



Peel Me a Grape!

Have you ever been involved in a 'homestay' - when a visitor from another country stays for a while with a 'typical' family? Perhaps you have stayed with a family overseas, or maybe you have had a guest in your Japanese home for a short time.

A homestay is of course an excellent opportunity for both the hosts and the visitor to learn about another culture. The conversations may sometimes be about serious topics, but usually it is the simple things that turn out to provide the most surprises.

If you are involved in a homestay - especially with a guest from North America - and want one of these little surprises, there is no better way to get one than to put a bowl of grapes on the table. The visitor will be pleased - after all, pretty much everybody likes grapes - and will joyfully pluck them from the bunch one-by-one, pop each one directly into his mouth, and then chew and swallow. He'll probably say "These are delicious!", because Japanese grapes are indeed quite tasty, even by world standards.

And then the fun will begin, as he watches in amazement as his Japanese hosts start to eat some. You well know the routine; if the grapes are a large type, the skin of each one will be carefully peeled off in strips before the pulp is eaten. If the grapes are small, they will be squeezed against the lips, with the pulp and juice being sucked in and the skin discarded.

"What about the skin?" he will ask, "Aren't you going to eat that? It's the tastiest part! That's where most of the nutrition is!" And another enjoyable 'homestay discussion' will begin ...

The idea of peeling grapes before eating them isn't completely unknown in the west, but it frequently carries a very strong feeling of decadence. We can imagine an Emperor in ancient Rome, reclining on a couch while slave girls peel grapes and pop them into his mouth. Or we remember the Mae West movie from the 1930s, the one in which she uttered her classic line "Beulah, peel me a grape!", as she strolled languidly across an opulent room.

So the sight of family members around the dining table peeling all their grapes certainly isn't something the visitor expects. When I think back to when I was a child; if my brother and I had ever tried something like peeling grapes, my mother's reaction would have been strong and sharp - "Stop playing with your food! Eat properly!"

And speaking honestly, I don't really think that I want my grapes peeled for me; I'm quite content to munch them with skins on, enjoying that burst of slight bitterness at the moment that my teeth crunch through the skin.

But what's that you say, no grapes this evening? You're going to serve oranges instead? Now that's a different story! Bring on the slave girls!

David Bull
Seseragi Studio
Nagabuchi 8-4-5 Ome City
Tokyo Japan 198-0052
<http://astoryaweek.com>