

Chubby Babies

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“A chubby baby is a healthy baby.”

This was my mother’s philosophy on child rearing. It was the reason she spent the mid-eighties to mid-nineties being followed around by four short, perfectly round children.

My mum is a very good mother. My siblings and I were always polite and well presented (if a bit stocky). As children grow older, there’s less that a mother can do to help them in their lives. One thing my mother could do (and do very well) was make sure we had enough delicious food to eat. And I think that my home was a fairly typical example of New Zealand’s approach to food.

I came to Japan as an out-of-shape (what I liked to refer to as “delectably rotund”) 108kg. Ten kilograms melted off me in the first few months. I was amazed. I hadn’t even really noticed it. This unexpected weight loss finally encouraged me to kick my coke habit (the soft drink, not the illegal drug): something that I had been struggling with for the previous few years.

From that point, I consciously tried to lose weight. I joined a rugby team in Matsuyama and started jogging. I even ran five kilometres in the Shodoshima Olive Marathon (something that pre-Japan Nathan would’ve considered near insanity).

Why am I healthier in Japan than in New Zealand? At the time, I put it down to a combination of things: the heat, smaller portion sizes, a more active lifestyle, walking and riding a bike, as well as singing and dancing with my students. Of course, these are all part of it. But I wonder if there isn’t something more fundamental in the way our countries approach food and health.

You can’t underestimate the power of social pressure. There aren’t many fat people in Japan, and nobody wants to stand out negatively. As a foreigner, I consider myself immune to a lot of social pressure in Japan because I stand out so much anyway. But it’s not always so easy. I had an embarrassing conversation in an up-market clothing store when the staff member had to tell me, using only hand gestures, that their range didn’t go up to my size. I left that shop in a hurry. I was also surprised at the joy I felt when I could finally fit into a Uniqlo XL shirt. It was as if Japan had finally accepted me.

In New Zealand you would never tell someone that they were overweight, and certainly not call someone fat. This was not an idea that my students in Japan shared.

“You look...” they would say, with a confused look, struggling for the adjective. I tried to supply it, “good?” They shook their heads.

“Beautiful?” I guessed. They shook their heads vigorously, making convex shapes with their hands.

“Ah, overweight, fat.” They nodded.

I thanked them for taking an interest in my health. Pretending I was fine, I did an octopus style dance that jiggled my flubber, while I cried on the inside.

Access to healthier convenience foods is important. On your lunch break in New Zealand, you’ve got about thirty minutes to buy and eat your lunch. You’re confronted with numerous burger options, fish and chips, and bakeries. Cheap and fast, but not healthy. Here in Japan, you’ve got reasonably priced sushi, beef and rice bowls, *onigiri*. And the *bentou* that get delivered to businesses and schools are a great idea.

Of course, there are many unhealthy options in Japan as well. But at least these healthy options exist. Without much trouble, you can get a fast, cheap, reasonably healthy meal.

Another big difference isn’t food related. It’s the active nature of the early childhood education in Japan. It seems like every time I cycle past a *youchien* they are outside running, jumping, or marching. A few months ago, the *youchien* near my house was actually doing long-distance running. They had teachers and volunteer parents out on street corners, and these three to five-year-olds were actually running about a kilometre around four suburban blocks. I’m sure some of them were even tottering because they weren’t even walking confidently yet.

I can’t help comparing this to kindergarten, as I remember it, in New Zealand: a pudgy kid sitting in the middle of a sand-pit crying and waving his arms frantically because he’s dropped his sausage roll just out of reach.

I’ve recently been back in New Zealand for six weeks. I was there for my brother’s wedding and I had a lot of meals out catching up with friends. I knew I’d be doing well to maintain my current weight. What I wasn’t prepared for was the food onslaught that came from my mum. Every evening she would say, “I’ve cooked your favourite,” and dish me up a large portion. Before I’d even finished, she was dishing me up seconds. If there was no more, she’d take it off her own, or my dad’s, plate. If I said I couldn’t eat any more, she’d look at me with big sad eyes, as if I was undermining her ability as a mother. So I ate. I put on five kg over six weeks.

There is a phrase that I think sums up the difference in food philosophies between our two countries: “eat until you’re eighty percent full.” I first heard this from a student, here in Japan, who wanted to give me weight-loss advice, and I’ve heard it a few times since in Japan. It was an epiphany. As stupid as it might sound, it had never occurred to me that I could stop eating before I was 100% full. Perhaps a chubby baby is a healthy baby, but beware of mothers who try to keep you chubby your whole life.

