



The Sweet Smell of International Amity!

You know, speaking about the bakery last week reminded me of a story I have been meaning to include in this A Story A Week for a long time - about my own baking!

First up - full disclosure here - I am not a good cook at all. I have no particular interest in cooking, am very careless with it when I do finally get in front of the stove, and in the years since my children left home have pretty much lived what is called here in Japan 'conbini raifu', eating for the most part prepared dishes from the convenience store and supermarkets. (When friends from North America hear me talk of 'getting dinner at the 7-11' they are kind of disgusted, but they simply have no concept of what a wonderful selection of fresh food is available in a modern Japanese convenience store.)

But baking is different from cooking. Rather than chop things, and fry things, and mix in this and that, and boil this and sauté that ... you simply prepare your 'collection' of ingredients, blend them together in the mixing bowl, set the oven for the proper temperature, and then stand back until the bell rings, and the wonderful aroma fills your kitchen. (At least that's *my* level of baking, anyway!)

Now I can handle that. At least, with a few tried and true recipes I can handle it. The mainstay of my not-very-extensive repertoire is my muffin recipe. And again, more disclosure is necessary here; I am not starting completely 'from scratch' when I make my lunchtime muffins: no carefully sifted flour, minute samples of baking powder, etc. etc. I am using a prepared mix. But before you shout me down, claiming that using a mix is not 'baking', let me quickly interject that, actually, I *am* using an old family 'recipe'. Let me explain.

Over in the west, muffins commonly come in two types: either a rich, soft, sweet 'cakey' type, or the 'health food' type. Neither is to my taste. The 'healthy' muffins are invariably heavy, quite dry, and always full of any different types of nuts and nuts and more nuts. I like a *clean* muffin!

But the other type - common also to most baked goods here in Japan - is just too soft, sweet, and bland. Suitable for a confection, but not for a meal.

Our 'family recipe' - which my two kids kind of grew up on - is to use a blended mix. When I returned from my trip to our annual family reunion in Canada last month, my suitcase was packed full of packages of muffin mix - oatmeal and bran are my two favourite types. (I'm always a tad nervous coming through Customs with a suitcase full of 'powder', but have never encountered any problems so far. One of the packages did split in transit this time, but there were so many packages jamming the suitcase, that nothing could spill very far.)

When it is time to make a batch of muffins, I use a blend of this mix and a typical Japanese supermarket muffin mix. 50/50 is too sweet, so perhaps it's around 60/40, I'm not exactly sure. (I'm such a good baker, I don't actually need to measure! :-)

I break in a couple of eggs for good measure, squirt in a shot of vanilla essence while mixing (with soy milk), and then as the last step before they go into the oven, put a small chunk of cheese on top of each one. Twenty-three minutes later (at 170 C.) my lunch is ready.

'Nichi-bei muffins' ('Japan/US muffins') - these tasty symbols of international cooperation should be on the menu at the next summit Japan is hosting. I wonder if I should perhaps send some to the Prime Minister for sampling?

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