



## Not so Super Markets ...

I have mentioned a number of times in these stories that I am lucky to have a reasonably good bakery within a short distance of my home. When it comes to other types of food shopping though - I am speaking of supermarkets - I am not so fortunate. There is a supermarket not too far from my home of course - nobody in an urban area in this country is very far from one - but shopping there is a joyless experience for me.

When I moved to Japan more than twenty years ago, I found local supermarkets to be quite interesting. Pretty much everything I saw on the shelves was novel, and as it was my stated intention to 'dive into' Japanese daily culture as much as I could, I wasn't so critical of the food products that were available. My attitude was simple, "So this is the way that Japanese people eat ... OK, I'll eat that way too."

Most evenings we had rice and miso soup, along with some kind of o-kazu. Now and then we would have 'curry rice', or 'spaghetti' or another such western dish that has been absorbed into local Japanese cooking culture. So during those years our family ate pretty much the same sorts of food as our neighbours; the local supermarket was providing what the community wanted, and things were thus in balance.

But as time went by, and our family situation changed (I started to live alone with my two young daughters), I found the offerings available at the supermarket fell short of our requirements. I am not much of a cook, the girls were still very young, and we thus needed a good selection of prepared foods, rather than just raw materials for cooking.

The supermarket did have some ready-made foods on offer, as does my local supermarket now. But the quality is very poor indeed. Nearly all the dishes are assembled from fried foods, and are extremely greasy and unpalatable. And what is worse, the selection is exactly the same, day after day after day. Nothing new or interesting ever appears on those shelves. When I think back to the astonishing variety of prepared meals available at the 'deli' corner of any supermarket back in Canada, it nearly makes me cry!

Now of course I shouldn't complain about this; I have chosen to live here, so I have to take the bad with the good. What makes the situation frustrating though, is that the kind of food I would like to buy is available here in Japan! Back in those early days I sometimes stopped by at an 'international' supermarket when I was down in central Tokyo, and would bring back a shopping bag full of interesting items. But the very long train journey, not to mention the very high prices, meant that such treats were quite rare.

In more recent years, stores with such interesting selections have crept ever closer and closer. If I take a 20 minute walk to the train station and a half-hour ride to a nearby city, I can find a few shops with some very nice prepared meals, and these are not too expensive either. But two hours spent shopping for dinner! I can't do that every day!

But the fact that the number of such stores seems to be increasing is a heartening sign, and now every time I approach my local supermarket I look hopefully for a large banner I so much want to see in the window sometime soon ... "Closing for renovations".

And then ... a short time later I will stroll into the newly-opened market and eagerly fill my basket ... with fresh muffins from the bakery counter, a 12-ingredient salad and a lightly-grilled chicken with herbs from the delicatessen, and a few scoops of rich crunchy granola from the bulk food section ...

In my dreams!

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