



Once a Week ...

... a short story/essay from woodblock printmaker David Bull

Do You Know Granola?

Do you know granola? A very popular food over in North America, usually eaten for breakfast, granola seems to be unknown by most people here in Japan. I like it very much, but I wish it was more popular in this country, because I think that eating granola could be very beneficial for Japanese. It's not because it's tasty ... although it certainly is delicious, and it's not because it's healthy ... although it is a very nutritious food. What I have in mind is something quite different - granola is a slow food!

I realized this for the first time the other day when I was watching a friend eat granola. She took a spoonful and started chewing. Then she chewed some more ... and more ... and then put the spoon down, and chewed some more. Finally, she felt that it was ready, swallowed the mouthful, and only then picked up the spoon and took some more. It must have taken at least a full minute to eat that single small spoonful.

Now, compare this with typical Japanese eating. Whether it be breakfast, lunch or dinner, the pattern is usually the same. Take a mouthful, and then while still chewing, use the chopstick, spoon or whatever, to prepare the next 'load'. Swallow, and immediately take in the next mouthful. There is never even time to put down the eating utensil. The food goes in ... down ... in ... down ... in a basically uninterrupted stream until the meal is over, usually in just a few minutes.

I encountered what was perhaps the extreme example of this type of eating while having lunch one day recently in downtown Tokyo, when I had a 'meal' in a curry shop specializing in lunch for salary men. You buy your ticket from a machine at the door, then go and stand behind one of the diners as he sits at the counter eating. When he finishes and gets up to leave, you slip into his place, slap down your ticket, get your curry, and start eating. No sooner have you begun when somebody comes and stands behind you, waiting for his turn! All thoughts of a relaxed lunch disappear, and you wolf down mouthful after mouthful. Gulp, gulp, gulp. It doesn't take very long. Gochisosama! Ooooooh ...

Is all this Japanese 'speed-eating' healthy? Well of course as we all know, it isn't, but the general culture here is so highly energized, that slow relaxed meals are very rare indeed. The habit is ingrained from very young ages. My daughter Himi tells me that there are only ten to fifteen minutes allowed for eating their school lunch. The teacher is constantly driving them, "Eat up. Eat up. There's no time for club ..." Most days, Himi doesn't have enough time to finish, and has to throw away the left-overs! This is crazy. We all know this is crazy!

So let's try and change the pattern. I know we can't all take a two-hour lunch like people in some Latin countries, but how about trying a granola breakfast for a good start? It's tasty, it's very nutritious, and best of all - you can't eat it quickly! Slow down ... and live a little!

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