Japan's cuisine now a 'cultural asset'

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Yasuko Hiramatsu, mother, housewife and part-time translator, slices burdock as she cooks kinpiragobo at home in Tokyo. The younger generation is increasingly eating Krispy Kreme donuts and McDonald

Unesco tucks into the "intangible" taste of washoku

Traditional Japanese food - washoku - has been designated an "intangible cultural asset", making Japan's national cuisine only the second after France's to be so honoured.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (Unesco) decided to add washoku to its Intangible Cultural Heritage list after its intergovernmental committee met in the Azerbaijan capital of Baku on Tuesday.

Washoku, also commonly referred to as nihon ryori (Japanese cooking), makes it the country's 22nd intangible cultural asset on the Unesco list, including the theatre forms noh and kabuki.

"We are truly happy," Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said on Thursday. "We would like to continue to pass on Japanese food culture to future generations and also to work harder to let people overseas appreciate the merits of washoku."

The listing obliges the government to demonstrate to the international body that it is taking steps to protect its national food culture.
The idea to get washoku recognised by Unesco was first mooted by a group of chefs and connoisseurs in the ancient capital of Kyoto, who were worried that Japan's culinary traditions would die out if not protected.

The government backed the idea in the hope that such recognition would ease concerns, especially overseas, about the safety of Japanese food products following the tsunami-triggered Fukushima nuclear disaster.

The Unesco listing also comes at a time when Japanese are eating less of their own cuisine and adopting more Western dietary habits. Rice consumption has plunged in the past five decades, from a high of 117kg per person per year in the early 1960s to less than half that in recent years.


The agriculture ministry, worried that young Japanese do not know enough about their own food culture, has produced a pamphlet on washoku targeted at high-school students.

The rising consumption of Western food is also said to have contributed to the increasing incidence of lifestyle diseases such as obesity, hypertension and diabetes among adults in Japan.

Yoshihiro Murata, owner-chef of Kikunoi, a ryotei (Japanese-style restaurant) in Kyoto, was one of those who actively pushed for the listing. "I hope this will provide the opportunity for us to review the kind of food that we Japanese are eating these days," says Murata, whose restaurant boasts three Michelin stars.

"It's all right to have bread and coffee in the morning, but, a few times a week, we should eat rice and think about our own food culture."

The South Korean tradition of making and sharing kimchi also made it to the Unesco list this year. Past entries include traditional Mexican dishes, the Mediterranean diet in countries like Italy and Spain, and the Turkish ceremonial dish of keskek.

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