



At the Bakery

A long time ago, when I first started writing pieces for English-language publications in Tokyo, I promised myself that I would never become one of those foreigners who complains about things in Japan. If you yourself have been overseas, you know how easy it is to sometimes think "Oh, why do these people do such a strange thing!" It's the same for me; of course I generally like Japan - that's why I have chosen to live here - but some aspects of life in this country are exasperating sometimes, and it's difficult to avoid 'complaining' about them!

So may I have your permission to write about one of those things today? I promise that I'm not going to become a 'complainer'!

It happened when I went to our local bakery yesterday. I'm very lucky to have a nice bakery within a two-minute walk of my home. They don't have quite the selection of different breads that would be available in a neighbourhood bakery back in Canada, but they have enough choice that I can always find something for lunch.

As you can imagine, they pretty much have the same selection of goods each day. They occasionally add something new, but for the most part, their 'menu' doesn't vary, so I usually end up eating the same things. Now that isn't my complaint - what happened yesterday at lunchtime is.

This bakery isn't one of those where you pick up a tray and tongs, and walk around making your own selection; it's the type where everything is behind glass, and you have to ask the clerk for each item you wish to purchase. Yesterday when I went in, it was the same clerk I have been dealing with for years, the same selection of goods, the same time of day ... So I thought we would have a little bit of fun. Instead of telling her what I wanted, I simply said, "Give me the usual, please!"

In my home culture of Canada, for a customer to do this would not be strange at all. The clerk would simply grab an assortment of the type of things I usually buy, put them in a bag, and take it to the register. If she were feeling particularly playful, she might even toss in something I never buy, just to make me smile when I opened the bag later at home.

But you can guess what happened here. She froze, not knowing what to do. I smiled, laughed a bit, and prodded her a little ... "C'mon; you know what I like ... just give me a typical selection."

She looked around for help from another clerk. They didn't know what to do either. I wasn't ready to give up quite so easily, so prodded her a bit more ... "Don't worry; I'll happily take whatever you choose!" Still nothing ... she absolutely didn't know what to do. And this was a young girl with whom I have been dealing for nearly five years now, many days a week!

At this point, another customer entered the shop and stood behind me, so it was 'game over', and I of course had to give in and make a selection. And when I go back tomorrow to get something for lunch, I'll 'behave myself' and just play by the rules.

But you know, I do sometimes wish that casual relationships here in this country could be just a bit more open and relaxed ...

There; I promise you that's my last 'complaint' for a while! :-)

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