

Just to be clear, I am not a food person or a “foodie”. I have always been thin and like to say that I “eat to live” and not “live to eat”! Therefore, my food stories are not so much about the magnificent food choices that are available in Japan, as they are about rules around what can be ordered in restaurants and whether or not those rules can be bent (hint: most of the time they cannot).

We had a Denny’s restaurant that was about 20 minutes away from our house in Sakado, by car. In the US, the Denny’s chain had something called a “Denny’s Combo” which consisted of a hamburger and a small salad. In Japan, the Denny’s menu was much different than the one in the US. There were many Japanese style dishes along with individual odd choices such as potato salad, or buttered corn. In order to work at a food restaurant in Japan, it was necessary for the servers to go through an extensive training. This was not just at Denny’s but everywhere. For example, they were all required to memorize the contents of the menu and then trained to set the glasses, dishes, etc. down in front of the customer without making any noise. This is in direct contrast with the US where servers at chain style restaurants just seem to slam the coffee cups or silverware down in front of you. Or throw the dishes into the tray or bin when cleaning the table with much clatter. In Japan, it’s a much more civilized experience. The only downside is that there are still smoking sections in most restaurants, so they can tend to be quite smokey, where the western world has pretty much banned smoking indoors in restaurants.

I would always look forward to our visits to Denny’s, as it reminded me of home, though the menu was quite different. There was one thing on the menu that was the same, however. There was a Denny’s combo, which featured a hamburger. I would always look forward to going to Denny’s for this very reason. However, nine times out of ten, I would order the Denny’s combo and the server would make an apologetic expression before saying, “I’m sorry, we are all out of bread.” At that point, I would have to order something else, but my mood would be deflated. Now, you think I would have learned over time that this would happen more often than not, as I was in Japan after all. However, I would naively continue to repeat this time and time again. Oh well.

Whenever we would go out to lunch in Japan, regardless of the restaurant, there was typically a lunch menu that had a selection of the “A Set” or “B Set”. These were daily lunch features that were priced reasonably and most people would choose one or the other to avoid having to make any major decisions at lunch. Years later, when my Japanese in-laws came to visit us in the US for the first time and we took them out to lunch, it was at a chain such as TGIF or Appleby’s, etc. They did not speak any English and when the lunch menu came, it contained about 8-10 pages. They were amazed at all of the choices and I was put in the position of having to translate 10 pages of food choices! In that sense, the Japanese system was much easier. In addition, outside every Japanese restaurant they have plastic replicas of the food dishes that are served inside. Therefore, even if you don’t speak Japanese, you could have the server follow you outside the restaurant where you could point to what you wanted to eat.

The downside of the A and B sets was that there were no substitutions, and this could drive you a bit crazy, especially if you're not the type of person who orders things "off the rack" or "off the shelf". For example, the meal would tend to come with a soft drink. However, if you wanted to order a cup of coffee or tea in place of the soft drink, you were told that you can order that separately at a separate price, but you would have to have the soft drink whether you wanted it or not, because it was included in the set. This could get a little crazy; once at McDonalds a friend of mine wanted to have barbecue sauce with the chicken tenders. He was told that barbeque sauce was only for chicken nuggets, and was refused.

The best example of this was when my wife and I decided to go to an Italian restaurant near Haneda airport in Tokyo for dinner. Italian food is one of my favorites and I was pleasantly surprised at all of the choices on the menu. I saw that they had spaghetti and meatballs, as well as mostaccioli (penne pasta). Great! I could almost taste the sauce already. When the server came to our table, I said I would like to have the mostaccioli and meatballs. She looked at me with a very sorrowful and concerned expression on her face. "I'm sorry sir, but mostaccioli does not come with meatballs." Hmm. "Well, you have spaghetti and meatballs, correct?" Now her face brightened up. "Oh yes! Would you like to have the spaghetti and meatballs?" "Um, no thank-you. How about if you take the meatballs off of the spaghetti plate and you put them onto my mostaccioli plate?" Her expression turned apologetic again and she made a sound of sucking in air, which is a way of saying that will not be possible and she was not sure how to answer. However, to her credit, she said "I will have to go and consult with the chef." Great! I thought, here we go, we're really getting somewhere now. After about five minutes the server returned with the chef in tow. The chef looked at me, bowed and said, "I'm sorry sir, the mostaciolli does not come with meatballs, but if you want us to add meatballs to the mostaciolli, we will have to charge you separately. It will be an additional 100 yen." Finally, a decision maker! Though now 100 yen is close to US \$1.00, back then it was only about fifty cents. I said "Yes! That would be great!" It seems the misunderstanding in this case was they thought I wanted to receive the meatballs at no charge, as if they were part of the meal, when I just wanted to eat meatballs and had no issue paying extra for them. Both sides breathed a sigh of relief that this impasse had been resolved (not to mention my wife, who was dying of embarrassment! Definitely not the first time.)