Gourmet Samurai: Changing Food Gender Norms in Japanese TV

Abstract: Japan’s obsession with food TV is rooted in its gourmet boom, beginning in the 1980s, when the strong economy encouraged mass consumption of expensive foods and foreign cuisines. Gourmet TV dramas are often based on a popular manga comic and typically reproduce hegemonic gendered food norms, with professional male chefs embodying food authority and expertise often acting as protagonists. In recent years, however, several popular new TV series have introduced a new gender archetype: masculine loners who care deeply about traditional or home-style foods, so-called B-kyū gurume (second-class gourmet) cuisine. This article analyzes four such recent programs and argues that the emerging “gourmet samurai” archetype resonates with audiences because of the recent elevation of B-kyū cuisine and, more fundamentally, the steep decline in the marriage rate, a topic of intense media speculation. The expanding ranks of Japanese singles suggest that many men now face increased responsibilities for choosing or preparing their own meals. The everyman heroes of these shows offer role models to the growing cadres of unmarried men, encouraging them to become manly connoisseurs or cooks of simple, traditional foods and conveying the message that food knowledge and pleasure is as acceptable and satisfying a pursuit as romance, career, or family.

Keywords: Japan, food TV, manga, masculine archetypes, B-kyū gurume

Inogashira Goro, a middle-aged everyman, is Japan’s “Solitary Gourmet,” the protagonist of a popular TV series that aired for five seasons from 2012 to 2015. Like many popular shows, The Solitary Gourmet (Kudoku no gurume) is based on a long-running manga comic, first serialized in 1994. Each thirty-minute TV episode follows a formula: our protagonist Goro arrives at a nondescript Tokyo neighborhood to conduct a sales call for his one-man tableware importing business. Suddenly seized with hunger, he desperately searches for a restaurant that suits his preferences: working class, serving high-quality home-style or traditional foods with a nostalgic air. Goro’s interior monologues reveal his dilemmas choosing what to order and his passionate reactions to dishes proffered. The final, “bonus” portion of the show features the author of the original manga, Qusumi Masayuki, visiting the very places featured in the episode, as the TV series and manga both highlight actual restaurants in Tokyo, blending fact and fiction in a manner not usually seen in American food-based TV programming.

Japanese food-themed TV and media, in fact, offer a wider variety of formats than seen in the contemporary United States, perhaps because the Japanese “gurume boom” became a mass media phenomenon in the 1980s with the advent of Japan’s bubble economy, long before the current Euro-American obsession with food TV (Ishige et al. 1989: 156–64). Japan’s first gurume TV series, Food Heaven (Ryōri tengoku), ran from 1975–92 and Itami Jūzō’s Tampopo (1985) is, arguably, the first internationally acclaimed foodie film (Zimmerman 2009: 29). In 1989, one scholar counted 110 food-centric broadcasts in a single week of network TV, more than any other themed category (Ishige et al. 1989: 167–69). During this era, “gurume” became a ubiquitous catchword that connoted familiarity with a variety of domestic and foreign delicacies and cuisines, rather than single-minded appreciation of elegant Japanese foods, the purview of traditional connoisseurs (bishokuka) like legendary restaurateur and artist Kitaōji Rosanjin (1883–1959) (Hirano 1980, 2008). By 2005, T.J.M. Holden (2012: 122) claimed that, in Japan, between gurume TV shows, food-themed segments within other shows, and pervasive food advertising, “Food is present on virtually every channel every hour, every day of the week throughout the broadcast day.” Recently, the number of gurume-themed TV programs has spiked even higher, perhaps due to national pride in UNESCO’s official recognition of Japanese cuisine (washoku) as an intangible cultural treasure in 2013 (Ichijo and Ranta 2016: 147–54).

While the United States now hosts several cable channels dedicated to food, programming generally falls into the genres of cooking instruction, competitive games, or culinary travel. Japanese TV, too, has had programming in these formats for decades. Fuji TV’s iconic Iron Chef (Ryōri no tetsujin), the progenitor of all such battling chef shows, aired from 1993–99 before its less
scintillating stepchild, *Iron Chef America*, was launched in 2002 (Lukacs 2010; Fuji Television 2004). The “Bistro SMAP” segment on the variety show hosted by aging boy band SMAP, in which the idols compete in cook-offs for top celebrities like Michael Jackson and Jackie Chan, debuted in 1996 and remains popular today. Japanese food TV, however, also regularly hybridizes genres, as seen in *Solitary Gourmet*, which blends travel guide with fictional narrative.

Food-themed dramas, comedies, and animated series, although relatively unseen on U.S. TV, have, in fact, long populated Japan’s airwaves. In contrast with nonfictional cooking instruction or competition shows, which might entice viewers to try a new dish or restaurant, dramatized narratives invite them to identify more deeply with characters, using empathy and emotional appeal to coax viewers toward adopting new attitudes about their food practices.

Many shows are based on gurume manga, which began to proliferate in the 1980s, beginning with Kariya Tetsu’s *Oishinbo* (1983–2014), a manga about the exploits of a culinary journalist (Brau 2004) (Fig. 1), and Ueyama Tochi’s *Cooking Papa* (1985–present) (Fig. 2), depicting a beefy, lantern-jawed salaryman—an urban, middle-class, white-collar worker—whose hobby is cooking for his family (Aoyama 2003: 170). Both are among the longest-running manga series in history. Like *Solitary Gourmet*, *Cooking Papa* mixes fiction and nonfiction, featuring full recipes for the dishes Papa makes at the end of each chapter. Both were adapted into animated and live-action TV series and their successes spawned masses of imitators. Hundreds of gurume manga titles now exist, dozens of which have already been adapted for film or TV programs designed to appeal to a variety of audiences. For fans of machismo, there is the anime *Toriko*, the name of a hyper-virile hunter of rare animals he plans to consume, or the 2011 indie film *Gangster Grub* (*Gokudō meshi*) about a group of prisoners competing to tell the most mouth-watering story. At the opposite end of the spectrum are the beautiful boys of the female-oriented manga *Antique Bakery* (*Seiyo kotto yōshiten*), so popular that it was adapted into a feature...
film in Korea as well as animated and live-action series in Japan (Kim and Min 2013).

Gurume dramas are usually androcentric and often formulaic. A typical gurume romantic comedy involves a young male slacker who transforms himself in order to succeed as a chef or restaurateur, often specializing in either French or Italian cuisine (e.g., Bambino [2007], Hungry [2012], Monsieur [2013], and Dinner [2015]). Another recent subgenre is the historical drama, chronicling pioneering figures such as Akiyama Tokuzō (1888–1974), the first Paris-trained chef to serve the Imperial family, portrayed in the 2015 series The Emperor’s Chef (Tenmō no Ryōrihan), or Takeburi Masaharu (1894–1979), founder of Japan’s whiskey industry, whose story was recounted in NHK’s 2014 morning serial Massan.4 Time travel, another popular formula in Japanese TV, gets mashed-up with gurume themes in TV Asahi’s Nobunaga’s Chef (Nobunaga no Shefu 2013–14), about a contemporary young chef who awakens on a sixteenth-century battlefield and becomes personal cook and advisor to the infamous warlord Oda Nobunaga (1534–1582). In these and other food dramas, the male main characters embody or aim at embodying authority, power, and expertise over food, frequently as a professional chef in the kitchens of top-notch restaurants. Women, in contrast, are infrequently protagonists of gurume dramas and mostly appear as supporting housewives or mothers, romantic interests, or unmarried young consumers fond of sweet treats and fashionable foreign restaurants.

In past decades, gurume manga, and the TV dramas they engendered, thus tended to propagate hegemonic gender norms related to food. Tomoko Aoyama (2003: 158–69) has identified several such norms of culinary masculinity in modern Japanese literature including fondness for alcohol, meat, and offal, knowledge of other cultures through travel (i.e., cosmopolitanism), “aversion to everyday domesticity” associated with women and household chores, and reluctance to talk or care about food unless one is a professional, as it is considered “unmanly.” She observes that with the gurume boom, amateur “cooking men” began to appear more frequently in literature, TV, and other media, but the special meals they concocted were divorced from the tasks of shopping and cleaning—considered women’s labor—and they ultimately cooked to please themselves rather than others. Several of these characteristics correspond closely with masculine food norms found in other societies and earlier centuries, described in a 2005 special issue of the journal Food & Foodways entitled “Food and Masculinities” (Julier and Lindenfeld 2005; Sobal 2005; Roos and Wandel 2005).

Nevertheless, among the deluge of new gurume dramas, some popular entrants have begun to shift rigid associations between gender norms and food roles in Japan, occasionally presenting female leads as culinary apprentices or head cooks (e.g., NTV’s Own and TBS’s Ando Natsu, both 2008) or portraying lead male characters not as professional chefs or critics but as everyday consumers or cooks who care about the food they eat or about the lives of their customers, and who defy some stereotypes of culinary masculinity while confirming others. This essay examines several popular gurume TV dramas that highlight such new representations of culinary masculinity.

I call this new archetype the “gourmet samurai”: a renegotiation of two primary tropes of Japanese masculinity, the samurai and the salaryman (Louie and Low 2003; Roberson and Suzuki 2003; Frustuck and Walthall 2011). Like the iconic ronin (masterless samurai) heroes of Kurosawa Akira films, the gourmet samurai is a taciturn loner who values autonomy and integrity. He is a traditionalist, favoring consistency over the latest fashions, and eschews swagger but demonstrates extreme competence in food, his area of expertise. In the 1960s, the salaryman became an icon of postwar masculinity, whose institutional loyalty and competitiveness vaulted Japan into international economic dominance (Hidaka 2010; Dasgupta 2005). Unlike the samurai loner, he was a family man, a breadwinner who left domestic labor, including food matters, in the hands of his full-time housewife.

The new TV archetype is often a salaryman in appearance, but is uninterested in romantic and familial relationships and more closely resembles the samurai ronin in his values. Food is the main source of these characters’ emotional lives and identities, acting as a substitute for sex, companionship, or professional success. While deeply devoted to food, they prefer nostalgic, everyday meals to the fancy or foreign cuisines favored by professional chefs and critics in earlier gurume dramas. In sum, the gourmet samurai is a virile but unmarried Japanese everyman with a demanding—if quotidian—palette, who makes no apologies for his culinary tastes and indulgences.

The ennoblement of ordinary foods in these dramas accords with the recent boom in “B-kyū gurume” (second-class gourmet), shorthand for “fast, cheap, and tasty” comfort foods that satisfy hearty appetites including dishes such as ramen, fried noodles (yakisoba), and savory pancakes (okonomiyaki) (Fig. 3). The concept was born alongside, and in reaction to, the larger gurume boom of the 1980s, which was rapidly transforming mainstream food values by popularizing foreign-associated fine dining and fussy home cooking for mass audiences. Many iconic dishes of B-kyū cuisine, like the rice omelet (omuraisu) and fried pork cutlets (tonkatsu), also had foreign
to describe unusual food combinations or faddish trends like Coffee Ramen or Chocolate Tonkatsu.

This article argues that the “gourmet samurai,” as an emerging media archetype of culinary masculinity, resonates with audiences not only because of the new visibility of B-kyū foods, but also due to rapidly changing social demographics, namely the precipitous decline in marriages and the recognition of the “singleton” (ohitosama) as a growing identity within consumer society (Ueno 2007, 2012). The new archetype reflects and celebrates this situation, although it does so primarily for men, perhaps because single women are often demonized by ideologues and the mass media as selfish, overly picky, career-oriented women who are to blame for the steep dip in the marriage and birth rates (Haruka 2000). These new programs, on balance, seem to suggest that the accumulation of food knowledge and maximization of food pleasures by single men is as acceptable and satisfying a pursuit as romance, career, or family.

In Japan, academic studies of national foods and food practices emerged with the gourmet boom of the 1980s–1990s and have engaged historians and anthropologists of culture and everyday life ever since. Their texts often employ a sweeping historical approach, examining dietary culture according to received chronological divisions in national history (Ishige 1995, Kumakura 1999, Ishige and Tamura 1999; Harada 2003, Haga 1996-1999, Ehara et al. 2009). Such works tend to highlight Japanese culinary exceptionality, whether through foods or food values considered “uniquely Japanese,” such as natto (fermented soy beans) and strict seasonality, or through the nation’s ability to thoroughly domesticate “foreign” foods like tempura, ramen, and curry. They encourage culinary nationalism through forging an “intimate, indissoluble bond between cuisine and country” (Ferguson 2004: 81). In sum, such scholarship rarely uses food as a critical lens to examine social issues, hegemonic ideologies, or entrenched gender biases.

Feminist scholars such as Laura Shapiro, Sherrie Inness, and Carole Counihan have long argued that food is a powerful component of gender identity; hegemonic conceptions of masculinity and femininity are performed through acts of food preparation, consumption, and representation in a manner that often reflects social and economic gender inequalities (Shapiro 2004, 2008; Inness 2003, 2006; Counihan 1999, 2012).
English-language scholarship on Japanese culinary identity has begun to apply a gendered lens to studies of food practices by, for example, examining the housewife’s responsibility for producing nationally approved meals (Allison 1991; Sand 2003: 55–94; Higashiyotsuyanagi 2010) and the role of the military in popularizing new dietary practices (Cwiertka 2006: 56–87).

TV programming—ubiquitous, inexpensive, and easily accessible—is arguably the most prominent and effective form of media for disseminating a society’s unequal gendered food ideals (Swenson 2009). Scholarship addressing the relationship between American food TV and gender norms has found, unsurprisingly, that food programming tends to uphold a gender binary, with female “coks” in home kitchens and male “chefs” in professional kitchens and competitive arenas (Swenson 2009; Naccarato and LeBesco 2012; Rousseau 2012). T.J.M. Holden’s seminal article on masculinity in Japanese food-centric TV game shows and variety shows argued that the emblematic figure of Japanese masculinity, the salaryman, was absent from this type of programming, yet the men who appeared—a diverse collection of chefs, transvestites, athletes, and entertainers—nevertheless still embodied the characteristics of patriarchal masculinity that the salaryman embodied: authority, expertise, and competitiveness (Holden 2012: 123–29). In this article, I update Holden’s findings and demonstrate that male protagonists in current food dramas actually are depicted as ordinary, salarymen types who embody new patterns in masculine relationships with food that conform to Japan’s changing social landscape.

The shows selected as examples originated as manga and were adapted into TV series that ran for multiple seasons on major networks, indicating a wide and diverse viewership. In these programs, bachelors roam the urban landscape seeking solace or identity through consuming or producing comfort foods. The new heroes are stoic yet suave iconoclasts who sell solace or identity through consuming or producing comfort foods. The new heroes are stoic yet suave iconoclasts who sell solace or identity through consuming or producing comfort foods. But unlike the gourmet samurai, he is friendly and garrulous, often reacting to novel situations or the prospect of food with a boyish glee. In appearance, he is less overtly masculine than the others and more “metrosexual” with an elaborately feathered coiffure. His deep cosmopolitanism, embodying both European and Far Eastern civilizations with ease, also distinguishes him from the later characters who tend to seek out the cultural remnants of pre-bubble economy Japan. Furthermore, Takano’s superhuman senses, along with his superhero-like ability to wield his special golden chopsticks like a weapon, mark him as an exceptional and extraordinarily talented human being. Thus, unlike the everyman heroes of the shows discussed below, Detective Glutton cannot serve as a realistic role model for new conceptions of culinary masculinity among the masses.

**THE SOLITARY GOURMET**

During the opening sequence of TV Tokyo’s *The Solitary Gourmet*, a deep, authoritative voice-over proclaims: “When a man indulges in satisfying his hunger, he focuses on himself. He is momentarily liberated, freed from disturbances by anyone. To eat freely is an act of dignity, an act that offers the utmost comfort equally to all modern people of the world.”

Goro, played by the popular actor Matsushige Yutaka, is a loner whose solo nature is revealed in the first episode. When he contemplates opening his own antique shop, he quickly
rejects the idea: “It’s just like a marriage, open a shop and you’ll add more things that you must protect and life becomes more complicated. I’m a man who basically prefers to be light and free.” He works alone at his import business to spare himself from “annoying interpersonal relations.” Most of the dialogue is in the form of voice-over, representing Goro’s interior, food-centric monologues. Like Kurosawa’s samurai, Goro is reserved and uncommunicative with others, and visibly uncomfortable around chatty female clients who remark on his sour countenance.

Food appears to be the only thing that can bring a smile to Goro’s face, and the biggest decision he faces daily is what to have for lunch. He favors older, shabby establishments with good cheap food that cater to male clientele, the type of nostalgic haunt sometimes referred to as an “old man oasis” (oya-jita-chi no oashisu) (Fig. 4). Episodes are named for the B-kyū style dishes he selects that day, like the Chicken and Egg Rice Bowl (oyakodon) (Fig. 5), Spaghetti Napolitan, or Simmered Fish Meal set (nizakana teishoku). Goro’s interior monologue often reflects his deep emotional relationship with food, e.g., “The sauce has permeated the fish so well that the taste has permeated my heart” or “Finding a good eatery is a once in a lifetime opportunity—it must be fate.” When faced with a difficult choice between two restaurants, he feels as if he is deciding between two beautiful women. Choosing one, he bows and apologizes to the rejected shop, promising to visit soon.

Food clearly acts as a substitute for sex for Goro, although more markedly in the show’s first season. As he eats, a loud

**Figure 4:** Inogashira Gorō (played by Matsushige Yutaka) is The Solitary Gourmet, in a typical example of the type of nostalgic restaurants he prefers.

**Figure 5:** Example of oyakodon, literally parent and child bowl, a B-kyū dish made with chicken, eggs, and dashi stock served over rice.

SOLITARY GOURMET FROM NAVY (HTTP://MATOME.NAVERO.JP/ODAI/2141459493671367401 WITH ORIGINAL SOURCE FROM HTTP://PRTIMES.JP/ MAIN/HtM/HTML/RD/P/000000185.000002734.HTML) © PR TIMES INC.

OYAKODON 1.JPG BY A 4-HYKWHTTPS://JA.WIKIPEDIA.ORG/WIKI/%E5%88%A9%E7%94%85:HYKW-A4A4-HYKW (HTTPS://JA.WIKIPEDIA.ORG/WIKI/%E3%83%95%E3%82%A1%E3%82%AB:OYAKODON 1.JPG) IS LICENSED UNDER CC BY SA
drumbeat increases in tempo and he audibly gasps, grunts, and moans while his interior monologue excitedly proclaims “Yes! Yes! Mmmm . . . Mmmmm” or makes suggestive double entendres. At an eatery where customers grill their own offal (horumon), as his meats sizzle away, he thinks, “Finally I can hear the cry of the meat I’m going to eat.” Or while eating braised pork belly from Japan’s tropical southernmost islands, he thinks, “Yum! Yum! Let’s have an Okinawan festival all by myself.” It is no accident that the word for “festival,” omatsuri, is also slang for sex. In another episode he finds his grilled seafood appetizer “Plump, plump yet delicate . . . Yes! Yes! Like I thought—the milk of the sea!” and receives the main course with “Hot! Hot! Good! Good! Mmm, this taste, this taste! So good, so good!” Following a satisfying meal he sometimes runs out of the restaurant for a seemingly postcoital cigarette or notices the “good sweat” he has worked up.

Viewers are notified that Goro is not gay through a flashback, revealing he was once in love with a woman named Sayuki but refused to marry her. In another episode, he encounters a long-lost friend who is now a transgender woman. When the friend urges Goro to fall in love again, Goro blurts out, “Please live your life in the way you want—I . . . am hungry!” as he rushes out to find lunch.

The Goro character both embodies and defies hegemonic Japanese gender norms, including food norms. Though self-employed, his appearance is that of a salaryman, with indistinguishable suit, tie, and briefcase in every episode. He is attractively masculine, tall and handsome with a slight pompadour, and is highly competitive, as we learn when he plays shogi (a chess-like game) with retirees in a park. He frequently stops by shrines in the neighborhoods he visits, signaling his respect for Japanese traditions. In terms of food norms, on one hand, he rejects stereotypical masculinity by abstaining from alcohol, embracing sweet treats, and passionately caring about his meals; on the other he shares the aversion to domesticity, love of meat and offal, and reluctance to actually discuss food—though internally preoccupied with it—identified by Aoyama for literary characters.

Overall, Goro’s worshipful consumption of B-kyū meals demonstrates to viewers that men do not have to eat delicacies or frequent fancy establishments to acquire a gourmet consciousness. Everyman has the resources to cultivate culinary capital by learning to truly appreciate everyday foods prepared unpretentiously with quality ingredients in a comfortable setting. Busy salarymen often eat alone at lunch, sometimes at quick, cheap “standing-only” (tachigui) restaurants. Goro encourages them to savor their meals; his message is that eating alone is neither undesirable nor a matter of expediency, but rather an opportunity for self-indulgence and deep self-satisfaction.

FOOD STRATEGIST

The Solitary Gourmet proved so popular that another series based on a different gurume manga authored by Qusumi premiered in April 2015. The protagonist of Food Strategist (Shoku no gunshi) is Hongo Ban (Tsuda Kanji), another single, middle-aged salaryman in a trenchcoat and suit, who approaches eating like a battle, with tactics designed to prove himself superior to opponents (Fig. 6). In many restaurants serving traditional foods, such as sushi, tempura, yakitori (Fig. 7), and oden (a kind of stew), customers are seated at counters in front of the cook and do not order all at once, but as they go along. Through the sequence and content of orders, the consumer demonstrates the type of savoir faire associated favorably with another trope of masculinity, the biss (sophisticate), men who demonstrated a command of cultural knowledge in the pleasure quarters of Edo (now Tokyo) (Seigle 1993: 131–36). When ordering oden, for example, well-informed customers first select items of different shapes and textures to gauge the overall quality of the shop. Like the venues of Solitary Gourmet, the places visited are usually reminiscent of earlier
times—portable carts (yatai) and small eateries in the shitamachi area of Tokyo, the “low city” east of the Sumida River where Edo-era merchants and artisans resided.

Hongo is assisted in his battles by a famous third-century Chinese military general, Kongming (proper name Zhuge Liang, 181–234 AD), who resides in his subconscious and provides advice on strategic advance. Animated fantasy sequences emphasize the combative, masculine nature of Hongo’s enterprise: he spies his sushi through a gun-sight, deciding which to consume first, and compares his bouts against his rival, Rikishi Kaoru (Takaoka Sōsuke), to historical battles between Takeda Shingen (1521–1573) and Uesugi Kenshin (1530–1578).

Hongo aspires to be a culinary tsū, but is neither suave enough nor bold enough. He is an arrogant fool who childishly breaks into a skip when nearing restaurants, peeps and leers pervasively at women, overdrinks, and ends many episodes waking from a drunken stupor in his tiny quarters, feeling humiliated by his defeat at the hands of his rival Rikishi, a handsome, younger man who always wears a simple gray hoodie. When Rikishi confidently orders pig womb (kobukuro) and breast (oppai), Hongo rues his own discomfort at naming such private female parts in front of other customers. It is actually Rikishi who represents the gourmet samurai and desirable tsū, a self-possessed expert who chooses his words sparingly but outperforms Hongo in ordering the best dishes in the most optimal sequences at every venue, earning the admiration of chefs and other clientele alike. Food Strategist promotes the pursuit of food knowledge as a masculine ideal and provides tips on how viewers can order food skillfully, but cautions against the vulgarity, pretentiousness, and drunkenness displayed by Hongo. Rikishi’s restrained appearance and quiet demeanor, complementing his tasteful wielding of food knowledge, merit the respect that the more flamboyant Hongo craves but cannot achieve.

Qusumi’s latest gourmet manga, High Plains Gourmet (Kōya no gurume) and Rustic Samurai Gourmet (Nobushi no gurume), provide similar average Joe type protagonists. High Plains Gourmet focuses on nostalgic izakaya pubs where an after-work, mostly male clientele pairs snacks and side dishes with beer, highballs, or other strong drink, and where food is often secondary to alcohol. In this manga, the salaryman protagonist is depicted as a cowboy facing a vast wilderness of urban drinking establishments, resembling spaghetti western drifters who were actually based on samurai ronin from Kurosawa films. Rustic Samurai is the alter ego of a paunchy, unemployed loser who enjoys historical novels. When he eats his cheap meals out alone or cooks his own simple meals at home, he often asks himself “What would the Rustic Samurai do?” (Nobushi nara, dō suru) in that food situation, fantasizing about historical food scenarios. Qusumi’s adoption of a samurai character as the daydream identity for a solitary misfit diner confirms the attractiveness of the samurai trope as a model for the new culinary masculinity. Time will tell whether these manga, too, are adapted for TV.

FIGURE 7: Examples of types of yakitori, grilled chicken skewers, including chicken thigh alternated with green onion (negima) and chicken meatball (tsukune).

NEGIMA BY HASIO (HTTPS://COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA.ORG/WIKI/CATEGORY:YAKITORI#/MEDIA/FILE:NEGIMA.JPG) IS LICENSED UNDER CC BY 2.0
The final example offered is Late Night Diner (Shinya shokudō), based on a manga by Abe Yarō, broadcast on TBS for three seasons in 2009, 2011, and 2014 and released as a feature film in 2015 (Fig. 8). The story centers on a rundown izakaya open from midnight to 7 a.m. with a sordid and eclectic clientele of gangsters, strippers, police detectives, poets, and the occasional salaryman (Fig. 8). The sign hanging outside simply proclaims “Grub” (meshi, a masculine term for food) and the menu, posted on the wall, contains just four cheap items: tonjiru (a pork and miso stew) and three kinds of alcohol: beer, sake, and shōchū, a strong white liquor. The diner’s mysterious owner, known only as Master (a common appellation in Japan for men running small businesses, played by Kobayashi Kaoru), will, however, prepare any dish a customer requests if he is able.

Like Solitary Gourmet, each thirty-minute episode is named for a simple comfort food that Master makes for a given customer, the central character of that episode: e.g., red wieners for the gangster Ryūchan (played by Goro actor Matsushige Yutaka), pickled cabbage for the screenwriter Tsukiko, and fried chicken for Saya, exhausted by her work at a pachinko parlor. The diner’s hard-luck customers have all made mistakes in their lives and loves, but the foods Master prepares evoke happier times and places, providing hopefulness and strength to help them resolve their problems: Ryūchan reunites with the lost love who first made him wieners, Tsukiko ends a scandalous affair with her producer, and Saya leaves her abusive boyfriend. Each episode concludes with that character explaining the recipe as Master demonstrates, another hybrid format, here combining drama with cooking instruction rather than restaurant guide.

Master exudes a calm, confident masculinity, invariably wearing deep blue samue work clothes with wooden geta clogs, the manly attire of traditional artisans and Zen monks. A large scar across his left eye hints at a violent or criminal past and adds to his tough but cool mien. He appears romantically unattached, without personal relationships outside the diner, though the feature film hints at past romance with the proprietress of a high-end traditional restaurant. Like Goro, his respect for Japanese religious tradition is demonstrated through nightly rites at a tiny, adjacent shrine. Both are men of few words; Master speaks little besides acknowledging orders with an authoritative “Coming right up!” (haiyo!) and occasionally offering nuggets of advice to his customers.

In contrast with the male characters described above, however, Master’s food identity does not revolve around what he consumes but what he produces—homey foods that his customers equate with “Mom’s cooking.” Like the idealized Japanese mother, he is both responsible for all cooking-related labors, such as shopping and cleaning, and is dedicated to nurturing and soothing his family of customers with comforting meals. Food does not seem to be a substitute for sex or sociality for Master; rather, he and his diner act as substitutes...
for home and family, providing a space of succor and nourishment for quirky, lonely souls trying to survive the gritty city. Master thus promotes a new masculine culinary norm—a hard-boiled nurturer, simultaneously maternal in his food labor and paternal in his guidance and support of his family of customers.

A strong sense of both melancholy and nostalgia—the lost promises of the past—suffuses each episode, heightened by the show’s mournful soundtrack. With its U-shaped wooden counter, dingy kitchen, and old-fashioned clock chiming midnight at the beginning of each episode, the diner appears suspended in in time. One regular customer, a poet, even dresses in early twentieth-century Japanese fashions. Passing under the diner’s noren curtain, customers escape twenty-first-century disillusion and malaise for the timeless balm of Master’s sincere and attentive hospitality, or omotenashi, a key value in Japanese service culture. Omotenashi includes the ability to create an intimate, relaxing, yet personalized environment for guests through unobtrusive service, a quality found in traditional inns and tea ceremonies but believed missing from most modern restaurants and hotels. The embodiment of omotenashi in the dilapidated diner and Master’s rugged exterior suggests that, while authentic Japanese hospitality is increasingly rare in contemporary Westernized society, it can be found in surprising guises, in neglected pockets of the city unchanged by the bubble economy and its collapse.

In contrast with the shows discussed above, Diner includes several recurring female customer roles but often conveys a negative message about feminine strength. The trio of thirty-something “office lady” friends who share a love of tea over rice (ochazuke) are bitter, sharp-tongued spinsters. Younger, more attractive women who frequent the diner are generally in some form of trouble—emotional or financial—and must be saved by Master or other male characters. When Tsukiko, the successful female screenwriter, claims that she is confident and assertive, another client retorts that these are defects she must fix. Thus, while the strong yet sensitive Master offers a new model of masculinity for male viewers, female viewers are cautioned to maintain traditional gender norms; they must remain helpless and demure to attract male attention.

**Contextualizing New Culinary Masculinities**

Several factors help explain the emergence of the gourmet samurai archetype, the everyman who cares and is knowledgeable about the unpretentious food he cooks and/or consumes. For one, it accompanies an array of new food-centric consumer goods and services marketed toward men, including glossy gourmet magazines and male-only cooking schools and lessons. A wildly popular chain of restaurants, established in 2011, including branches named Oreno Furenchi, Oreno Italian, and Oreno Supanisshu, invites regular guys to casually sample cuisines that might be unfamiliar. Since “Ore no” is a colloquial masculine form of the pronoun “my,” the restaurants’ names might be glossed as “Dudes’ French,” “Blokes’ Italian,” and “Spanish for Gents” respectively.

More fundamentally, however, these media and consumer trends reflect national demographic and economic changes that have affected patterns of eating. Japan’s marriage rate has declined steadily for decades, and especially steeply since 2000 (Raymo et al. 2015). As reported by Julian Ryall in a February 14, 2015 article in the Telegraph, nearly half of all Japanese men between the ages of thirty and thirty-four were unmarried, in comparison with twenty-one percent in 2005. In her best-seller I Will Not Marry! (Kekkon shimasen), TV personality Haruka Yoko explained that women increasingly rejected marriage for career because it was impossible to successfully maintain both in Japanese society. She asserted that women choosing the path of the housewife must forever sacrifice their interests, dreams, and comfort to those of their husband and family.

Such housewives are, of course, generally responsible for planning and preparing breakfasts, dinners, and sometimes bento lunches for their families. The decline in marriage rates thus suggests that many average men, historically uneducated about food, face increased responsibilities for choosing or preparing their own meals. At the same time, the low salaries and long working hours of the post-bubble economy have limited the amount of time and money unmarried men might devote to culinary pursuits. Ryall noted that average urban apartments, at a tiny 450 square feet, further inhibit learning practical cooking skills. The new shows encourage the growing cadres of single men to seek out cheap and tasty home-style meals or traditional foods rather than subsisting on processed convenience store offerings or fast food.

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, the mass media has often turned to gendered caricatures to explain this growing prevalence of singletons in society, deemed a threat to national interests by inhibiting the birth rates required to maintain Japan’s overall economic standing. Young women who continued to live with their parents, selfishly spending their earnings on cosmetics and travel, were dubbed “parasite singles” (Yamada 1999). Fashionable, heterosexual men in their twenties and thirties who seemed to have little interest in marriage or sexual relationships were christened “herbivores” (“soshoku danshi,” literally grass-eating men), who, like bovines, were uninterested in consuming flesh. In a
November 10, 2009 New York Times column on modern phrases, Japan’s herbivores were described as “metrosexuals without the testosterone.” A 2009 book by Megumi Ushi-kubo, *Herbivores and Girlmen Are Changing Japan* (Soshuku kei danshi ojo-man ga Nippon o kaeru), further specified that herbivore men tended to be noncompetitive momma’s boys who were typically quiet and submissive, traits associated with femininity. Nevertheless, unmarried men began embracing the term themselves; on February 16, 2012, *Japan Today* cited one survey of four hundred single men around the age of thirty, reporting that a full seventy-five percent self-identified as “herbivores.”

As the buzzword gained currency, new variations using food-based metaphors emerged to further explain declining marriage and birth rates and the changing landscape of male-female relationships. The *Japan Today* article described how carnivorous men (*nikushoku danshi*) were adept at seduction and attractive to young women, who considered them strong and reliable, but were an endangered species and unlikely to marry, while fish-eaters (*gyōshoku danshi*) were overly passive, waiting to marry until a woman they found attractive first declared her love. Cabbage-roll men only appeared to be herbivores externally, but turned into raging carnivores on dates, all vegetable on the outside, concealing red meat inside. The media also blamed the apparent increase of herbivore men on “carnivorous women” (*nikushoku joshi*), deemed overly masculine and undesirable for their loud, aggressive behavior and career orientation.

In conclusion, the various factors described above—the enduring popularity of Japanese gurume media, the elevation of B-kyū comfort foods, the decline of the marriage rate alongside other shifting demographics, and new media characterizations of gender—have influenced men’s relationships with food and encouraged the portrayal of previously unthinkable male protagonists on food TV, like the Solitary Gourmet, Food Strategist, and Master. These new characters first became popular among readers of gurume manga, but as they were transformed into network TV programs, the new norms of culinary masculinity they offered were widely disseminated among mainstream audiences. The “gourmet samurai”—the attractive, everyday heroes of these shows—could become role models that empowered ordinary men to similarly pursue new relationships with food as companionless consumers, cooks, and connoisseurs.

These characters challenge certain gender norms by, for example, injecting a rhetoric of caring into male roles and sanctioning male teetotaling, or endorsing solitary bachelorhood over heteronormative romance. The salarymen depicted are no longer deeply tied to their corporations or role as familial provider. Nevertheless, the new protagonists retain and reproduce other masculine stereotypes, such as authoritative knowledge and competitiveness. They valorize traditionally “manly” appearance and demeanor, thought abandoned by the new hordes of fashion-conscious herbivores, and reaffirm values that support conservative national goals, such as respect for ritual and for the gods. Finally, these TV programs reinforce gender hierarchy in Japanese society; the occasional female characters are marginalized or deemed inessential, condemned for strength or success, and urged to remain meek and modest. Within Japan’s increasingly unmarried society, the new shows allow their male protagonists to substitute food for family, but their stance toward female characters reinforces social disapproval of women who similarly eschew families for careers or individual pursuits.

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**NOTES**

1. After the series ended, three reunion specials were broadcast from 2000–2002. The series was introduced to American audiences in 1999 by the Food Network with campy dubbing that, along with the show’s own melodramatic kitsch, made it a cult favorite.

2. Tomoko Aoyama (2008: 133–40) notes that such hybridization occurs in the modern Japanese gastronomic novel, dating back to *Kuidōsaku* (1902) by Murai Gensai, which combined fiction and actual recipes.

3. Recently American movies such as *Chef* (2014), *The Hundred-Foot Journey* (2014), and *Burnt* (2015) have begun to feature more food-themed storylines.

4. *Tennō no ryōiban* is based on a historical novel by the same name, written by Sugimori Hisahide and published in 1979 by Yomiuri shimbunsha.

5. English-language scholarship focusing on single foods in Japan is generally less descriptive and more analytical/critical than its Japanese counterpart. See, for example, Kushner 2012; Solt 2014; White 2012; Alexander 2013.

6. Metrosexual is a contemporary term coined to describe young, urban men who are fastidiously groomed, fashionable, and live upscale lifestyles.

7. Many thanks to an anonymous reviewer on suggestions for this translation. Note that in the original, the language was more gender neutral, but I have chosen a male referent.

8. Another Qusumi vehicle, *Hiri no Sentozake* (*Bath and Booze at Midday*), about a salaryman who skips work in the afternoons to
indulge in public baths, followed by drinks and snacks, began airing in April 2016.

9. While the vaguely male-oriented gourmet magazine Dansyu has been popular since 1991, new titles like Men’s Caféteria (Danshi shokudō), Men’s Cuisine (Otoko no ryōri), and Men’s Leaf appear regularly, but are often short-lived. Men-only cooking schools include Men’s Kitchen and Men’s Basic Cooking Classroom (Danshi bonkaku ōtōryō kōshitsu). Male-only classes are also offered by larger chains of cooking schools such as Better Home Association (Betāhōmū kōshitsu) and ABC Cooking Studio, which boasts over 130 locations.

10. I am grateful to Anne McKnight for bringing this chain to my attention.


12. Ryall also reported that the percentage of unmarried women within the same age bracket jumped from nine to over thirty-four percent over this period.

REFERENCES


**MANGA, TV PROGRAMS, AND FILMS CITED**


