

# How Japan became No. 1

## Best-selling book touts nation's traditional diet

By ERICA ANGYAL  
Special to The Japan Times

Who has the global bragging rights to slimness? First there was Mireille Guiliano's book, "French Women Don't Get Fat: The Secret of Eating for Pleasure," published in 2004. Hot on the heels of this best-seller, Naomi Moriyama threw down the gauntlet less than a year later with "Japanese Women Don't Get Old or Fat: Recipes from My Mother's Tokyo Kitchen" (Delecorate Press) — taking it one step further by adding longevity to the equation.

For those who travel to places like the United States, Europe or Australia, it is often a great shock to see how many people are overweight or outright obese, but how few plus sizes we encounter when walking the streets of Japan. According to the latest figures from the International Obesity Task Force and the World Health Organization (WHO), Japanese women have the lowest obesity rate in the industrialized world — a tiny 3 percent, compared with 11 percent in France and a whopping 34 percent in the United States. Japanese women also enjoy the world's highest life expectancy — 85 years. (It's a close race though: Italian and French women are just behind at 84 years and Swedish, Swiss and Australian women are on 83 years).

The virtually nonexistent rates of obesity in Japan is intriguing when you consider how food obsessed the country really is, with more cooking programs and gourmet magazines than you can throw a breadstick at. Part of the explanation, says Moriyama, lies inside the nutritional value of Japanese cooking, and in the kind of food prepared by her mother and millions of other Japanese mothers.

A marketing consultant who was born in Tokyo but currently resides in New York with her husband and coauthor, William Doyle, Moriyama says that it's not just genetics that keep the Japanese so enviably trim. While she was a college student in the U.S., she packed on 12 kg and not long after she returned home after two years, the extra weight fell off naturally. She attributed the loss to her mother's home-cooked food.

"I live in New York and I grew up in Tokyo eating my mom's good old-fashioned traditional Japanese home cooking. Every time my American husband and I went back to eat at my mother's Tokyo kitchen, we would lose weight and feel fantastic. We wrote this book to explore why this was happening."

According to Moriyama, who is 45, the "secret" of staying svelte is simply to eat a traditional Japanese diet comprising fish, vegetables, fruit, rice and soy.

Moriyama believes a difference in the grocery-shopping habits play a part, too. "On average, Japanese women are buying more fish, rice, soy and fresh vegetables — and smaller amounts of less healthy foods like red meat, candy, cookies, potato chips, pastries and processed foods," she says. "Japanese have smaller kitchens and less storage than Americans, so they have to go to the supermarket more often to shop for fresh fish, vegetables and fruit. In America, there's more room to store things like frozen and canned foods, and people stock up

for weeks at a time. In Japan, there is a cultural preoccupation with buying produce that is *shun* [in season]. That's a health advantage, since nutritionists tell us 'fresh is best' for fruits and vegetables."

When it comes to eating, Moriyama recommends the Japanese saying, "*Hara hachi bunme* (Eat until you are 80 percent full.)" In short, stop short of stuffing yourself.

Portion sizes are, of course, part of the problem. People become accustomed to volume, and to stay in business, restaurants and supermarkets have to cater to that demand.

"In the United States, the size of an average portion has completely exploded over the past few decades, which has helped trigger a rapid rise in obesity, which we're also seeing in Europe and Australia," Moriyama says. "The results of Japanese-style portion control are striking. On average, Japanese people consume 2,700 calories per person per day,

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compared with 3,700 per person in the U.S. That means Japanese eat 1,000 calories a day less than Americans, even though Japanese are, on average, only about two or three inches shorter than Americans."

She mentions an anecdote about Japanese sumo wrestlers who toured Las Vegas a few months ago. "One of them looked at an all-you-can-eat buffet table at one of the casinos and marveled to a Wall Street Journal reporter, 'Everything is so big here. It makes me feel small.' Another one stared at a jumbo pastrami sandwich and said, 'It's too big.' These are sumo wrestlers!"

Moriyama suggests taking a Zen approach to food: "Choose the freshest ingredients, cook gently, serve more fish, rice, fresh fruit and vegetables, and take time to slow down and eat with your eyes as well as your mouth — savor and admire the natural beauty and flavor of your food. The secret to enjoying food is to fully appreciate how beautiful it is. Beautiful presentation is the lifeblood of Japanese cuisine."

To non-Japanese cooks, she gives the following tip: "Give your regular big dishes and plates a vacation — try serving more modest portions on the small salad and appetizer dishes you already have in your cupboard. Don't think of it as portion control; think of it as portion liberation."

While much of the wisdom contained in "Japanese Women Don't Get Old or Fat" might not be breaking news on these shores, the book is a valuable reminder of the inherent

health benefits of a traditional diet. To research the book, Moriyama and Doyle interviewed over 30 top science and medicine experts on the subjects of longevity, health and nutrition. "They attribute Japanese longevity to a number of factors — diet and lifestyle; strong social and spiritual ties; a sophisticated health-care system, perhaps some genetic advantages, and 'incidental exercise' — the fact that Japanese are more likely to walk or ride bikes in their daily lives than many Westerners.

As Moriyama's book has been embraced enthusiastically in the U.S., as well as Britain and Australia (where it's subtitled "Delicious Slimming and Anti-Ageing Secrets" and published by Vermilion), she certainly seems to have tapped into the zeitgeist of going back to more traditional ways. However, when you take a closer look at the reality of everyday Japan, a number of disturbing trends are emerging. The awful truth is that many Japanese love their fast food, be it Yoshinoya beef bowls or Big Macs, and breakfast these days is more likely to be white toast and a coffee than miso soup and grilled fish.

Also, there seems to be something else at work: an obsession with being thin. Japan has the highest rates of anorexia and bulimia in the world, and Moriyama notes there is indeed an enormous social pressure to be thin in Japan. For many young women, dieting is a way of life. This desire to be thin may explain the drop in BMI (Body Mass Index) in younger women. BMI equals a person's weight divided by his or her height in meters squared. The problem of "extreme thinness" among Japanese women (which is classified here as being below 17 kg/m<sup>2</sup>) grew from 2.4 percent in 1976-1980 to 4.2 percent in 1996-2000 among young women (ages 15-29 years). The drop in BMI among young and early-middle-age Japanese women is most noticeable in metropolitan areas such as Tokyo.

Yet Moriyama also admits there is an obesity crisis on the horizon in Japan, especially among certain segments of children and middle-aged men. What's more, the increased weight among Japanese men and older women is not always represented by the BMI because when they gain weight, it tends to accumulate in the abdominal region and not the legs and arms. This is the worst place to gain weight as it is more closely tied to increases in chronic disease, such as cardiovascular disease and diabetes. The Japanese waist circumference is increasing, and adults who are not technically even overweight according to the BMI, let alone obese, are showing increased waist circumference.

What's interesting is that women in neighboring South Korea also boast an obesity rate of only 3 percent. So perhaps the next book to emerge from a marketing executive will be "Why Korean Women Don't Get



Naomi Moriyama, author of "Japanese Women Don't Get Old or Fat: Recipes from My Mother's Tokyo Kitchen"

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## From Mom, with love

*Loaded with fragrant toasted and ground sesame seeds, this carrot-tofu mixture is one of my mom's favorite dishes. It was a star side dish in my lunch box at high school. While I often eat it hot over freshly cooked rice, it tastes wonderful when cold, especially on toasted whole grain bread. Serves 4.*

### Mom's Carrot-Tofu Dish

2 rectangles	usu-age tofu (thin sheets of fried tofu)
2 tablespoons	rice vinegar
2 teaspoons	granulated sugar
2 teaspoons	sake
2 teaspoons	reduced-sodium soy sauce
1 teaspoon	salt
1 tablespoon	canola oil or rice bran oil
6 cups	carrot matchsticks (from about 5 medium carrots)
2 teaspoons	toasted sesame oil
1/3 cup	roasted and ground white sesame seeds

1) Bring a small saucepan of water to the boil. Add the usu-age tofu and gently simmer over medium heat, turning occasionally, for 1 minute; drain (this will remove excess oil). Cut the usu-age tofu diagonally in half and slice each half into thin strips.

2) Combine the vinegar, sugar, sake, soy sauce and salt in a small bowl. Stir until the sugar has dissolved.

3) Heat the oil in a large skillet over high heat. Add the carrots and usu-age tofu strips and sauté until the carrots are crisp-tender (about 3 minutes). Reduce the heat to medium-low and add the soy sauce mixture. Cook the carrots and tofu for 2 more minutes, or until tender (but not too soft). Turn off the heat, stir in the sesame seeds and drizzle with the toasted sesame oil.

4) Transfer to a small serving dish.

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Fat," expounding the benefits of kimchi (a traditional Korean dish of fermented chili peppers and cabbage) and *yakiniku* (Korean barbecue chicken) with sunny lettuce.

Moriyama acknowledges that the traditional Japanese diet isn't perfect and that it's often far too high in sodium, from salty foods like pickled vegetables, soy sauce and miso soup.

While the national diet has definite

virtues, Moriyama believes that Japan is at a crossroads: "If it chooses the path of too much fast food, Western-sized portions and less physical activity, it may become a fat nation with an out-of-control obesity epidemic in 10 years or so. But if it holds onto its roots in the traditional Japanese diet and lifestyle, it can continue as the world's healthiest nation." We hope it chooses the latter.