

# The Gastronomic Tale: A Link between Japanese and Italian Food Culture

## Creation and Development of a Book Series for Italian Readers

Stefania Viti

Journalist and writer

**Abstract** This paper focuses on the project of creation, development and publication of a series of books on Japanese food culture within the Italian publishing scene. We will have a chance to discuss the importance of Japanese food and culture's storytelling, and to examine the peculiar choice of this kind of narration, as well as the gastronomic tale as a link between Japanese and Italian cultures. Lastly, this paper will provide a few ideas on the nourishment of the gastronomic conversation between Italy and Japan after the pandemic.

**Keywords** Storytelling. Food. Italy. Japan. Publishing. Culture. Gastronomy.

**Summary** 1 Background and Expansion of Japanese Food in Italy. – 2 Western Gaze on Japanese Food: Storytelling of a Gastronomic Tale. – 3 Gastronomic Tale as a Link Between Italy and Japan. – 4 Subject, Structure and Storytelling of a Gastronomy Tale. – 5 Japanese Food Culture in Italy After the Pandemic: Storytelling as a Market Strategy.

### 1 Background and Expansion of Japanese Food in Italy

The journey of Japanese food towards the West started mainly after the World War II. The first dish to reach the West was *sushi*, which made its debut in the USA, where the California roll, a Westernised form of *sushi*, was created. *Sushi* was also the first Japanese dish to become popular in Italy. It arrived in Europe sometime in the 1980s, as a trend

imported by the USA, spreading to England first and expanding to other European countries (Geri 2015) soon afterwards. The first *sushiya* in Italy, Poporoya, was established in 1989 in Milan, where it remains, and it continued to be one of the few original *sushi* restaurants in the city for many years (Viti 2015). Until the mid-2010s, *sushi* was still the best-known Japanese food in Italy, the identifying dish of an entire food culture. *Ramen*, *sake* and other Japanese delicacies were not very popular among Italians and could be enjoyed only in the few Japanese restaurants located in large cities like Rome and Milan, where customers were mainly Japanese businessmen arriving from Japan. Still in 1990s and well into the early 2000s, Japanese restaurants were perceived as exotic and sophisticated venues, unapproachable by common people, due to the fairly expensive bills and to the obscure menu choices. Up to the beginning of the 2010s in Italy the general knowledge of Japanese food was very basic and mainly associated with *sushi*. In large cities like Milan *sushi* became increasingly popular, albeit still being perceived as a rather expensive, *chic* and somewhat *elite* and *gourmand* food choice. The opening of many *sushi* restaurants run mainly by Chinese helped popularise *sushi* among a larger public, although, the commercial success of *sushi* was not followed by a clearer understanding of the dish, thus creating a degree of confusion as to its country of origin. At that stage, the global wave of exotic and ethnic food had not yet struck and most Italians still regarded Asian food as a single undefined block, unable to trace clear boundaries around every single cuisine and peculiarity. The same lack of knowledge applied to *sake*, which, even up to the Expo Milano in 2015, was still erroneously considered as a grappa equivalent, a rice-distilled spirit with a high alcohol content, to be consumed as an after-dinner drink. As for *sushi*, while the dish enjoyed a growing popularity in the cities, raw fish still faced some degree of distrust and suspicion among people from the provinces. A sentiment which is still true today.

## 2 Western Gaze on Japanese Food: Storytelling of a Gastronomic Tale

From an editorial point of view, the coverage of Japanese dishes by lifestyle and food magazines followed and interpreted the general trend of the country. A gradual change began to occur in 2013, only a couple of years shy of Expo Milano 2015. “The knowledge of Japanese cuisine in Italy has gone through the expansion of *sushi* and the knowledge of it among the Italians” says Paola Manfredi,<sup>1</sup> food and travel editor for the Vanity Fair Italian website.

---

<sup>1</sup> Interview collected by the Author on March 2021.

By working on the web, we have a real perception of the number of readers who click and read an article, which is very important to understand the market and trends. During the years before Expo, we registered a boom of interest in articles about *sushi* that, up until now, has never been equaled by any other Japanese or ethnic food. It was a real wave. I still remember when we started to cover Japanese food by editing articles explaining what *sushi* is, how it is made, the ingredients and the different types. We also made sure to review *sushi* restaurants managed by the Japanese to make people better understand *sushi* and its world. Culturally speaking, I doubt that Expo Milano 2015 has changed the perception of Japanese food in Italy. Rather, I think that Expo catalysed an already existing trend, that saw the spread of ethnic cuisines in Italy. Among these, the Japanese cuisine has been the most popular. The globalisation of food cultures, which has brought about a growing interest in what we Italians call *cucina d'autore*, high-end cuisine created by famous chefs using an international array of ingredients, falls into this context.<sup>2</sup>

An example of this trend is the publication of books *Sushi & Susci* and *Susci più che mai* by Moreno Cedroni (2006; 2014), the two Michelin star chef who, inspired by Japanese *sushi*, created an Italian interpretation of it, even using the Italian phonetic spelling *susci*. In 2013, in Italy, Feltrinelli Real Cinema - the publishing house's series on art film productions - released to the Italian market *Jiro Dreams of Sushi* (Italian title: *Jiro e l'arte del sushi*) (Gelb 2013), a docufilm by David Gelb about the life and work of Jiro Ono, the most famous *itamae* in the world. Jiro Ono rose to international fame when he was awarded three Michelin stars in 2008, and by doing so, he became the holder of the Guinness World Record for being the oldest person to own the three-star accolade. The Feltrinelli Real Cinema releases are accompanied with a book related to the subject matter of the film and I was asked to curate the one related to Jiro Ono's documentary. The first idea we came up with was to find Ono's recipe book and translate it. Needless to say, I was unable to find any recipe written by Jiro Ono, since Jiro Ono has never authored any simple *sushi* recipe books. This discovery led me to a sudden awakening: the approach we had used so far, that is looking for *sushi* recipes, betrayed a wholly Western vision, in which food is customarily described through recipes. The theorem could not be applied to Japanese food. Secondly, the greatest living *itamae*, by having never written a recipe book, had sent a very clear message: *sushi*, while being a dish, cannot be synthesised in a simple recipe. In that period, as a journalist specialised in Japanese affairs,

---

<sup>2</sup> Interview collected by the Author on March 2021.

I was facing a similar problem, since I was frequently being asked to write stories about *sushi* with recipes attached. All these experiences gave me the opportunity to think about how much we knew in Italy about *sushi* and Japanese culture, both from a historical and gastronomic point of view, and I came to the conclusion that, culturally speaking, the popularity of *sushi* had been based on a great misunderstanding (Viti 2015a). A common mistake when approaching the Japanese culture is to believe that to a simple and essential form corresponds an easy technique, in this case a recipe. Furthermore, since the variety of Japanese cuisine was yet to be disclosed, I realised that Japanese food was still closely identified with *sushi*, so much so that it was common to think that the Japanese eat *sushi* every day.

### 3 Gastronomic Tale as a Link Between Italy and Japan

When I realised that, in order to write about Japanese food culture, I had to clarify all these points first, I took the chance to do that by going to Feltrinelli and pitching to them the idea for the book that was to be attached to the Italian DVD release of *Jiro Dream of Sushi*. The publisher green-lit the project and I created an editorial plan for *Il Sushi*, a book that collected a few essays on the history, geography and culture of *sushi*, written by experts of Japanese culture who were happy to contribute. *Il Sushi* was written with a clear goal in mind: to provide Italian readers with the tools to acquire a better understanding of the most famous Japanese food in the world, and to break down stereotypes, by giving new information and explaining the Japanese point of view on the matter. The writing style would have to be simple and clear, intelligible to readers unacquainted with Japanese culture: “our dissemination of the work is essential to reach readers who are unfamiliar with some topics, by expanding the general knowledge. This can have an influence on the market and create new customers. It is much more difficult for a book to appeal to and be read and understood by those who are completely unpractised on a topic than those who are already interested in it. In this sense, it was paramount to choose the most adequate style and topics, so as to overcome reticence and indifference and to sell the article or any other publication to the general public. These are the tasks that need to be undertaken in order to ensure new information about a given topic circulates among the people smoothly” concluded Paola Manfredi.<sup>3</sup> This argument provided me with an excellent motive to propose to my editor to have *Il Sushi* elevated to a project of its own, in a revised and expanded edition. Gribaudo, the Feltrinelli im-

---

3 Interview collected by the Author on March 2021.

print specialising in gastronomy books, approved my idea and *L'Arte del Sushi* saw the light in the year of Expo Milano, during which time the number of initiatives aimed at the promotion and dissemination of Japanese food increased exponentially. *L'Arte del Sushi* did not include any recipes, but it featured essays written by scholars on Japanese culture and gastronomy experts, especially for the project. *L'Arte del Sushi*, curated by Stefania Viti, was published by Gribaudo in the summer of 2015. It needs to be considered that the Japanese culture, including its culinary aspects, was not completely strange to the Italians. For decades, the Italian culture had been permeated by it. However, while on the one hand the narrative of the Far East played a significant part in stirring up the 'exotic charm' of Japan, on the other hand, paradoxically, it distanced its beneficiaries, namely readers, from the true essence and more authentic nuances of an absolutely iconic and sophisticated culture like the Japanese one. As it happens, when we approach great cultures – I think of South America and its 'magical realism' – we are initially dazzled by the icon, the striking manifestation, the bright light that fascinates us, but, at the same time, blinds us with the pleasure of discovering new nuances and shadows, the perception of more hidden lights. In this sense, we worked with the author on a project that could bring back the natural frame of Japanese culture to the general public, with a storytelling integrating the numerous and different cultural levels" said Massimo Pellegrino,<sup>4</sup> Editorial Director and Chief Operations Officer at Feltrinelli Gribaudo. *L'Arte del Sushi* heralded an editorial project that brought us – the publishing company and myself – to continue writing and publishing several books on Japanese food culture, which would follow and often anticipate the market trends.

#### 4 Subject, Structure and Storytelling of a Gastronomy Tale

Since books are commercial products that must be sold and must be read, we need to be able to 'read' the market, that is to understand the needs, the liking and the taste of every reader, and, by doing so, to predict what topics will trend. Following these principles, since 2015 we have published books exploring new dishes and culinary aspects of the Japanese culture as they were spreading across Italy. In this process, it may be interesting to note that by 2016 Gribaudo had published the Italian release of a book written by Jiro Ono (2016). The book is a compendium of the characteristics of the main ingredients of *sushi*, and the most important techniques he uses to create his *sushi*. The title is very simple: *Sushi*, but it includes a very impor-

---

<sup>4</sup> Interview collected by the Author on March 2021.

tant subtitle: *Aesthetic and Technique*, the two main characteristics of any form of Japanese art. In the same year, I published the last book of what I call a 'trilogy' about sushi, *Il sushi tradizionale*, in which I compiled over 50 simplified recipes by Poporoya's *itamae* Shiro Hirazawa. I did indeed include a few *sushi* recipes, but the book is not quite the cookery book that it may seem. From this publication on, all the recipes I have presented in my books have a very specific goal: to make readers understand how incredibly difficult it is to make *sushi* or other Japanese dishes. Raising awareness of the difficulty of making a dish, which is simple only in its appearance, can help readers and restaurant goers better appreciate the value of what they are eating. At the same time, encouraging readers to make *sushi* on their own can help them become acquainted with new ingredients and new ways of preparing food.

In any case, it is not sufficient to be a trained cook. There is so much more to making *sushi* than simply putting rice and fish together. Learning how to make *sushi* entails a willingness to 'think in a Japanese way', and to inhabit one of the most identified aspects of its culture. As I wrote at the beginning of my essay published in *L'Arte del Sushi*: "Masters never explain. Masters' actions must be observed and then repeated: this is the only possible lesson to be learnt" (Viti 2015a, 11; transl. by the Author). Through *sushi*, we thus reach one of the key principles of Japanese culture, which is *kata*, the unique Japanese way of doing things. *Kata* can be learned only through practice: it happens also in *chadō*, *shodō* and any other Japanese art. Only if we respect the long path of *kata* can we grasp the essence of Japanese culture. Whenever I meet - as I have in the past - a chef and they tell me they have learnt to make *sushi* in six months, I always reply that they may have learnt to put together rice and fish, but that *sushi* is another thing. As Pio d'Emilia wrote: "More than a dish, *sushi* is a ritual. A manual. Even more: a compendium of food and cultural anthropology" (2015, 16; transl. by the Author). Only if we understand this, can we fully appreciate the sophisticated way of making *sushi*, its essence, which is the quintessential Japanese way of making food. During my journey across the world of *sushi*, I made another banal but very important discovery: the storytelling of food is, indeed, a cultural performance in which the recipe must be the last actor to enter the scene, not the first. I used this structure for all the other books I wrote. Each book consists of two sections: the gastronomic tale first and then the recipes. The recipes arrive at the end of a literary journey in which the reader is informed by the origin, the history, the geographical characteristics of the ingredients he is going to use while trying to cook Japanese dishes. Recipes are then an expression of a chef's creativity and for this reason, each time I carefully select the restaurants and chefs with whom I want to collaborate. When creating a series of books on Japanese food culture, with my

editor I have chosen to tread an editorial path which endeavours to meet the needs of the readers, captivate their attention and answer the questions they may have on the subject matter. “After *L’Arte del Sushi*, the author returned to the bookshelves with *Il Sushi tradizionale*, followed by volumes on *ramen*, *sake* and a splendid book dedicated on popular cuisine, street food and the *matsuri* (festivals) of Japan. The forthcoming book on tea and pastry is a sumptuous and elegant volume which not only frames the most traditional and authentic aspects of Japan, in what has now become a real method of stylistic approach, but also depicts the ‘other’ Japan, as seen through the spyglass of our Mediterranean culture. This is carried out with no mystification or downright simplifications, but through the eyes of those who have devoted and will still devote a substantial part of their existence to the study of a *locus amoenus*, a second homeland in Japan, and of the Japanese culture, perceived as stratified, complex, not attributable to a slogan or a catchphrase. Japan is a myth and a real country at the same time, and in our project we paid attention to both dimensions. For this reason, Gribaudo is very proud of having given space to this inspiring narrative in their publications” concludes Massimo Pellegrino.<sup>5</sup>

## 5 Japanese Food Culture in Italy After the Pandemic: Storytelling as a Market Strategy

In a globalised world, the dialogue among cultures is an important aspect that can occur through the storytelling of food traditions. Tradition is indeed the keyword of our Italian culture and can be seen as an inspiration to find a literary style to present far-away countries. As in the case of Japan, we can find similarities that may then be turned into commercial opportunities from both sides. “The passion of the Japanese for our food heritage is well known, as evidenced by the presence in Japan of thousands of Italian restaurants and many publications. The attention of Italians to Japanese cuisine is more recent but has significantly increased in the last decade, during which we have discovered the extraordinary affinity between two distant worlds: the search for the authenticity of the ingredients, combined with a painstaking accuracy in the preparation of the dishes and a particularly developed aesthetic sensibility that are common to both cuisines. It should not be forgotten that Italy and Japan are very keen on their traditions in all fields. Today these are mutually studied, cultivated and delved into. Publications keep the dialogue between the two cultures alive, always expanding it to new fields and contribut-

---

<sup>5</sup> Interview collected by the Author on March 2021.

ing to an increase in exchanges favoured by knowledge” said Ambassador Umberto Vattani,<sup>6</sup> President of the Italy Japan Foundation. In 2019, EU and Japan signed the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA), which guarantees 45 high-quality Italian products the same protection in Japan as they have in Europe. The COVID-19 pandemic has definitely thrown a spanner in everybody’s works, but, hopefully, we will soon be able to go on with our lives. However, we must prepare to work very hard, to regain lost market share and trust from other countries. To accomplish that, cultural activities are key, because any product - a dish, a garment, a country - without smart storytelling has a limited visibility, which means a limited value.

---

**6** Interview collected by the Author on March 2021.