, convenience stores (*konbini*) function as an exterior domestic pantry, replacing the refrigerator within everyday food practices.

These observations raise a crucial question regarding the role of higher education in encouraging young people to re-engage with food-related practices and conviviality. However, Ishida adopts a cautious stance, noting that 'we are discussing a "return to everyday life", but everyday life itself is objectively different from what it was ten, twenty, or thirty years ago'. In

this sense, *konbini* represent the current everyday reality for many Japanese citizens, functioning as informal social spaces frequented by both young and elderly people, and not just as food providers sites.

At the same time, Ishida highlights the instability of such structures, suggesting that convenience stores themselves may eventually be displaced by further digitalisation and the expansion of online platforms. This potential disappearance illustrates the evolving nature of everyday food environments, which are continuously redefined by technological and social change. Practices that are currently associated with the fragmentation of food systems may, in the future, become objects of nostalgia—further emphasising the dynamic character of modern everyday life.

Within this framework, the interviewee (inspired by the Slow Food movement) stresses the centrality of the table as a site of social transformation, arguing that meaningful change does not necessarily originate from overt political action, but rather from everyday practices: “to change the world, there is not always need for protests; the real revolution begins around the table”.

As Ishida explains, everyday consumption choices directly influence global production chains. The widespread consumption of products such as hamburgers, for example, reinforces industrial meat production systems, which are in turn connected to phenomena such as deforestation in the Amazon rainforest. These dynamics underline the interconnectedness of individual practices, environmental consequences, and global food systems.

Finally, Ishida reflects on the role of institutional interventions, particularly the implementation of the *Shokuiku* law. He notes that public attention to food-related issues intensified significantly following the introduction of food education policies, leading to the emergence of associations, publications, and public debates. Although the visibility of these themes has diminished over time, the interviewee acknowledges that food education remains strongly embedded within primary and secondary education.

Overall, this interview provides a broad overview of contemporary food practices, highlighting the tension between educational ideals, structural constraints and everyday realities: on the one hand, there are the values promoted by the faculty (conviviality, traditional knowledge, sustainability); on the other, there is an awareness of the constant social and structural changes that are reshaping everyday life, especially for the younger generations.

Given these assumptions, the following survey will serve to feature the students’ voices. The researcher will attempt to analyse their daily food practices and the extent to which structural constraints may preclude them from translating their knowledge into practice.

4.4 – Quantitative research and findings

- ***Structure***

The survey was created using Google Forms. Japanese and English were used to make it as accessible as possible.

The survey is divided into three sections and was designed with the principles of SPT theory in mind. The survey therefore seeks to explore the three key characteristics of the theory: *Materials*, *Competences* and *Meanings*. The first section analyses materials through questions aimed at framing the general eating behaviours of the participants. The second section analyses skills by investigating the *food literacy* and education of the participants. The third section explores the means, hence students' motivations regarding their consumption choices, choice of study path and their prospects for the future. The researcher refers to the previous subsection "application of the theory" for further details.

In the appendix to this thesis, it is possible to visualise all the questions which are divided into two subsections: Elements of SPT theory and Thematic subsections.

- ***Hypothesis***

Before presenting the results obtained from the student survey, this section will briefly outline the hypotheses identified by the researcher for this type of research. Research hypotheses serve different purposes depending on the type of research (whether qualitative or quantitative). Given the mixed-method nature of this thesis, the hypotheses serve to formulate expectations that can guide the researcher in interpreting the empirical data. The hypotheses formulated in this study, therefore, are not intended to serve as "predictions of results".²³⁷

These hypotheses arose from the issues addressed in the qualitative analysis discussed above:

- 1) The meanings and ideals promoted by the Faculty of Gastronomy Management.
- 2) The socio-structural transformations that characterise contemporary food practices.
- 3) Existing literature on food consumption among young people and sustainability issues.

Hence, the formulated hypotheses for this part of the research are as follow:

²³⁷ Given, Lisa M. *What Is the Role of a Hypothesis in Qualitative Research?*, 100 Questions (and Answers) About Qualitative Research. Vol. 0. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc, 2016, pp. 56.

H1) Despite a high level of food literacy, students may experience a gap between sustainability-oriented knowledge and their actual eating practices.

H2) Time pressure, economic limitations and everyday routines are expected to play a significant role in limiting the actualization of food-related knowledge.

H3) Exposure to food-related education may contribute to shaping students' perceptions of their future professional responsibilities in the food system.

These hypotheses will be discussed later, after presenting the results of the survey analysis, in order to understand whether and how the data can support these hypotheses. It should be noted that this research is not intended to have statistical value, but rather to identify patterns and tendencies that can be related to the qualitative data discussed above.

- **Results**

Demographic Data

At the end of the administration period, a total of 47 responses had been collected. The sample analysed consisted exclusively of undergraduate students (100%) enrolled in the Gastronomy Management course, aged between 18 and 20 (51,1%) and 21 and 23 (48,9%), spanning the four undergraduate years. No graduate or doctoral students participated in the survey. In terms of nationality, 97.9% of respondents were Japanese, while just 2.1% were of international nationality.

Food Literacy

The first section of the survey related to analysis of their food literacy, with the aim of exploring both the level of individual awareness and the perceived role of the university in building such skills.

Prior to administering the questions, a brief explanation of the meaning of food literacy was provided: “Food literacy is understanding the impact of your food choices on our health, environment, and economy – and understanding that these impacts are not experienced equitably”. This definition helped to guide and clarify the intent of the research.

The first question looked into previous experiences in the gastronomic and educational fields prior to entering university. The results show that 74,5% of respondents had food

experiences during primary, lower secondary and/or upper secondary school, suggesting a relatively widespread practice of food education in the Japanese school system.

At the same time, 55,3% say they have gained food-related skills or awareness at home, while 42,6% say they have developed their interest through personal initiatives such as using social media, attending dedicated events and cooking as a hobby. Interestingly, 2.4% (one respondent) reports direct involvement in the family restaurant; a further 2.4% (one respondent) links their choice of course to an experience of vegan cooking gained during an exchange period abroad. Another 14,9% had food-related experiences through their part-time job (specifically in food chains and/or restaurants). Finally, 10,6% of participants say they had no significant experience in the field before enrolling in the course.

The second question concerns the degree to which different topics are taught within the course of study. The question was developed using Likert scales (ranging from “Not at all” to “To a great extent”) and shows that students perceive the course of study as focusing on a wide range of food-related topics with a moderate level of intensity. In fact, within each subject area, the option “moderately” is the most frequently selected (43.9% on average). This result suggests an educational approach focused on providing cross-disciplinary rather than specialist skills within the three-year programme. This result is particularly evident in the sections “Food literacy and awareness in everyday eating behaviours”, “Shokuiku policies and philosophy”, “Impact of modern lifestyles on eating habits” and “Preservation and adaptation of Japanese food traditions”. Interestingly, only the topic “Practical skills for sustainable food choices” received a majority of “Slightly” responses (42,55%). Overall, it would seem that topics related to environmental sustainability and contemporary food systems are perceived as more important, while those closely linked to daily food practices and domestic routines are rated more moderately. In this context, cultural and identity issues occupy an intermediate position.

In relation to sustainability, a further question delves into students’ perceptions of the thematic emphasis of the course. The data indicate that the area’s most frequently covered are: environmental impact (waste reduction, climate change, etc.) (68,1%) and the economic sustainability of food systems (59,6%). This is followed by the preservation of cultural and food traditions (53,2%) and social aspects related to local communities (46,8%). Finally, only 27,7% of students say they have gained knowledge of personal responsibility in everyday food choices.

Finally, this part of the survey explores students’ perceptions of the pedagogical approach of the course: 55,3% of students perceive it as mainly theoretical; 10,6% consider it mainly practical, while 34% consider it a good balance between the two. This distribution

suggests a prevalence of the theoretical dimension in students' perceptions, which is particularly interesting when compared with the results that emerged in the qualitative interview.

Eating Behaviours

The questions in the following section aim to probe respondents' current eating behaviours, with particular attention to spatial, temporal and social organisation of meals.

The first question asks students the frequency with which students tend to eat outside the home during a typical university week. Results show that almost half of respondents (46,8%) eat an average of 1-2 meals outside the home, while (almost all) the other half reports eating out more frequently: 31,9% eat 3-4 meals outside the home, and as many as 19,1% eat five or more. These findings suggest that eating outside the domestic environment constitutes a regular component of students' weekly routines.

Number of meals eaten outside on a average university week

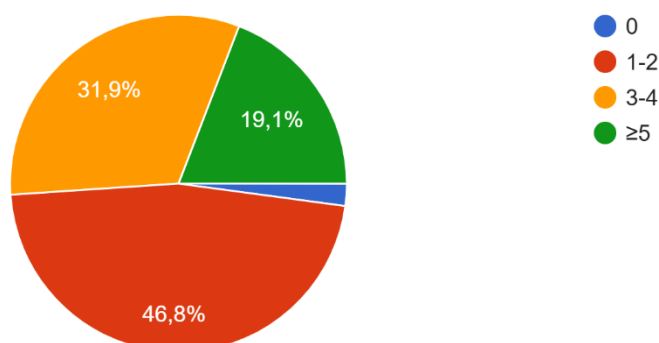


Figure 36 Number of meals eaten outside of home on a average university week

The next question delves deeper by asking which meal they are most likely to eat outside the home. Responses were split in half, with 57,4% of participant reporting lunch, while 40.4% reporting dinner. It can be assumed that daily commitments such as university classes (for lunch) and part-time work (for dinner) are key factors in explaining these trends. Only a 2,1% (1 respondent) answered 'Breakfast'. These aspects will be analysed in more detail in the next section.

*How many full meals (rice + soup + main dish + side dish(es))
do you consume on average per day?*

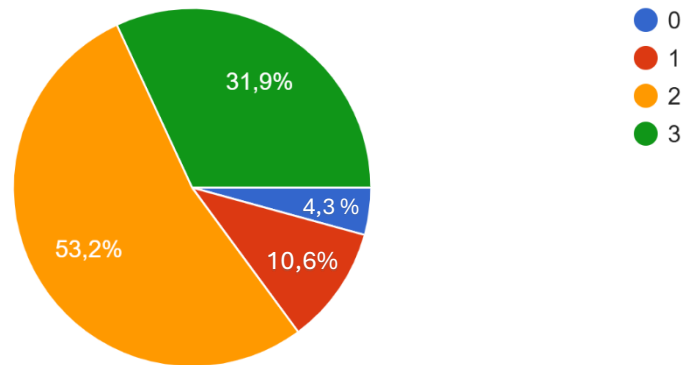


Figure 36 Number of full meals eaten on a average day

The third question deals with the number of “complete” meals (as defined by the *ichijūsansai* model illustrated in previous chapters) that participants consume on average throughout the day. The result appears to be positive, with 53,2% of respondents stating that they consume two per day, and as many as 31,9% consuming three per day. The remaining 14,9% consume one or none at all.

Time allocation for food-related activities is further explored through a question addressing the average amount of time spent preparing and consuming meals. Results are heterogeneous: the largest proportion (27,7%) of participants spend between 45 and 60 minutes on average, followed by (25,5%) those who spend 30-45 minutes, the same percentage for those who spend around 15-30 minutes, followed by 14.9% of respondents who spend well over 60 minutes, and finally 6,4% of participants who spend less than 15 minutes.

Average time spent on making and eating meals

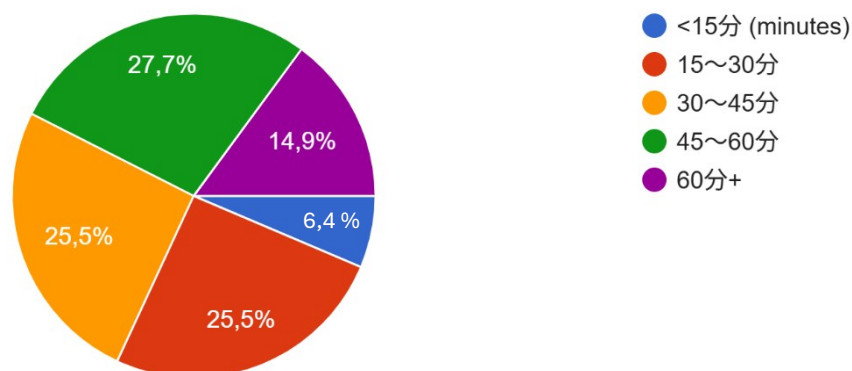


Figure 37 Average time spent on a meal (both making and eating)

The last question to complete this set is a Likert scale (never – very often) that aims to portray the frequency of certain eating behaviours among participants:

- **Meal Skipping:** 27,6% never skip meals, 40,4% rarely, 21,2% sometimes, 10,6% skips meals often or very often.
- **Eat alone:** 57,4% eat alone often or very often, 29,7% sometimes, 12,7% rarely, interestingly, no respondent selected “never” as an answer.
- **Consume of ready-made foods or packaged meals purchased from convenience stores:** 44,6% sometimes, 23,4% either often or very often, and 29,7% rarely or never.
- **Consume western fast food (McDonald’s, KFC, Wendys etc.):** 42,8% sometimes, 46,8% rarely or never, 8,5% often. Interestingly, no respondent selected “very often” as an answer.
- **Consume Japanese fast food (Matsuya, Yoshinoya, Coco-ichibanya):** 19,1% never, 72,3% either rarely or sometimes, 8,5% either often or very often.
- **Consume home-cooked meals:** 61,7% either often or very often and 38,2% sometimes or rarely (1 respondent). No participant selected “never” as an answer.

Overall, meal skipping seems to be relatively infrequent, however, approximately one-third of participants reported skipping meals at least sometimes. Eating alone emerges as a particularly widespread practices suggesting that commensality might be absent from students’ daily routines. Finally, ready-made or packaged meals shows a moderate but regular presence, while fast food consumption (both of western and Japanese nature) show a contained frequency. Conversely, home-cooked meals remain a consistent element of students’ diets.

Personal perception of eating habits

The following section looks into students’ personal perception of their own eating habits.

The first question in this section uses a Likert scale to research how often students feel unable to eat sustainably due to these daily constraints. For this question, the term “sustainability” was specified by providing examples such as: choosing local and/or seasonal products, reducing waste, minimising the consumption of ready-made food, and cooking at home. On a scale of 1 to 5, respondents remained in the middle, with a slight peak between “3” (34%) and “4” (34%), followed by “2” (23.4%). These data suggest a tension between “sustainable behaviour” and “actualisation”, highlighting the fragile balance between the two.

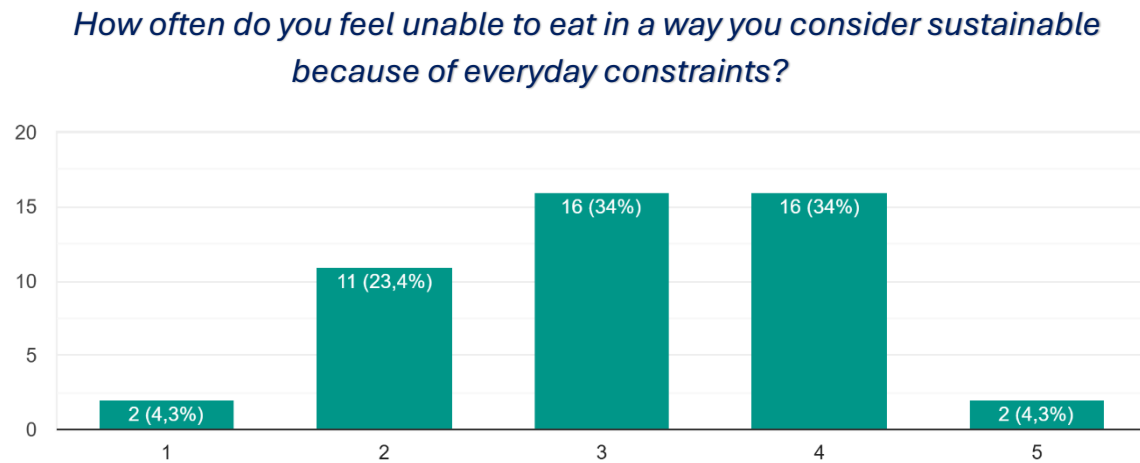


Figure 38 Students' perception of non-sustainable consumption due to everyday constraints

The next question relates their personal perceptions, actions and the teachings of their faculty by asking which eating habits have changed the most since enrolment. 76,6% of respondents say they have changed their “food choices”, while 42,6% selected “cooking at home”. Significantly lower percentages cover habits such as mealtimes (23,4%), ready-made meals (12,8%) and fast-food habits (12,8%). It is also interesting to note that 12,8% say they have not changed any of their eating habits.

The question investigating perceived direction and intensity of change plays an important role in contextualising the previous answer. 45% of participants say they have experienced a positive change, while 35% say they have experienced a moderately positive change. These two segments therefore represent a more or less positive change of 80%. This is followed by students who say they have experienced neither improvement nor deterioration (15%) and those who have experienced a moderately negative change (5%). No participant selected a negative change.

Finally, an attempt was made to clarify, using a Likert scale, how much students perceive a real gap between what they consider healthy and sustainable and their actual actions. Responses again concentrated around the middle-to-high end of the scale: “3” (34%) and leaning towards the “large gap” section consisting of “4” for 38,3% and “5” for 10,6%.

This distribution suggests that, despite greater awareness of positive change, many students perceive a discrepancy between their ideals and their implementation in everyday life.

Do you feel a gap between what you know about healthy and sustainable food and what you actually do in your daily meals?

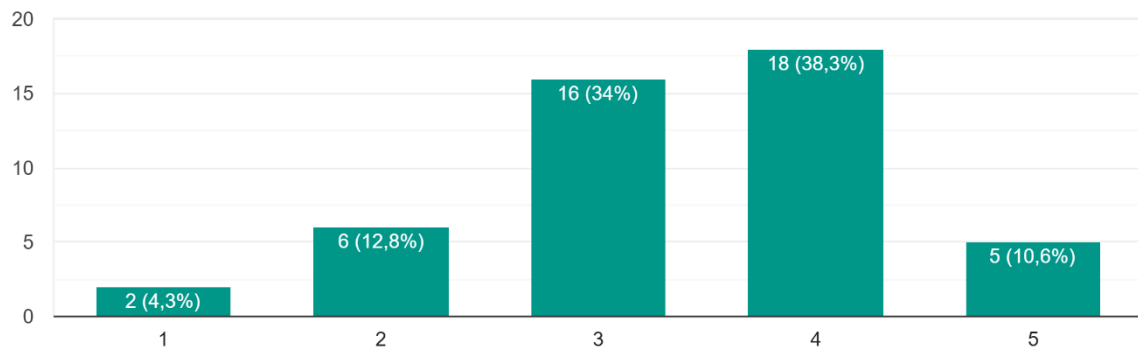


Figure 39 Perceived gap between knowledge and practice

Influential factors

This section tries to skim over the main factors influencing students' eating habits, combining structural, contextual and perceived variables in order to provide as comprehensive a picture as possible of the dynamics that shape daily eating practices.

Firstly, the researcher sought to reconstruct the personal context of the participants by investigating their living arrangements, distinguishing between students who live with their families, alone or with roommates. The results show a balanced picture with a slight prevalence of students living alone (57,4%) compared to those living with their families (42,6%). No participants currently live with roommates. Therefore, the students all claim to have regular access to a kitchen suitable for cooking (100%), suggesting that any critical issues in their eating habits do not stem from a lack of domestic infrastructure, but rather from other time or organisational constraints.

In this regard, students were asked to indicate their average daily commuting time, specifically one way: 42,6% of participants take between 15 and 30 minutes on average, 19,1% take between 61 and 90 minutes, another 19,1% take more than 90 minutes, and a smaller 10,6% take between 31 and 60 minutes. A cross-analysis of the data show up a clear relationship between living arrangements and commuting time: almost all participants who live alone fall within the 30-minute range, while those who live with their families take between 61 minutes and more than 90 minutes on average (a total of 38,2%). This data suggests that housing choices indirectly affect the possibilities for managing daily time, with potential repercussions on eating habits.

To complete the picture in the personal context, the section analyses the presence of part-time work, with 85,1% of students answering “yes”. The high prevalence of this condition, regardless of living arrangements, indicates that the majority of students are exposed to additional time and energy constraints, which can significantly influence food choices and meal regularity.

The survey also assessed the students’ subjective perception of the factors that influence their eating habits to assess their level of awareness of the mechanisms that shape their daily practices. When asked which factors negatively affect their eating habits, students indicated: cost of food (42,6%), fatigue (38,2%), university timetable (36.2%) and part-time work (40,4%) are the factors that most influence their eating habits. These data emphasize a strong interaction between economic constraints, workloads and time management. To a lesser extent, but still significant, are commuting time (19,1%), lack of time (21,3%), easy access to convenience food (14,9%), late sleeping (8,5%) and student club activities (2.1%). It is important to note that this question allowed for multiple answers, so it is not surprising that 51,1% of participants also selected “personal preference” among the various options. This suggests that students perceive that both personal factors and external constraints influence their eating habits, ruling out the possibility that structural factors alone are the cause.

What factors most influence your eating habits?

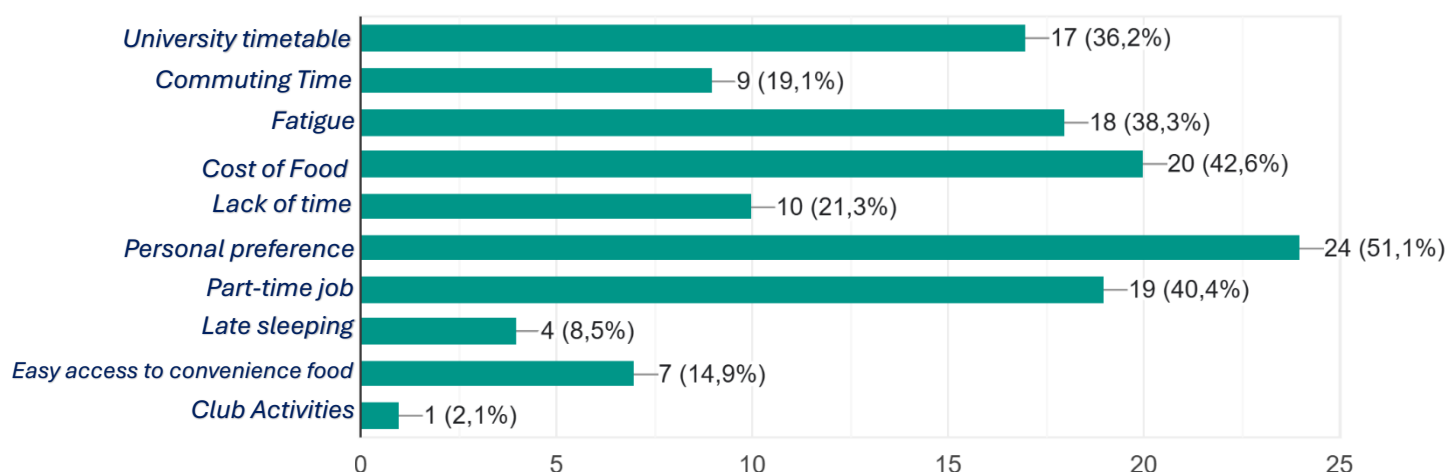


Figure 40 Negative influential factors on students' eating habits

To better understand the drivers of these changes, the next question asks which factors most influenced their eating habits when the change was positive. A full 69,6% of students selected “Lectures,” followed by “Interaction with other students” (41,3%), “Practical activities and field trips” (34,8%), “Personal motivation and reflection” (17,4%), and “Instructors” (19,6%). Smaller percentages included school materials (2,2%) and personal reading (2,2%). Overall, the data suggests benefits from both academic and social dynamics. In fact, when asked to imagine an alternative scenario in which they had not enrolled in this program, their eating habits would have been very different (27,7%) or different (31,9%), while a substantial 38,3% said they would have been moderately different.

Which factor has a positive influence on your eating habits?

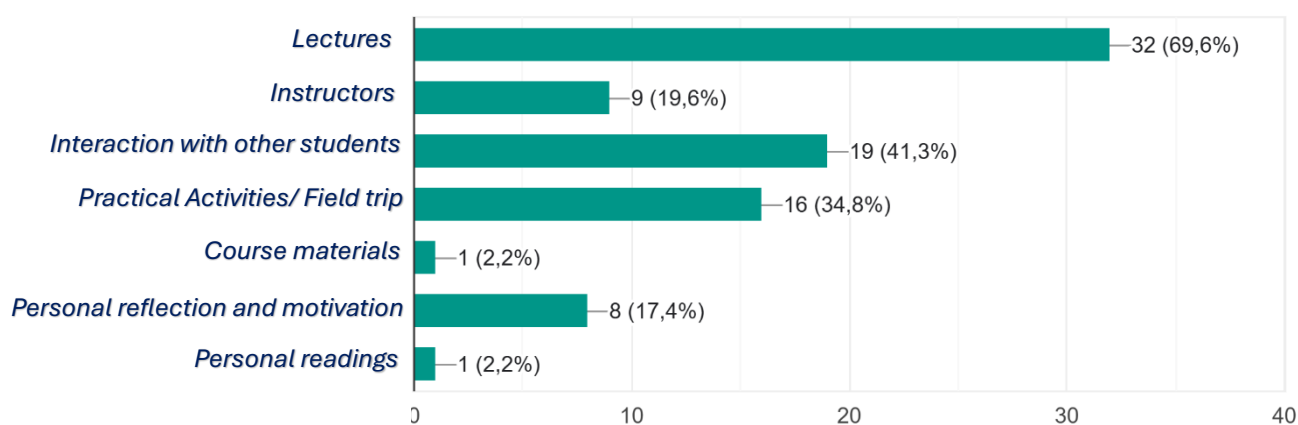


Figure 41 Positive influential factors on students' eating habits

In conclusions, this analysis it is possible to observe how students' eating habits are the product of a complex interaction between structural conditions (such as commuting, part-time work), housing context, educational and relational factors, and individual choices.

Motivations and Future Perspectives

The last section of the survey regards students' motivations for enrolling in this field of study and how these motivations relate to their future professional aspirations.

When asked about the reasons behind their choice, respondents reported a plurality of motivations that reflect both cultural and practical interests. Interest in Japanese food and traditions (36,2%) and the desire to learn about sustainable food practices (31,9%) emerge as the two most significant drivers, suggesting that cultural curiosity and ethical concerns play a central role in shaping students' educational choices. Other popular drivers were: recommendations from family and friends (21,3%) and a general interest in cooking and

culinary skills (21,3%). Numerous questions were added independently by respondents, such as: interest in physical health and food nutrients (2.1%), desire to learn about marketing (2.1%) and wanting to contribute to regional revitalisation (2.1%).

Subsequently, participants were asked about their desired career paths: a strong majority of participants (85,1%) stated the desire to work in the culinary sector, often within large corporations or specialized companies operating across different segments of food systems. At the same time, a notable proportion of respondents envision careers in teaching (23.4%) – especially culinary teaching, hospitality and tourism industry (17%), in public institutions (12,8%), in sectors specialising in sustainability and the environment (10,6%) and research (8,5%). In short, there is a wide diversification of professional careers envisioned by the students, going beyond the simple commercial food production sector.

Finally, students were asked to reflect on their perceived professional role in negotiating the relationship between Japanese tradition and contemporary eating habits. Most of the participants (48,9%) position themselves in an intermediary position by stating of the possibility of mediating between tradition and modernity, while 36,2% emphasise the adaption of tradition to modern life. Only a 12,8% (however, not neglectable) state the will to preserve Japanese tradition. This trend suggests the direction we could take in the near future with this new generation of professionals in the sector: agents active in the transformation of food culture, who do not merely preserve their traditions but have a desire to translate, adapt and (at the same time) enhance their traditional culture and eating habits.

4.5 – Discussion and triangulation

In this subchapter, the researcher will attempt to summarise the research carried out for this thesis. Bringing together the results of the document analysis, the qualitative interview and the survey data, the researcher will reflect on the relationship and dynamics between institutional meanings, students' knowledge and everyday food practices. Through triangulation, both the points of convergence between the various research methods and the tensions that characterise contemporary food practices among university students will be highlighted.

Starting from the institutional level, the faculty website and the interview with Professor Ishida were fundamental to understanding food as a moral, cultural and transformative practice. Gastronomy, within this framework, does not simply represent technical skills but represents a multitude of disciplines. Through this lens, it also acquires strong significance within discourses on social responsibility, sustainability and social well-being. Drawing on Social Practice theory

(which proved fundamental to the conduct and interpretation of this research), qualitative research contributed to defining the meanings associated with food, on the one hand, and the skills and materials provided to students, on the other.

When considering students' perspectives, daily practices and knowledge about food and gastronomy, institutional ideals take on different facets. In fact, survey data indicate that students have a relatively high level of food awareness and report a generally positive change in their eating habits since enrolling in their course of study. Despite this, a significant proportion of respondents perceive a significant gap between what they consider “healthy and sustainable” and what they are actually able to practise in their everyday lives. ‘I want to eat organic food whenever possible, but financial constraints mean I end up choosing cheaper options’ (Fig. 42a), ‘I prioritise price and sometimes can’t afford sustainable ingredients’ (Fig. 42b), ‘Since saving money has become a basic part of my daily routine, sustainable choices have become secondary’ (Fig. 42c) – these are some of the many testimonies from students who show a clear awareness of the principles of sustainability but at the same time recognise the limitations imposed by the material conditions of their daily lives.

なるべくオーガニックの食事を取りたいが金銭的な問題で安価なものを選んでしまう

a.

価格を優先してしまい、サステナブルな材料を買えないときがあるから。

b.

日常の基本に節約することが入ってくるので持続可能な選択は二の次になっている

c.

Figure 42 Comments on the survey to the question: «Is there a tension between what you consider “sustainable” and what you actually do in everyday eating? If so, why? »

In this regard, one respondent states: ‘I often go to the school cafeteria because I can eat healthy food at an affordable price, but the meals they serve use a lot of imported ingredients,’ (Fig. 43) underlining a compromise between sustainable ideals, affordability and the actual availability of food options, as well as a genuine commitment to pursuing a sustainable lifestyle while economising.

手頃な価格で健康的な食事ができるため、学食をよく利用するが、そこで提供されるのは輸入食材を多く利用した食事だから。

Figure 43 Comment on the survey to the question: «Is there a tension between what you consider “sustainable” and what you actually do in everyday eating? If so, why? »

Another aspect that emerged from the students' opinions is the concrete lack of time and energy: 'sometimes I don't have time to eat', 'When I want to take it easy, I eat prepared meals in plastic containers from the supermarket', 'while I understand the importance of sustainability, I sometimes choose the easier option due to my busy schedule and financial constraints'. These statements highlight how, even with a high level of theoretical awareness, daily food practices are strongly shaped by time constraints, workloads and fatigue, which reduce the scope for individual action and favour choices that are perceived as less sustainable but more compatible with the pace of contemporary life.

手抜きしたい時に、スーパーでプラスチックの入れ物に入っている惣菜を食べます。
プラスチックのゴミを増やすことは、環境に悪いと感じていますが、その食習慣を減らそうとできていないところ

Figure 44 Comment on the survey to the question: «Is there a tension between what you consider “sustainable” and what you actually do in everyday eating? If so, why?»

Translated from Japanese: “When I want to take it easy, I eat prepared foods in plastic containers at the supermarket. I do feel that increasing plastic waste is bad for the environment, but I haven't been able to reduce this eating habit”

Despite this, it is important not to interpret this gap as a failure of education. In fact, by triangulating data obtained from the interview, it is possible to view these phenomena in a different light, as Ishida states: everyday life is undergoing and will continue to undergo profound changes, such as less available time, fragmented schedules and the widespread presence of convenience food stores. Therefore, the gap perceived by students should not be interpreted as an individual problem, but rather as the result of structural tensions between our ideals and contemporary living conditions.

The students' reflections on the relationship between tradition and change make the picture even more complex. Contrary to what is emphasised in institutional discourse, the results of the survey show that only a minority of participants explicitly identify themselves as “preservers of tradition”. Most students, on the other hand, tend to place themselves in an intermediate position, conceiving tradition not as a static heritage to be preserved unchanged, but as a dynamic resource to be mediated and adapted to the contemporary world.

This perspective emerges clearly from the qualitative responses, in which students recognise the concrete limitations that make it difficult to reproduce traditional practices “purely”. As one participant states, “it's difficult to perfectly maintain Japan's traditional diet”, due both to changes in the availability of ingredients and rising prices, and to the reduction in

the time that can be devoted to cooking in a context marked by dual-income families and accelerated lifestyles. In this sense, the transformation of food practices is interpreted as the result of structural changes rather than a loss of cultural values.

日本の伝統的な食生活を完璧に続けることは困難だと考える。現代では手に入る食材が変わってきており、調理や準備にかけられる時間も少なくなっていると考えからである。前者には物価高騰や環境変化、または消費者の嗜好の変化が関わっており、後者には、共働きが主流になり、家事を主な仕事とする人が減ったことが要因であると考え。

Figure 45 Comment on the survey to the question: « *If you want, you can share any additional thoughts about maintaining traditional Japanese food practices in modern life* »

Translated from Japanese: “I believe it is difficult to perfectly maintain Japan’s traditional diet. The ingredients available today have changed, and the time available for cooking has decreased. The former is related to rising prices, changes in the environment, and changing consumer preferences, while the latter is due to the fact that dual-income households have become the norm, resulting in fewer people doing housework as their primary job.”

On the other hand, some students point out that Japanese food traditions can become a source of “peace and comfort” while maintaining a relevant cultural role capable of offering stability and meaning in a society perceived as always more stressful and fragmented.

Between these two positions lies the group of participants who recognise change as an integral part of the preservation process. As another participant effectively summarises, ‘traditions are something that need to be preserved, but they also change with the times, and for this reason they should be practised selectively, incorporating what is compatible with personal interests and contemporary lifestyles. (Fig. 46)

伝統は守っていくものでもあるが時代とともに変容するものでもある。だから自分の興味に合わせて実践して、なんとなく自分と合ったものを取り入れていけばいいと思う

Figure 46 Comment on the survey to the question: « *If you want, you can share any additional thoughts about maintaining traditional Japanese food practices in modern life* »

In line with this idea, another participant stated that ‘change is essential to preserving what we value most, suggesting that key elements of Japanese cuisine – such as seasonality, hospitality and attention to natural flavours – can also be maintained through renewed and adapted forms.

In conclusion, the triangulation of qualitative and quantitative findings suggests that higher education plays a significant role in shaping food awareness and professional imaginaries but cannot be isolated from broader socio-structural conditions. The tension between ideals and practices does not signal disengagement but rather reflects the ongoing effort of students to reconcile sustainability, tradition and modern lifestyles. This tension, far

from being a limitation, may represent the very space in which new forms of food culture and professional identities are being constructed.

- ***Biases and limitations***

Having reached the conclusions of this research, we must also acknowledge the limitations and possible biases that may exist in the writing and analysis of the data.

Firstly, as mentioned above, the empirical component of the sample size analysed for this thesis is relatively small (47 respondents) and quite specific, namely students of the Gastronomy Management programme. Although this focus has allowed for a detailed analysis of factors such as food awareness within a more experienced and specialised group, this choice limits the possibility of analysing a wider student population. Therefore, the results should be interpreted as context-specific rather than representative of a wider student sample.

Furthermore, the study may be affected by some forms of self-selection bias. Since participation in the survey was voluntary, it may have been those students who are more sensitive to social issues such as sustainability in relation to gastronomy who took part. This factor may have led to an accumulation of responses from people with a particularly high level of food awareness or reflexivity.

Another important factor could be social desirability bias. Given the academic background of the students, they may feel an implicit normative passion to present themselves as more responsible or sustainability-oriented than students belonging to other fields of study. This could lead to more neutral or positive responses than actual practices might suggest. At the same time, the researcher tried to make several references to compromises, constraints and their sincere perceptions to investigate their self-awareness as much as possible.

Therefore, this study is an exploratory case study and, as such, allows for particularly accurate observation of the dynamics present, which – if considered in relation to other contexts – would not be as visible.

Given these limitations, future research could attempt to expand the scope of investigation by including a larger and more diverse sample of university students, especially those enrolled in courses not related to gastronomy or food. A comparative approach could help to understand whether the gap addressed in this study (food awareness vs. everyday practices) is amplified, reduced or qualitatively different among students with lower levels of formal food education.

Conclusions

This thesis analysed the relationship between food, sustainability and university education, tracing some of the historical milestones that have marked the evolution of the Japanese population's eating habits since the Second World War. The research began by outlining the origins and evolution of the concept of sustainability, highlighting how it emerged in response to a growing environmental, economic and social crisis. In this context, the food & beverage system emerges as one of the areas in which these tensions are most evident. The aim is to shift the focus from food as a simple consumer good to its fundamental role in discussions such as social responsibility, awareness and intervention in contemporary structural issues.

The introduction of the concept of food literacy has therefore made it possible to question the way in which knowledge, values and skills related to food are constructed, focusing attention on institutions such as universities as vehicles for promoting more sustainable food practices.

From this perspective, the researcher arrived at the key context of the research: Japan. In-depth research was conducted on the progressive change in eating habits since the Second World War, caused by factors such as changes in diet, the Westernisation of consumption and changes in social structure (linked to urbanisation and the reorganisation of family life). These processes illuminated how contemporary eating practices are the result of historical and structural dynamics rather than isolated individual choices.

Consequently, particular attention has been paid to the cultural, social and institutional responses that have emerged in the face of these transformations. From the recognition of Japanese cuisine (*washoku*) as a UNESCO heritage site, to the emergence of social movements such as Slow Food, to the promotion of comprehensive institutional policies such as *Shokuiku*.

The conducted case study is situated at the intersection of food emergencies, social transformations and educational interventions. The objective of this research is therefore to understand how contemporary food practices are constructed, negotiated and limited within specific social and institutional contexts. Particular attention is also paid to the role played by university education in shaping students' food awareness and daily practices.

Throughout the theoretical and contextual chapters, the strictly social nature of food practices has emerged. These cannot be interpreted solely as personal choices or simple acts of consumption, but rather as practices deeply influenced by economic, cultural and temporal structures. For this reason, the debate on sustainability and individual responsibility risks being

partial if not accompanied by an analysis of the conditions that make some practices possible and others difficult to achieve in everyday life. This theoretical approach formed the conceptual basis for answering the first research question, concerning how higher education affects food awareness and its translation into concrete practices.

Through the case study of the College of Gastronomy Management at Ritsumeikan University, it was possible to observe these dynamics in a particularly significant context. As a newly designed university programme, it offers an interdisciplinary and comprehensive view of food, attributing a cultural, social and even transformative role to gastronomy. Analysis of institutional documents shows how academic discourse makes food a space of moral responsibility and a lever for social change, while outlining precise expectations for students and their future professional roles. In doing so, it helps to define a framework of values within which students are called upon to position themselves as future actors in the food system.

The empirical results, obtained through interviews and surveys, confirm that exposure to this type of training contributes to the development of a high level of food awareness and a strong sensitivity to sustainability issues. In actual fact, although students show – within the limits of their possibilities – a positive attitude towards food by limiting their consumption of fast food and trying to cook and eat at home as much as possible, they still perceive a significant gap between their ideals of sustainability and their daily practices. This factor therefore suggests a high level of sensitivity to the issues addressed, which drives students to always strive for an improvement of their aptitudes. However, their inability to reconcile this knowledge with their practices is equally clear, confirming the initial hypothesis that high food literacy does not necessarily translate into food practices consistent with the principles of sustainability.

Therefore, it can be said that even in an “ideal” educational context, characterised by a high level of food literacy, students report concrete difficulties in translating the principles they have learned into consistent daily practices. This is where economic constraints, lack of time, fatigue and the organisation of university life are structural factors that limit individual scope for action.

It is important to emphasise, however, that the origin of this tension cannot be considered merely a failure of education or a lack of commitment on the part of students. On the contrary, it represents a central element in understanding the contradictions of contemporary food practices. In line with Social Practice Theory, research shows that knowledge alone is not sufficient to bring about change if it is not supported by material and organisational conditions compatible with the rhythms of daily life. However, this does not diminish the crucial role of education. On the contrary, the findings suggest that university education represents a necessary

starting point for change, as it cultivates critical awareness and reflexivity among students regarding their own practices.

Moreover, students' awareness of the gap between their ideals and their daily practices should not be interpreted solely as a limitation, but also as a sign of critical consciousness. Being able to recognise this tension may constitute the first step towards future transformative action, particularly as many of these students will operate professionally within the food system.

Another important dimension concerns the relationship between tradition and change. The students' reflections challenge a static view of food traditions, preferring processes of adaptation and mediation instead. Tradition – an established cultural resource – must contend with current social, economic and cultural changes and find ways to adapt to the contemporary world. In this regard, the students state that they do not perceive change as a threat, but rather as a necessary condition for continuity and for its profitable enhancement. These reflections therefore contribute to answering the second research question: students tend to perceive their future professional role in terms of mediation between sustainability, tradition and contemporaneity.

Overall, this thesis contributes to the debate on food and sustainability by showing how food practices are the result of a broader set of variables: ideals, knowledge and structural conditions. In this context, university education emerges as a fundamental space for the construction of professional meanings and identities, but not as a self-sufficient solution. Changing practices therefore requires an approach focused on social and economic infrastructure, in addition to individual responsibility. Nevertheless, its importance should not be underestimated. By shaping future professionals equipped with sensitivity to sustainability and awareness of structural constraints, higher education contributes to laying the groundwork for broader and long-term transformations within the food system. In this sense, education may not immediately resolve structural contradictions, but it creates the cognitive and ethical conditions from which systemic change can eventually emerge.

In conclusion, this research suggests that improving sustainable food practices cannot be attributed to individual responsibility. On the contrary, the results show that even highly informed and motivated individuals find themselves operating within certain structural constraints. From this perspective, any strategies for change should shift the focus from the individual to broader issues: the social, economic and temporal conditions that make some practices accessible and others difficult to achieve. Rather than asking individuals to “do better”, it becomes essential to ask how urban, educational and economic structures can be rethought to

make sustainable practices not a virtuous exception, but a concrete possibility in the daily life of every single citizen.

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Appendix

<i>SPT element</i>	Sections	Questions	Answer Options
Materials	Eating Habits	During a typical university week, how many meals do you usually eat outside your home?	0 / 1–2 / 3–4 / 5 or more
		During a typical weekday, which meal are you most likely to eat outside the home?	Breakfast / Lunch / Dinner / I eat out equally at different meals / I rarely or never eat out
		How many full meals (rice + soup + main dish + side dish(es)) do you consume on average per day?	0 / 1 / 2 / 3
		On average, how much time do you spend on a meal (including cooking and eating)?	Less than 15 minutes / 15–30 minutes / 30–45 minutes / 45–60 minutes / More than 60 minutes
		How often do you skip meals?	Never / Rarely / Sometimes / Often / Very often
		How often do you eat alone?	Never / Rarely / Sometimes / Often / Very often
		How often do you eat at Western fast food chains (e.g. McDonald's, KFC)?	Never / Rarely / Sometimes / Often / Very often
		How often do you eat at Japanese quick-service chains (e.g. Yoshinoya, Matsuya, Sukiya)?	Never / Rarely / Sometimes / Often / Very often
		How often do you eat ready-made or pre-packaged meals from convenience stores or supermarkets?	Never / Rarely / Sometimes / Often / Very often
		How often do you eat app-ordered ready-made meals at home (e.g. Uber Eats, Demae-can)?	Never / Rarely / Sometimes / Often / Very often
		How often do you eat home-cooked meals?	Never / Rarely / Sometimes / Often / Very often
		What factors most influence your eating habits?	University timetable / Commuting time / Fatigue / Cost of food / Lack of time to cook / Personal preference / Part-time job / Late sleeping habits /

Competences

Food Literacy		Easy access to convenience food
	How often do you feel unable to eat in a way you consider sustainable due to everyday constraints?	Never – Very often (5-point Likert scale)
	Before enrolling in this course, did you have any previous experiences related to food or food education?	School food education / Family environment / Volunteering or community activities / Food-related part-time job / Personal interest / No prior experience
	To what extent does your course of studies address food literacy and awareness in everyday eating?	Not at all – To a great extent
	To what extent does your course address Shokuiku policies and philosophy?	Not at all – To a great extent
	To what extent does your course address Slow Food principles and values?	Not at all – To a great extent
	To what extent does your course address sustainability in daily food choices?	Not at all – To a great extent
	To what extent does your course address the impact of modern lifestyles on eating habits?	Not at all – To a great extent
	How would you describe the overall approach of your course of studies?	Mainly theoretical / Mainly practical / A balance of both
	Since attending the faculty, have you changed any of the following?	Food choices / Meal times / Fast food habits / Ready-made meals consumption / Cooking at home / None
	If your habits have changed positively, what has had the greatest impact?	Lectures / Instructors / Interaction with other students / Practical activities or field trips / Course materials / Personal motivation or reflection
	How is food sustainability addressed in your course?	Environmental impact / Cultural preservation / Social aspects / Economic sustainability / Personal responsibility / Not clearly defined

Meanings

	Is there a tension between what you consider sustainable eating and your actual daily practices? If so, why?	Open-ended
Motivations	What was your main motivation for choosing this course?	Interest in sustainable food practices / Interest in Japanese food culture / Career preparation / Recommendation from others / Interest in practical cooking skills
	If you had not taken this course, do you think your relationship with food would be different?	Not at all – Very different (5-point Likert scale)
	Do you feel a gap between what you know about healthy and sustainable food and what you actually do?	Not at all – Very different (5-point Likert scale)
	What role do you think students can play in balancing traditional Japanese food practices and modern eating habits?	Preserving traditions / Adapting traditions / Mediating between tradition and modern practices / Marginal role
	In which field would you like to work in the future?	Food industry / Food education / Research / Public institutions / Sustainability sector / Hospitality and tourism
	Age range	18–20 / 21–23 / 24–26 / 27+
	Level of study	Undergraduate / Graduate / Doctoral
	Nationality	Japanese / International
	Current living arrangement	Alone / With family / With roommates / Student dormitory
	Do you have regular access to a kitchen suitable for cooking?	Yes / Limited access / No
	How long is your average commuting time (one way)?	Less than 15 min / 15–30 min / 31–60 min / 61–90 min / More than 90 min
	Do you currently have a part-time job?	Yes / No