Hunkering down shoeless on a flat pillow in a chrome-railed pen about three feet by four, and watching 350-pound behemoths duke it out, might not sound appetite-inducing, especially when doubling up this way makes you acutely aware of your own girth. But sumo fans have appetites to match their love of the sport, and they eat not only to fuel the long day of sitting at a tournament, but also to demonstrate their “face,” that all-important measure of esteem. A sumo wrestler’s face may not be the part of the body you’d consider most important, but in Japanese public culture, “face” is everything. Losing honor publicly is like losing social credit, and it leads to shame broader than the wrestler’s bellyband. But saving face extends beyond the sumotori. Sumo fans are aware of status, too.

Western observers may see the wrestlers as the sporting world’s Strasbourg geese, force-fed and fattened with foods calculated to achieve mega-massive bellies. It may appear that the game is girth and that he who eats most will topple his less weighty opponents. Indeed, since there are no weight categories in sumo, the smaller sumotori must be agile enough to avoid the full frontal power of the larger. Some observers, imagining how wrestlers put on weight with chankonabe, intestinal massage, and heavy daytime napping, are put off their feed, just as we might be by watching a hot-dog eating contest at Coney Island. Most of us, including most Japanese, think of a “diet” as a regime for weight loss, not weight gain.

But real sumo fans, who share masuseki (box seats) with large bags and boxes of foods, have a more discerning and less visceral response to the wrestlers’ bulk and do not see any reflection on their own eating. Two types of status accrue among attendees who are fed: faithful, regular fans have the traditional status, while a more modern status is achieved by the conspicuous consumption of food and place that a company can provide. Modern-status fans are the guests of rich businesspeople and politicians whose masuseki reveals a competition parallel to the one taking place in the ring below. One’s “face” is fed at least as much as one’s belly with the bottomless bags and boxes of yakitori (skewered and grilled chicken) and other prepared foods provided for the day.

How all this is managed, and cooked, is a story in itself. The runners dressed in Edo Period rickshaw apparel who bring food to your box belong to the chaya seido or “tea-house system,” a means of organizing the catering for hundreds of businesses and regular patrons. A chaya is literally a tea house, but that doesn’t begin to describe the organization of hospitality in Japan’s six annual sumo tournaments (one each in Nagoya, Fukuoka, and Osaka; three in Tokyo at the famous Kokugikan in Ryogoku). The chaya are subcontractors working between the massive catering company attached to each city’s stadium and the patrons, both those who pay for and those who enjoy the foods and treats provided. The chaya bring in the customers.

Chaya had their start in the Edo Period, when on the paths to shrines and temples pilgrims and travelers took their ease in roadside huts where tea and dango or mochi (round steamed or grilled snacks of pounded rice with various toppings or flavors) were served. These were koshikake chaya—as opposed to the tebiki chaya or shibai chaya, where spectators at events such as kabuki theater were sold snacks; or iro chaya in the pleasure quarters, where customers of various entertainments were refreshed and could enjoy the charms of hostesses. Of all these types, only the sumo chaya and kabuki chaya are left.

But the original, simple, sporting or entertainment huts are gone. By contrast, the chaya at major tournaments are well-organized, providing tickets, food, and drink as well as souvenir goods to sumo fans, patrons, and guests. The system took its present shape in 1957 and remains in place as a piece of postwar history. Today, according to the manager of the Tokyo Kokugikan, the economic decline has meant a concomitant decline in business customers in the chaya world, with companies tightening their expense-account belts and cutting down on lavish treats for clients. At the
same time, however, access to sumo is not as limited as it once was. More seats are released for ordinary people, some of whom buy seats and meals for all fifteen days of a tournament. And it is not as hard to get tickets as some may think. My own Tokyo masuseki was purchased with ease and a fair amount of cash, at a twenty-four-hour convenience-store vending machine in Kyoto. It came without food packets and benevolent donor, of course, but if you hide your face as you make a purchase, you can certainly treat yourself at the stadium to the same goodies, and some of the same service, that build others’ prestige.

Fans of long standing (as opposed to guests of corporations, who are also well-treated) are not referred to as okyaku-san, the common term for guests, but as otokui-san. The ranks of fans are just as ordered as the ranks of rikishi; the most elite of the otokui-san are the tanimachi, well-heeled fans who make lavish donations to either a heya (a sumo stable) or to a particular wrestler. But wealth is not enough. Being a good fan also means tending the face of “your” stable or wrestler with gifts and devotion. Favorites are given beautiful keshonawashi (the embroidered belts gracing top rikishi), kimonos, and extra-large zabuton pillows; fans gain prestige for themselves in their gift-giving, along with invitations to stable parties, ceremonies, and special attractions. Their food packages reflect the thickness and longevity of their layered connections with sumo.

However, good fans must also demonstrate knowledge of the hierarchical, vertical relationships of sumo as well as the horizontal relationships among fans; upstaging another fan too blatantly will put you out of the ring. When to shout out encouragement or disparagement in the vocal bursts that punctuate a match, and when not to, is part of the connoisseurship of sumo, and a demonstration of face. It’s a delicate business, like the sport itself. The role of an elite fan, unlike that of a less-in-the-know corporate guest, is not passive. Sitting in a masuseki, the one you (and perhaps your ancestors) have inhabited for years, is the result of long-cultivated relationships that can, if properly tended, be handed down for generations, like subscription boxes for the Metropolitan Opera.

Whether you enter as a long-term fan or as a transient guest of a large company, you approach the arena through a hall of about twenty-five booths stacked high with bags and boxes. You hone in on the one indicated by your invitation or assignment and are promptly assigned a runner whose job it is to bring you, and all of your treats, to your box, then to tend you throughout the match by bringing tea, sake, beer, or anything else you might desire.

It is not the quality of the food that distinguishes better-treated guests from run-of-the-mill ones. The stadium’s central kitchen prepares all of the food, and all of it is good, even if standard, picnic-style fare. Though not a formal meal, sumo-fan fare can serve as one. There is always good-quality yakitori, and always an obento box filled with rice, boiled and seasoned vegetables, seaweed, and more chicken, perhaps deep-fried nuggets. A plastic container holds anmitsu, a cooling sweet, while bags or boxes contain sembei (rice crackers) and other snack foods, all of them very good, none of them fancy. Lacquered, sweet, soy-glazed chicken on skewers has pride of place, since in sumo-tournament lore the meat of four-legged creatures is taboo. The meat of the biped chicken—an animal with a lucky posture
compared to the four-legged stance of cows or pigs (whose meat might, through magic or suggestion, throw a wrestler onto all fours)—is preferred. However, this taboo is not strictly observed: at stalls in the back of the stadium you can buy ham sandwiches.

Styles of yakitori range from low to high in Japan. Street stalls offer cheap chicken innards on skewers, while upscale yakitoriya alternate chicken chunks and tender asparagus tips on the sticks; crispy chicken skins wrap around gingko nuts. Tournament yakitori is markedly plain, in the middle range, with chunks of dark meat (preferred in Japan to white) and balls of ground chicken meat (tsukune) deliciously glazed in a mixture of mirin and soy sauce—darker in Tokyo, lighter in the Kansai area around Kyoto, Osaka, and Kobe.

In the obento, foods and their preparation also vary by region and, to some extent, by season—two principles of Japanese cuisine. Preserved foods such as tsukudani (tiny fish and sea vegetables boiled in soy and other ingredients) and salted or preserved fish appear in various versions, and seasonality often rules. You will find fresh bamboo shoot in late spring, fresh mushrooms in the fall, yams and “moutain potatoes” in the winter. Pickles, always served with rice, are definitely a local taste, and preparations of seaweed and tofu vary by region, too. In addition to rice, there may be a single red pickled plum called an umeboshi, a nearly national concept with decidedly local versions.

What approximates our category of dessert is the container of anmitsu, sweet jellied cubes floating in a light sugar syrup with canned fruit cocktail, including a red maraschino cherry and a marble-sized ball of red bean paste. And then there are the snacks. Sembei appear all over Japan, ranging from plate-sized, soy-glazed, souvenir crackers to very small twists and curls and sticks sprinkled with herbs, peppers, sesame seed, even sugar. Some are fried; most are grilled. Each region and shop has its specialty. In Nagoya, small discs have edible flowers pressed into them. In Kyoto, round sembei are grilled and sprinkled with red chile pepper. In my sumo packet, I found round sembei, each branded with the image of a sumo wrestler. Chocolates in the shape of sumo wrestlers appeared in a beautifully wrapped presentation box.

For those of us who come to a tournament as independent visitors, paying as we go, it is possible to buy a bag of goodies from a chaya booth. A Japanese-speaking friend can help choose the right components, and you can negotiate over which foods are included. When I went, I declined a large bag of seasonal roast chestnuts and a box of additional sembei; my chaya bag cost six thousand yen (the full bag sans drinks costs eight thousand yen; designed as an individual serving, it could feed two). At the rear of the masuseki are the democratic food stalls where you can get hot dogs, chips, dried squid, candy, sembei, and many other treats, including small obento. There’s not a lot of status at these stalls, but they allow you to fill up, and they will give refills on beer—most chaya supply you with tea and sake, the quality which will also broaden your “face”—and other supplies if your chaya bag leaves you hungry (which isn’t likely).

The sumo arena fills with customers as the day goes on. The stadium opens at nine a.m., but the early matches between the lowest-ranked rikishi don’t draw customers. As the matches rise up the ranks, the seats fill, and by three or four in the afternoon they might well be full. At the end of the sumo day, which arrives promptly at six p.m. with the matches between the top-ranking wrestlers, the closing ceremonies begin with a “bow dance.” The chosen rikishi twirls a bow, majorette-style, as in ceremonial archery, on behalf of the victorious rikishi. Then comes the final display of conspicuous consumption for fans: platoons of runners laden with large bags of goodies once again rush down the aisles with gifts for favored customers to take home. Presents such as sumo beer mugs, towels printed with images of wrestlers, and food increase the “face” of the recipient and the prestige of the giver. This public display may be worth lugging the gifts from the seats through the crowds, even though these items can be picked up at the chaya booth on the way out. Customers who don’t receive such parting gifts see their higher-status neighbors in corporate-sponsored boxes and think, “Next time, I think I’ll place my order with that company…”

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