When faced with the image of a sumotori (a sumo wrestler or rikishi), most food-minded people are likely to ask, “What do they eat to look like that?” I asked this question as a high-school exchange student in Japan a decade ago and have been exploring it ever since. The simple answer is that sumotori eat chankonabe, a chunky meat or fish and vegetable stew that they cook for their main meal of the day. But this first, seemingly simple, question invites many more. What is the significance of chankonabe, and what are its origins? What does food mean in sumo culture, and how does its use compare to that in other sports? What about food in Japanese culture in general? How can the Japanese people, whom we think of as health-conscious, and with such a minimalist aesthetic, so value obesity? And how can a society fearful of the health implications of McDonaldization accept sumo—a quasi-national sport requiring the consumption of up to eight thousand calories a day—as part of its religious and cultural framework?

The Rituals of Sumo

The origins of sumo are buried in legend dating back two thousand years. Most sources agree that the idea of sumo, like many important facets of Japanese culture (the cultivation of rice, the written language, Buddhism), probably came from the Asian mainland. The first written record of sumo dates to A.D. 712; it appears in the Kojiki (Record of Ancient Matters), the earliest extant piece of Japanese writing. The first known sumo bout occurred in the year 642, when the Empress Kogyoku had the imperial guards perform sumo to entertain dignitaries visiting from Korea. It is likely that sumo was originally performed as a rice-harvest ritual; the early Shinto influence is still evident in many aspects of the sport. Early sumo incorporated elements from other martial arts, and the rikishi were considered an important source of paramilitary knowledge. By the late eighteenth century, sumo had been institutionalized as a sport. It was nationalized in 1927 with the merger of regional factions and the establishment of official tournaments, and at this point sumo began to be considered the unofficial national sport of Japan. Whether sumo should be treated as a sport, a martial art, a religious ritual, a cultural institution, entertainment, or some combination of the above is a matter fiercely debated among contemporary sumo writers. At the heart of this debate, though, is the Western need to categorize complex Eastern do, or “ways.” Just as a martial art is at once religion, meditation, self-defense, exercise, art, history, culture, and philosophy; and the tea ceremony comprises a social gathering, ritual, spirituality, nourishment, hospitality, and aesthetics—so is sumo complex and multifaceted.

Part of the impetus for this debate derives from sumo’s apparent simplicity. The object is to knock the opposing man down or force him from the dohyo (ring). The rules are basic: no punching, poking, kicking, hair pulling, or pulling on the part of the mawashi (belt) covering the genitals. Consequently, most sumo is a medley of face slapping, head butting, and throws using the mawashi for leverage. The actual bout follows a few minutes of Shinto-influenced ritual: throwing salt to purify the ring, stomping feet to expel demons, raising arms to show lack of concealed weapons, and drinking holy water for strength. These movements are interspersed with the unofficial, invented practices of staring down the opponent, slapping the body, licking the fingers, and wiping the armpits, affectations that some rikishi exaggerate as a trademark. The match itself follows the ritual and lasts an average of only seven seconds.

Sumo has no height or weight classes, though in professional sumo there is a minimum threshold for both (173 centimeters and 75 kilograms). Indeed, part of the thrill stems from watching the “small” two-hundred-pound rikishi topple men two, or even three, times their size. Most people who see sumo for the first time wonder why the rikishi are fat. The physical explanation is twofold. First, having a big belly and strong, heavy legs lowers the rikishi’s center of gravity, making it harder to topple him. Second, because of the short duration of a bout, the taehai, or initial clash, is the bout’s most important part. Having a weighty balance of mass and velocity makes the rikishi attack with the most...
force at the *taehiai*. Thus, smaller *rikishi* need to be exceedingly quick to be successful, while slower *rikishi* use their weight to help them succeed.  

*Rikishi* are traditionally recruited from the Japanese countryside. The prototypical *rikishi* historically has been the brawny son of either a Kyushu fisherman or a poor farmer from northern Japan. In either case, the boy would be recruited by an *oyakata* (stable master) shortly after completing his compulsory education at fifteen or sixteen years of age. Then he would move to the stable for training. An increasing percentage of *rikishi* either enter the sport after success in college sumo, which allows them to start at a higher rank commensurate with their college record, or they come from abroad.

The recruits go unpaid, unless they are among the roughly 10 percent who climb to the salaried ranks. They are given room and board, discipline and “character building,” and a chance to make it into the big time. Promotion is based entirely on the merit of the recruit, which stands in stark contrast to the patriarchal social structure of much of Japan, where family ties, arranged marriages, and birth order are still sometimes surer means to success than skill.

While in training, the recruits and other unsalaried (low-ranked) *rikishi* act as servants to the salaried *rikishi*, cleaning the stable, cooking their meals, scrubbing their backs, carrying their luggage, massaging their injuries, and even helping with their intimate hygiene, complicated due to their girth. In turn they receive gifts and, more importantly, personal and professional advice from the salaried *rikishi*, in a type of apprenticeship. *Rikishi* generally value this hierarchal master-disciple structure between salaried and unsalaried individuals and often resent those who enter directly from college sumo at a higher rank without “paying their dues.” The difference between even the highest-ranked, unsalaried *rikishi* and the lowest-ranked, salaried *rikishi* is referred to as the “difference between heaven and hell.”

**Chankonabe**

The origins and etymology of *chankonabe*, the mainstay of the sumo diet, are not entirely clear. Two explanations predominate. Dorothea Buckingham and others attribute the
origin of the word to the Nagasaki dialect’s words for “Chinese” (e-han), “pot” (ko), and “stew” (nabe). Another camp explains that “…since e-han means father and ko means child, some believe the term refers to a stable master and his apprentices.” Regardless of its etymology, chanko has come to be slang for any meal eaten in the sumo heya or stable.

There is no definitive recipe for chankonabe, since each rikishi makes it differently, based on his abilities, the available ingredients, and individual preferences. Each heya, however, has its trademark style, such as Takasago heya’s kimchi and miso flavor, Magaki heya’s chicken meatball chankonabe, and Musashigawa heya’s weiner chanko (yes, hotdog chankonabe). All of the variations fall under one of two styles—mizutaki (water style), in which the ingredients are cooked in water and dipped into a variety of sauces, like the popular Japanese restaurant dish shabu shabu; or sappudaki (soup style), where the ingredients are cooked in broth and eaten directly from the pot. Chicken is the meat of choice for chanko during tournament time, as four-legged animals like pigs and cows are symbolic of the “four-legged” position into which a losing rikishi may fall; fish and shellfish cannot stand up and fight, either. As for the origins of chankonabe, Clyde Newton states that “Chankonabe did not develop until the turn of the century. However, it quickly became a staple in the sumo world.” Tania Kadokura cites a story attributing the origin of chankonabe to Oyakata Hitachiyama, who initially prepared the stew around the same time. Its popularity grew, she suggests, due to its nutritional value, economy, and communal service style, meeting both the tangible and the psychosocial needs of the stable.

A Day in the Life

A typical sumo day begins in the pre-dawn hours as the lowest-ranked rikishi start their workout. By eight o’clock the oyakata and salaried rikishi begin to arrive and replace the younger rikishi at practice. During this time the chankoban (young rikishi assigned to prepare the meal) begin cooking, while some unsalaried rikishi prepare the bath. Other rikishi essentially serve as weights and punching bags for their superiors. The practice ends around ten or ten-thirty, and the rikishi bathe in order of rank.

The salaried rikishi are then served lunch by the unsalaried rikishi. This is the first and largest meal of the day, as it is believed that eating before the workout will cause vomiting—not conducive to gaining weight. Rikishi sit around a communal nabe (pot) to enjoy their chankonabe, which is served with rice and pickles. Because there are fewer seats than men, the rikishi leave when they have finished; they are replaced by lower-ranked rikishi. The rikishi can punish or reward the new recruits by lingering or hurrying through their meal, or by eating only the choicest morsels or taking a fair mix. By the time the recruits sit down for their first meal of the day—as late as one or two o’clock—only broth and old rice might be left.

The rest of the day is spent doing chores, running errands, napping (believed to be the best way to put on weight after lunch), signing autographs, or doing public-relations events. The unsalaried rikishi typically stay in the heya for dinner, preparing and eating their second chankonabe for the day, which may be further motivation to climb to the salaried ranks. The salaried rikishi may also stay in the heya, but typically they go out on the town, dining out wherever they choose. Married, salaried rikishi go home to eat when not traveling or doing public-relations events.

Wrestling with Meaning

Though chankonabe in particular and sumo foodways in general have not received much scholarly attention, a quick tour of the subject offers rich opportunities for research and analysis. Chankonabe is clearly significant to rikishi. Many rikishi open chankonabe restaurants when they retire. When traveling to tournaments away from the stable, rikishi continue to prepare chankonabe at least once a day rather than eating catered or prepared food. Photographs abound of chankonabe preparation in parking lots, bedrooms, and other inconvenient but seemingly necessary places. Around 1897, W.K. Burton, in one of the first English-language sumo texts, already noted the sumotori’s relationship with food: “The manner in which they made away with anything eatable [sic] or drinkable that was put before them, in any quantity that might be offered, was simply phenomenal, and might have aroused envy of even the most robust European.”

Despite Japan’s cultural aversion to obesity, the rikishi is a national icon, a nostalgic historical anachronism, a sacred object. Perhaps the rikishi’s mandatory diet of the “traditional” chankonabe as opposed to a Western diet further helps the rikishi to continue functioning as a Japanese icon rather than as an image of Western sloth. No matter how chunky the soup, it is highly doubtful that a strenuous workout followed by even a lot of chankonabe, rice, and pickles results in the current sumo physique. Even with the increased addition of calorie-rich Western ingredients such as hot dogs, chanko is, after all, soup. Mary Roach reports that even if rikishi have a post-dinner snack of 2,500 calories at McDonald’s, they do not consider this a meal. Just as
the Japanese do not consider a meal without rice to be a real meal, perhaps rikishi do not consider food without chankonabe to be a meal. 23

If chankonabe is what makes rikishi Japanese icons instead of fat slobs, how is it that a dish with Chinese origins can be so central to a traditional Japanese sport? Joseph Tobin has argued that the Japanese are masters of acculturating foreign objects, which they adapt to make them distinctly Japanese. 24 If they have done this with rice, tea, and soy sauce, and more recently with animation, automotives, and even pizza, then they can certainly do it with chankonabe.

Beyond acculturation, however, chankonabe has a mystical aura for the rikishi that cannot be easily dismissed. In addition to describing the spiritual connotations of the type of meat used in chankonabe, J.A. Sargeant relates the story of a grand champion who spurned chankonabe and suffered the consequences. 25 In 1956, he writes, Yokozuna (Grand Champion) Wakanohana accidentally killed his four-year-old son when he spilled a steaming pot of chankonabe, scalding the boy to death. Following this tragedy, he continued to practice sumo, but publicly denounced chankonabe and switched to an everyday Japanese diet for several months. His form plummeted, and he regained control only when he reverted to chankonabe. Though Wakanohana’s faltering was more likely a function of grief than of nutritional or cosmic deficiency, rikishi cite this story as evidence of the strength-giving powers of chankonabe.

Shizuo Tsuji, a leading Osaka chef and national authority on Japanese cuisine, implies that the fortifying properties of chankonabe and other nabemono (stews) may not be purely physical, but also social: “Friendship and conviviality are the keynote of nabemono, the communal one-pot meals. When one Japanese says to another: ‘Come and have some sukiyaki [a type of nabemono],’ this invitation expresses his desire to become friends. It means, ‘I like you well enough to dip chopsticks with you in the same pot.’” 26 The early oyakata who adopted chankonabe were surely aware of the importance of developing group cohesion among housemates in a largely individual sport.

Many aspects of heya life (and, indeed, of Japanese life in general) reveal a practice I like to call “interdependence by design.” Sumo’s exercise rituals, uniform, and traditional hairstyle all require two or more rikishi to work together in order to be functional. Traditionally, rikishi do not build their muscles with machines; they build them with younger recruits, carrying them on their backs, knocking them down, and throwing them from their mawashi. The mawashi itself is a thirty-foot-long piece of fabric that must be wound carefully, with assistance, around the rikishi’s body in order to cover him comfortably, yet be strong enough to withstand pulling, pushing, and throwing without slippage, to prevent the embarrassment of baring it all to colleagues and visitors at the heya, or worse, on national television. Dressing the rikishi and putting his long hair into the traditional ornate topknot requires at least one helper. It follows, then, that the meal should be a group effort, with the lower-ranked rikishi feeding their superiors, and their superiors’ gluttony or restraint punishing or rewarding their servants. Although this type of group interdependence is a cornerstone of many aspects of Japanese life, visible in schools, social groups, and workplaces, it seems especially appropriate in the heya.

Another social function of chankonabe lies in preparing a rikishi for his second career. A select few rikishi are able to make a career in sumo. These men must climb to the highest ranks and then be fortunate and talented enough to secure a retirement position as an oyakata, for which only a few coveted places are available. Most rikishi never make it to the salaried ranks, and most who do retire in their thirties into local celebrity, not a lucrative retirement. Like most professional athletes, their formative years were spent at practices and competitions rather than at schools and jobs that would enable them to develop as professionals. However, their tenure as chankoban, their local prestige, and, no doubt, their affinity for food, make a career as a purveyor of chankonabe or other food a popular retirement option, especially in a rikishi’s hometown. As Joel Sackett notes, “Businesses related to food are probably the most common areas of work [retiring rikishi] select. Many open restaurants. They have had vast experience in shopping, food preparation, and keeping a kitchen in order, plus serving meals.” 27 Such restaurants are popular among the Japanese as well as tourists, offering a taste of the sumo world and a tangible connection to an iconic way of life.

In their separate autobiographical reflections, Hawaiian-born rikishi Konishiki Yasokichi and Jesse Kahaulua, whose professional name was Takamiyama, recall the difficulty they had early in their careers adapting to their new Japanese diet. 28 Unlike most foreigners in Japan, who can assuage their homesickness with Big Macs, young rikishi in the stable have a choice of either chankonabe or hunger. Kahaulua, speaking of the obstacles he faced in becoming the first major foreign-born, English-speaking rikishi, writes, “More immediate than language, however, was my problem with the food. I found that I could stomach very little of the chankonabe which forms the basic diet of the sumotori.” 29 Both rikishi were thankful that their okamisan, the wife of the oyakata and the mother figure in most stables, initially
supplemented their diet with Western fare until they became fully acclimated to chankonabe.

The necessity for the Hawaiians and other foreign rikishi to learn Japanese, act Japanese, and eat Japanese highlights the relationship between the sport and its foodways. For rikishi, sumo is not only a job; it is a way of life. Rikishi are at work not only in the ring, but also when eating, sleeping, and socializing. They are essentially ambassadors for Japanese culture, both in and beyond Japan, and to adopt this lifestyle is to live it at all times. They wear traditional dress when outside the stable, causing scenes on the street with their height and girth, yukata (light cotton robes), wooden sandals, and pungent hair pomade, which enable their adoring public to identify them easily and strictly monitor their behavior. Successful rikishi are also sex symbols in Japan; the most esteemed marry models, singers, or other celebrities. The most famous rikishi can barely open the stable door without being accosted by swarms of young women. Their large bodies and long hair, both unusual in Japan, are constant reminders of their chosen profession. Yokozuna Akebono, the first foreign yokozuna, complains that “a professional baseball player can doff his uniform and be an ordinary person at home, but sumotori can draw no line between private and professional lives.”30

Since rikishi are forever in the public eye, eating also becomes a public act. Many authors point out that without the mystical and spiritual connotations that sumo has appropriated, the sport could be perceived as little more than naked fat guys hugging.31 Thus, every act for sumotori is ascribed with meaning and can be construed as a political act: an afternoon nap becomes bulking up, a night on the town becomes a reward for a hard day’s practice, and gorging at McDonald’s becomes snacking. Many authors speculate that snacking, along with alcohol, provides the bulk of rikishi calories, and they bemoan the lack of scientific information regarding how many calories a rikishi actually eats in a day.32

Today’s rikishi are fatter than ever. Before World War II, rikishi in photographs overwhelmingly appear as muscular men with paunches.33 As Clyde Newton writes, “With the exception of giants…most early rikishi were somewhat taller than the average Japanese, but not necessarily obese.”34 It is only recently that rikishi have come to appear truly obese.35
and the Sumo Association has spoken out against this trend on numerous occasions. But the causes of such weight gain are not evident, since the pat answer to any question about sumotori food habits is “Rikishi eat chankonabe.” Were junk food or other Western food widely thought to be the major factor in this rikishi weight gain, the sport might lose some of its traditionalism and mysticism, moving a step closer to the entertainment and commercialism of professional wrestling and a step further from being the unofficial national sport of Japan.

As part of their prominent place in the public eye, rikishi serve as role models for Japanese children. Indeed, one of the official goals of the Sumo Association is to aid in “the education of young persons and students.” Ian Reader asserts that “the world of sumo is seen...as providing a correct model of true social behavior, conduct, and social order, and as being the very epitome of Japanese-ness.” Thus it is important that the rikishi publicly eat not only in a nutritious, but also in a Japanese, way, so that the answer to the child’s question, “What do rikishi eat?” is “Chankonabe—a nutritious and Japanese dish.” This practice is reminiscent of the milk-mustache campaign in the United States; both inculcate youngsters with a national ideal—that drinking milk or eating chankonabe is what has made their heroes who they are.

There may also be historic value in chankonabe, which reinforces the anachronistic nature of other aspects of sumo. Komei Hattori provides some insight into the phenomenon of the respected sumo physique in Japan. He speculates that the old-fashioned nature of sumo takes fans back to the days of widespread food insecurity in Japan, when the rikishi physique was seen as desirable, and, as in many cultures past and present, a sign of prosperity and strength.

Many sumo writers mention the forced historicism of sumo. Mina Takahashi explains that “ironically, the concept of having a ‘national sport’ is an imported one, for it was only around the time of the Russo-Japanese War that people here [in Japan] learned that other countries had such things and dubbed sumo ours.” Doreen Simmons writes that many of sumo’s rituals “are modern reconstructions or even a deliberate reaching for the past,” while Koike Tamio states that “For many Japanese, being a rikishi is equivalent to embracing the past.” In light of the twentieth-century adoption of chankonabe as a sumo staple, along with the rustic and nostalgic connotations that any stew carries, it is possible that chankonabe, may, in fact, have been invented in order to be seen as a traditional food.

**Chankonabe**

**INGREDIENTS**

- 10 cups cold water
- 2 sheets of dried konbu (seaweed)
- ½ ounce bonito flakes (katsuobushi)
- ½ head of Chinese or white cabbage
- 8 shiitake mushrooms
- ¼ pound enoki mushrooms
- 1 bag shirataki noodles
- ¾ pound bean sprouts
- 1 block tofu, cut into bite-sized pieces
- 1 pound chicken, cut into bite-sized pieces
- ¾ pound pork, thinly sliced
- 4 salmon steaks, cut into bite-sized pieces
- 8 scallops
- 8 to 10 cups dashi broth
- 2 teaspoons salt, or to taste
- 2 cups cooked rice
- 2 eggs
- Soy sauce
- Ponzu sauce (or light soy sauce mixed with a little lemon juice and sugar)

Soak the dried konbu in boiling water to cover until it has softened. When the konbu has rehydrated, bring the 10 cups water to a boil in a large stockpot, then add the konbu and bonito flakes. Boil for 3 minutes. Strain the liquid, discarding the solids. Return the broth to the pot and set aside.

Cut the cabbage lengthwise into ¼-inch strips. Cut the leeks on the diagonal into ¼-inch slices. Trim the bottoms of the shiitake stems. Remove the root ends of the enoki and separate the mushrooms.

Place the shirataki noodles in a strainer and rinse them with boiling water. Cut the noodles into 3 or 4 equal lengths.

Add the pork to the reserved broth and cook for 2 minutes, then add the chicken and cook for a minute, then stir in the salmon, tofu, scallops, and bean sprouts in turn, simmering until everything is just cooked. Season to taste with salt.

While the soup is simmering, add the rice to the dashi broth in a large saucepan and simmer briefly. Then turn off the heat and crack the eggs over the rice. Immediately cover the pan and allow the eggs to steam.

Set out a small sauce dish for each person. Pour on ponzu or soy sauce for dipping. To eat the soup, each person takes pieces of meat and vegetables from the communal pot and dips them in the sauce. The rice is eaten on the side.

Recipe courtesy of att.JAPAN. Adapted from http://www.att-japan.net.
wrestling. has negative connotations in sumo, especially since the advent of professional speaking of professionals. Rikishi is an honorific designation given to sumotori, especially when speaking of professionals. Rikishi and sumotori are the same in both singular and plural form.


3. Ibid.


5. Short rikishi have gone to great lengths to meet this minimum height requirement, including pounding themselves on the head to raise a bump, incorporating other people's hair into their topknot, and, more recently, having silicon surgically implanted beneath their scalp. The Sumo Association banned prosthetics in 1994.


11. Like many Japanese words, the initial consonant in hana changes for ease of pronunciation.

12. Mizutaki style is also dubbed "shado-shado style" in reference to another Japanese dish with a similar cooking method.


17. Kahauula, Takamiyama, 68. This source shows its age in this instance, as recruits today are more typically given noodles to add to the broth so that they, too, may be allowed to gain bulk, though depending on the generosity of the oyakata and his wife, they may still have to make do with whatever thin broth is available, along with plenty of rice, once their superiors finish.


