
Article Review: Stupid Article in The Australian

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Did you read the article "Saucing the best" in The Weekend Australian Magazine (May 30-31, 2009)? It's a rudimentary guide to "Asian sauces" for home cooking, and it's a stupid article.

It begins by claiming how Australians' considerable assumed knowledge of Italian foods (like olive oils) is incongruent with our virtual ignorance of "Asian" foods and tries to right this ignorance. But the assumption that there is such a thing as "Asian sauces" is the main reason why Australians remain ignorant.

Granted, there are some products like soy sauce that originated in China and are used all over the Asian region. But Indonesian kechap manis is totally different from Japanese shoyu, and you can't just substitute one for the other. Yet the article says that cooks in Australia prefer "Japanese soy sauces" and cites chef Tony Tan's recommendation Kikkoman. Kikkoman soy sauce that ends up in Australia is mostly made in Singapore and far too salty. Ask most Japanese chefs, and they prefer Yamasa or Shoda (Shoda organic soy sauce is one of the products in the picture). Kylie Kwong's quote about not using Chinese soy sauce is worth noting-Chinese product is often not fermented properly.

The author laments that the quality of the "Asian sauces" available in Australia is poor, but that might have something to do with the general quality of mass commercially available products all over Asia. After all, most southeast Asian countries are still poor compared to Australia, and the really yummy stuff that people eat are usually home made (which can be said of all food, Asian or otherwise), or made in restaurants-labour costs being cheaper than here. (We buy our XO sauce from a "special connection".) And it's true, as the article claims, that most good products go to restaurants and are unavailable retail. But given that Australia is a small market, especially for quality non-western products, there's hardly a commercial incentive to import any quality stuff. So it's not an issue of food quality, but economics.

But it's really the lumping together of varied cuisines into the "Asian" category that is keeping Australians from enjoying really good "Asian" food. People here assume "Asian food" is cheap, and certainly some cuisines like Thai or Vietnamese can be, as the ingredients they use are readily grown here and cheaper. But I know for a fact that Japanese food is much more expensive, and it's not an elitist thing at all, it's the difference between cuisines, and countries in the Asian region that accounts for the difference in price.

The article claims that better product is now more available here than before, but quality Japanese product is becoming more scarce of late. There are fewer Japanese expats living here now than say 10 years ago, and they were the ones who could afford the quality stuff. Plus, Japanese restaurants, though just as many as before, are decidedly downmarket, and few use quality rice or even proper bonito flakes for dashi stock. Add the exchange rate to the equation, and we've been told recently that Marutomo bonito flakes are no longer being imported here, as are some other more exotic Japanese grocery products. Expect to see less quality on the Japanese food front in the future.

by Masako Fukui Copyright Kei's Kitchen 2009