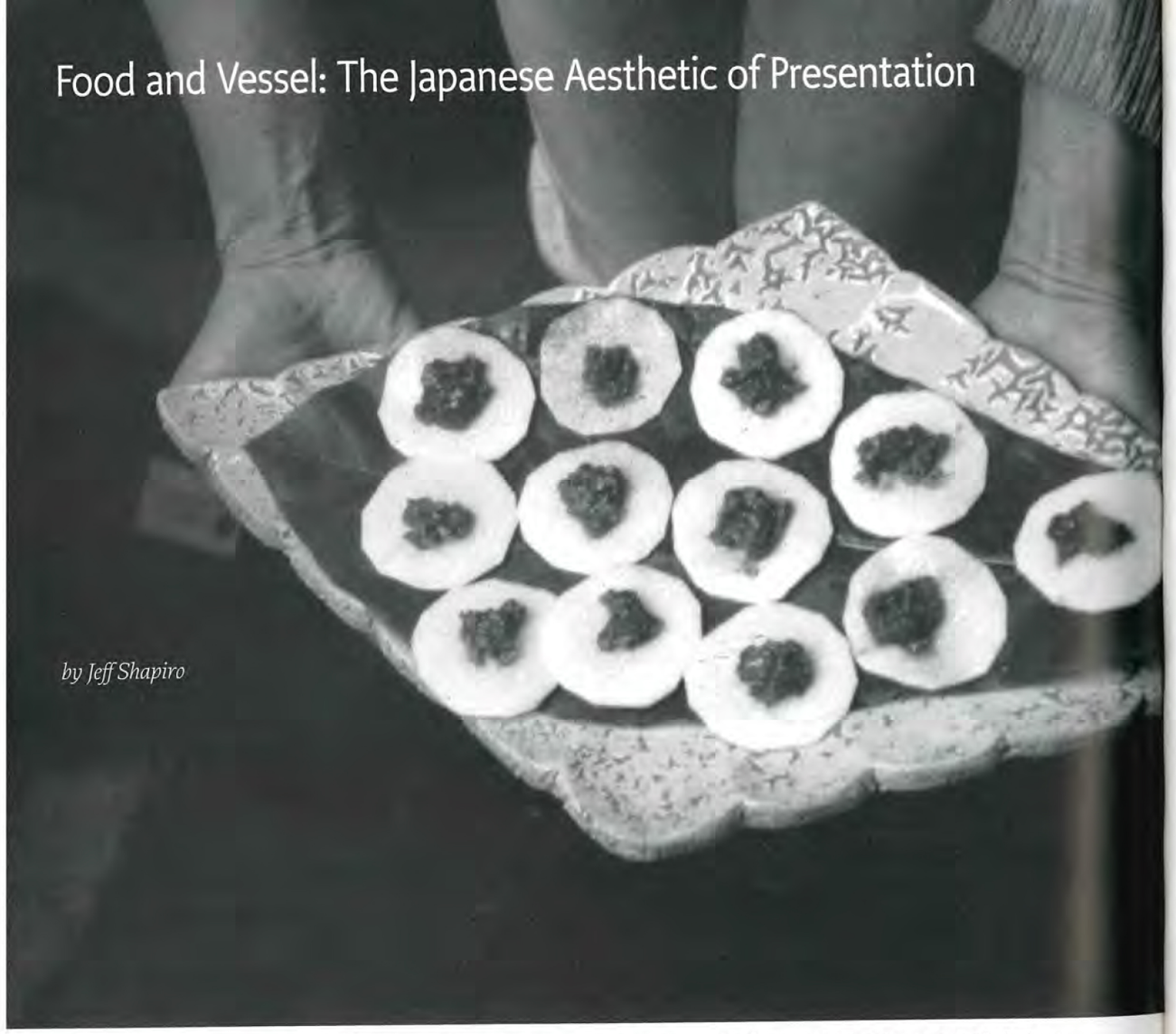
Food and Vessel: The Japanese Aesthetic of Presentation



by Jeff Shapiro

A NUMBER OF YEARS AGO I LED A TRIP TO JAPAN THAT focused on the relationship between food and vessels and how artists choose to present them together. Each country, society and culture has its own way of preparing and presenting food; perhaps Japan has just refined the process more over time. Japanese culture is interwoven with the use of ceramic vessels in many of its traditions and there is a high level of awareness about vessels and the presentation of food. Of course, the food must delight the taste, but first there must be a visual appreciation. It has to do with the host-guest relationship. The Japanese term *motenashi*, loosely translated, means to fully satisfy the needs/desires of the guest, and to this end attention is first placed on the sense of sight. For example, a large portion of steak and potatoes in gravy completely covering a dish (and perhaps hanging off the side) speaks about abundance and excess. Enjoying the art of eating means being aware of and appreciating all aspects of the process. Thus, arranging food so as to reveal the vessel surface is an important choice made by the host.

This may be traced back to the tea ceremony meal called *kaiseki*: small amounts of food carefully presented on a variety of vessels (clay, lacquer, glass, wood, etc.) Often a dampened green leaf or fern frond, or even a sprig of rice straw with a few grains of rice still on the stalk, will be included to signify freshness and the relationship to nature. Artistically, it is a matter of balancing positive and negative space, as well as giving consideration to contrast.

My wife Hinako, who is Japanese, has a wonderful way with food and food presentation. It is her art and her joy. It is a joy as well for me to see how she looks at pottery. A vessel may kindle a desire to cook a particular dish, or she may have a vegetable or piece of fish in mind and then look for just the right vessel to enhance it. Hinako contrasts the characteristics of the food with those of the vessel; an earthy or simple food might be presented on a refined piece of ceramics, while an elaborately-prepared dish might go better with the organic quality of an unglazed, wood-fired piece. She works like a minimalist painter. The presentation is suggestive rather than obvious, beckoning the guest to be involved in appreciating the process.

I derive great satisfaction from a presentation that makes me pause and really appreciate the harmony of vessel and food, rather than just mindlessly devouring what is put before me. Japanese food is often presented on many small dishes, sometimes ten or more for each person. What a delight to have soup in antique red lacquer bowls, pickles on a Korean *mishima* plate, small pieces of chicken served over a fern frond on a wood-fired leaf-shaped dish, and perhaps *chawanmushi* (a warm egg custard) served in lidded porcelain cups with overglaze enamels.

The meal would begin with sake, which itself is a subculture of ceramic vessel and aesthetics. There are many sake connoisseurs and many connoisseurs of sake cups and sake bottles. A sake cup (*guinomi*) that fits your hand just right is a true pleasure. It is like the understanding that each artist must make his or her own tools because each person's hands are unique. Such is the case with sake utensils.

While I was studying in Kyushu, I was fortunate to share meals with my teacher, Takatori Seizan, who was in her early seventies at the time. She had a reverence for materials, processes and nature. We would take a week off from pottery to plant rice and a week to harvest. This instilled a healthy respect for the food we ate. Nothing was wasted; we even used the rice straw and rice straw ash for glazes. We sat in meditation for a moment before each meal and never wasted a single grain of rice. If we left a grain or two in a bowl or a little piece of toast at breakfast, it would be served again for lunch! This respect and appreciation for food is innately part of Japanese life.

For a ceramic artist, the idea of revealing the vessel as the food is eaten is a satisfying one. I often wonder how the cook made certain decisions as to what food would go best on a particular surface. Does the food complement the vessel, or the vessel complement the food? This is not a Zen *koan*! The answer is, of course, that they complement each other.

I remember an exchange with my friend and mentor Suzuki Goro when I asked him to consider hosting a group of collectors visiting Japan. He had just finished an exhibition in Tokyo in which the main piece was a nine-foot tall stack, a sculptural column that was actually thirty ceramic food boxes, each nestled into the one below, with a beautiful Oribe glaze covering the outside. Goro's initial response was to dismiss the visit (he is a very private person) but when he learned that the purpose of the trip was to explore the relationship between food and ceramics, he changed his mind. He made it clear that although the stack was presented at the gallery as sculpture, it would only be totally successful when it had food in it.

A friend of Goro's, whom I did not know, was seated at this initial discussion. Upon hearing this conversation he asked rhetorically, "Who do you plan to have present food in these Goro boxes?" I innocently said I had no idea as yet, to which he retorted, somewhat indignantly, "There is no discussion. Only *I* will prepare the food and presentation." I later learned that he was the chef and owner of a famous restaurant outside Nagoya called Shiratama, comprised of two marvelous, connected, thatched-roof farm houses. And so we made arrangements to have the presentation at Shiratama.

The day of the event was a real treasure. When we arrived at the restaurant, we were the only guests. In a large room with a raised

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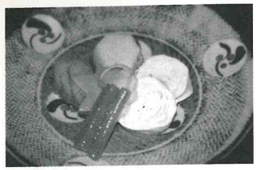


stage at one end was a stack of eighteen boxes in a standing column. The other twelve boxes were placed on individual lacquer stands for each of the participants. They were not aware of the conversation I had had with Goro, or that these boxes would go together! Each box was a lovely green on the outside with seasonal foods (seasonal being a two-week period) presented within. People marveled at the presentation and then at the various flavors and textures, delicate seasoning, fresh citron and *sansho* (Japanese pepper). But the surprise came as people ate and discovered that each box was decorated inside with Goro's signature style of contemporary Oribe painting, a series of nudes, crows in a field, abstract gestures. Each box was distinctly different from the next! At the end of the meal we placed the remaining boxes on top of one another to the full height of thirty boxes, an impressive and memorable moment.

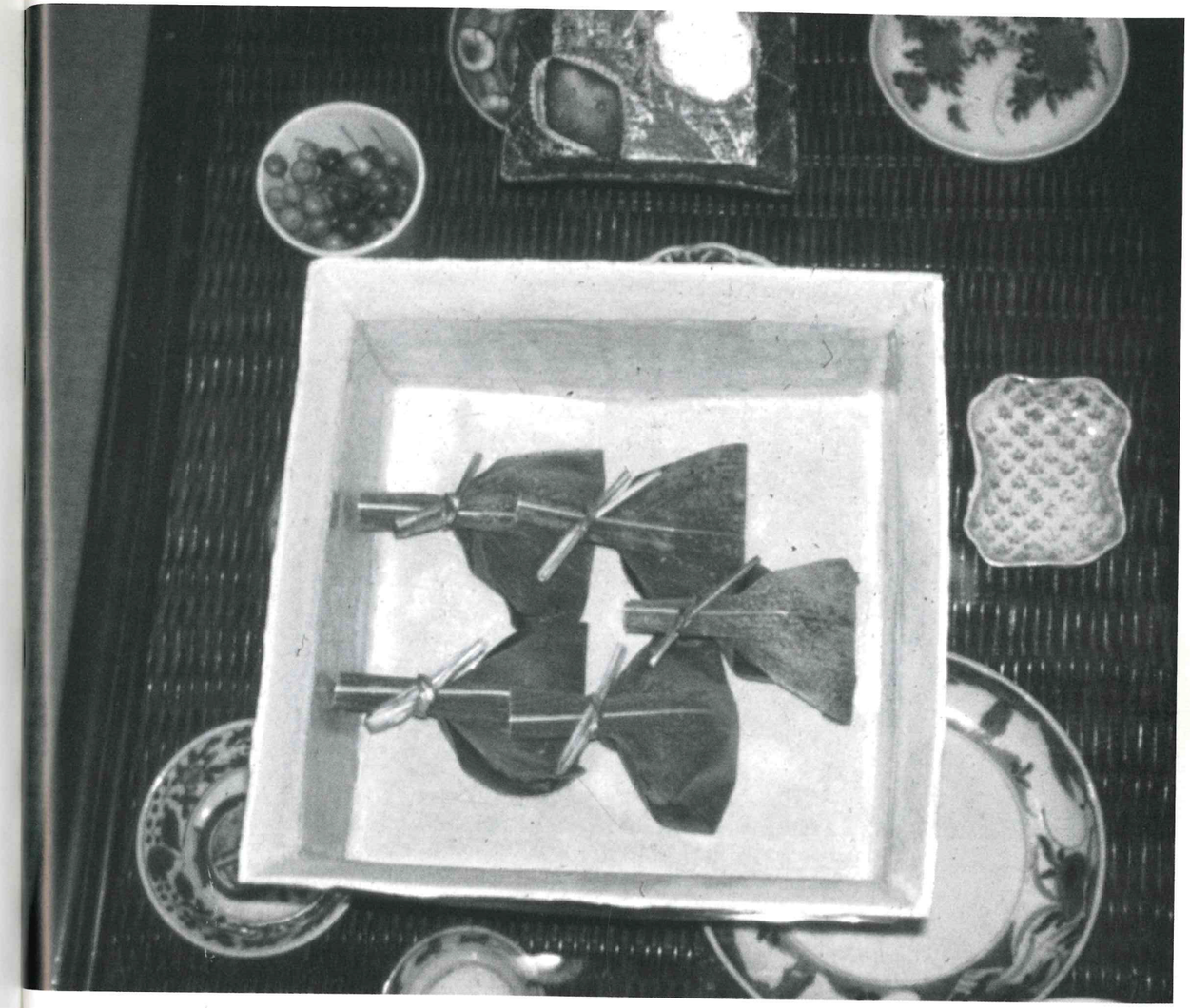
Another visit during the collectors' trip was to the studio of Tsuji Seimei and Kyo, a husband and wife well known for their ceramic work; Tsuji Seimei known also as an educator, collector, and critic, and Kyo as a food person. They have become important mentors to me, and it is always a pleasure and surprise to visit their home and studio.

When I approached them about hosting a visit from the collector's group, they agreed and said that they would make simple handmade *udon* noodles served in lacquer bowls. This was to be a real treat.

When we arrived, to my surprise there surely were hand-made noodles, but that was just one of many dishes served. There was fresh tofu in woven green bamboo baskets from Kyushu, and a friend of theirs had come down from northern Honshu to make a local culinary specialty of rice cakes on sticks that are broiled over charcoals. There were pickles that Kyo-*san* had been preparing in brine, *umeboshi* (sour salty plums) that had been aging for years, and an array of other foods too plentiful to recount. Everything was impeccably served on simple and exquisite ceramic and lacquer vessels, some antiques from their collection and other pieces made by Tsuji Seimei and Kyo. The presentation was imbued with the feeling of exquisite simplicity, with consideration and detail given to the placement of food upon a particular surface.

One other food and ceramic experience from the same trip was on a visit to Shimaoka Tatsuzo, who is now a Living National Treasure. I had asked him if he would speak to the group and said that we would order box lunches so as not to bother him. Shimaoka-*san* said that he would arrange something with the local box lunch maker that would be within our budget. When the day arrived, we first visited with Hamada Shoji's son Shinsaku, who gave us a wonderful tour of the house/museum and Hamada's collection. It was particularly impressive because of his stories. Rather than technical information on how and when a piece was made by his father, we heard the memories of a small boy and his intimate musings about Hamada's work. From there we walked across the dirt path to Shimaoka-*san*'s compound, with beautiful old farm houses and clay and stone walls. There was a lot of movement as we arrived, and I came to understand that Shimaoka-*san* had requested the services of a chef and assistant from the next mountain to prepare food for the fourteen participants. He used the rooms of his home, set with low tables and an array of pottery of which many pieces were his. Beer and sake were served in ceramic tumblers and sake cups. Again, the food was seasonal and impeccably prepared, with care and attention to taste and presentation. I especially remember one dish comprised of small amounts of food on a rope-patterned plate. One of the items was made to imitate a chestnut in its spiky husk, but the "chestnut" was actually made of steamed shrimp paste and the spikes from buckwheat (*soba*) noodles painstakingly fried in oil and then broken into one-inch pieces and stuck into the fish paste covering the surface. The amount of work needed to prepare this one dish for fourteen people was staggering. This exemplifies the concept of *motenashi*. It was overwhelming for us. The courses of food kept arriving and the variety of vessels kept changing. The food was delicious, but the real reward was seeing Shimaoka's rope patterns being revealed as the food disappeared.

The relationship between food and vessel is found in countries all over the world and throughout time. But the Japanese aesthetic of food and vessel is one of sensual poetry meant to delight. I remember drinking from a ceramic sake bottle that a collector brought



to a restaurant where Tsuji Seimei and I were having lunch one day. It was from the eighteenth century, a beautiful bottle with natural ash glaze, slightly distorted from the fire. Upon seeing it, Tsuji Seimei's response was to ask the owner of the restaurant, who was already preparing food on vessels made by Tomimoto Kenkichi and other well known potters, to kindly wash the bottle and serve his finest sake from it. I will never forget the feeling of drinking from this vessel made by a potter's hands in the eighteenth century. The bottle leaned heavily to one side, as though it was a little drunk from all the sake it had served over the years, but it was imbued with character and made the rather simple experience of drinking sake into an unforgettable one. It made me aware of the importance of both the vessel and what it contained – a relationship of vessel to food and drink that was not purely one of artistic choices but rather one of harmony.

OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP: *Food arranged on a Shimaoka plate.*
MIDDLE AND BOTTOM: *Suzuki Goro and stacking food boxes.*