

# Traditional Japanese Health Food—Natto

## 日本の伝統的健康食—納豆

**Experiences with Natto of Ito-En Ltd. Vice President Rona Tison:**  
**“Children’s Education Starts with the Traditional Japanese Health Food.”**

**ITO-EN LTD. 副社長ロナ・ティソン氏に聞く納豆体験：**  
**「子供の教育から始める日本伝統の健康食」**

**J**apanese Restaurant News (hereafter JRN): We have heard that you were born in America, and from the age of ten until college you lived in Japan, but did you start eating Japanese food and *natto* from that time?

**Tison:** Since my mother was Japanese, I ate Japanese food from the time when I was a child and I liked it. The fact that I am now working for a Japanese tea maker is also due to the fact that for my Japanese breakfast and at other times my mother would often brew tea and from that time on I enjoyed drinking it. However, as for *natto*, when I was a child I felt like eating it one or two times, but I did not like it.

**JRN:** In that case, what was the factor that led to your liking *natto*? And at that point, in what way did you eat it?

**Tison:** The occasion was when I talked to a friend who lived in California, and that friend explained its deliciousness in a way that had an extremely strong impact on me. “All of the children in my family love *natto*,” said my friend. “And we eat it every day, I tell you. Although there are also children who only eat candy and drink Coke, the children in our family are confident that eating *natto* makes them healthy.” I thought to myself, “If there is something that is good for the health

and delicious, I want to try it, too, and see.” So on that day, I went to a Japanese supermarket, bought some and tried eating it when I came home. Up to that time, I just had that memory of *natto* that, “I do not like it,” from the time when I was little, but then when I ate it I felt that *natto* was “incredibly delicious!” Perhaps up to then it was only a preconceived notion that made me not eat it, you know. *Natto* made up of small size soybeans and eaten with white Japanese rice is the greatest, isn’t it?

**JRN:** In what way did your impression of *natto* change? What was the attraction of *natto* that made you feel that it is “delicious?”

**Tison:** If you want an example, there is a “nuttness” that can be savored that you might compare to the flavor of peanut butter that is the attraction that you feel. Ever since that time I have become totally addicted. (Laughs) And at that point I thought that introducing people to *natto* was the best thing to do. That is because I had the ambition of making people think, “I want to try it and see what it is like!”

**JRN:** Starting last year, the company called Japan Traditional Foods has been producing *natto* in California. They have offered various ways of eating *natto* in

**J**apanese Restaurant News (以下、JRN) : ロナさんは、アメリカに生まれ、10歳くらいから大学まで日本に滞在されたと聞きましたが、日本食、納豆もその頃から食べていたのですか？

**Tison:** 母が日本人なので、日本食は子供の頃から食べていましたし、好きでした。現在日本茶メーカーに勤務しているのも、日本の朝食や母が良く入れてくれたお茶をその頃から楽しんでいたせいでもあります。でも、子供の頃に納豆を1、2回食べた気はしますが、好きではありませんでした。

**JRN:** では、どのようなきっかけから納豆を好きになったのですか？その際、どのように食べましたか？

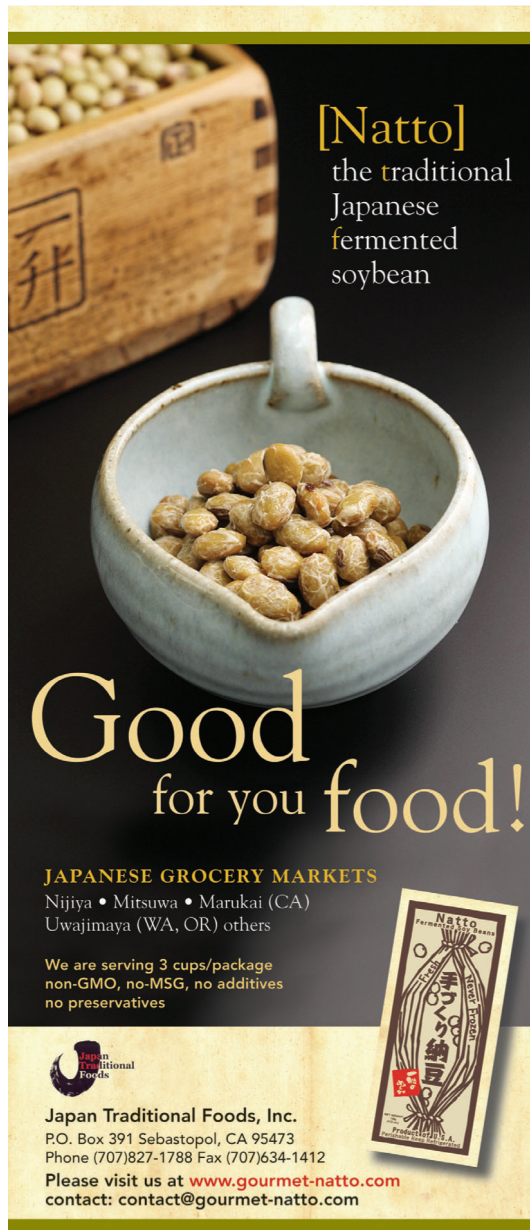
**Tison:** きっかけは、カリフォルニアに住んでいる友達と話している時、その友達が「ウチの子供達は皆納豆が大好きで、家族で毎日のように食べているのよ。お菓子やコークばかり飲む子供もいるなかで、ウチの子供は納豆

を食べているから健康に自信があるわ」と納豆の美味しさを私に説明したのが非常に衝撃的でした。「そんなに健康に良く美味しいものなら私も試してみよう」と思い、その日に日系スーパーで買って来て食べてみました。今まで納豆に対して「好きじゃない」という子供の頃の記憶だけでしたが、その時食べた納豆は「すごく美味しい！」と感じたんです。もしかしたら、それまで先入観で食べていなかっただけかもしれませんが。小粒納豆を熱い白いご飯と一緒に食べるのが最高ですね。

**JRN:** 納豆の印象はどのように変わったのでしょうか？納豆の何に「美味しい」という魅力を感じたのですか？

**Tison:** 例えるなら、ピーナッツバターのような風味といえますか、「ナッツィー」な味わいが魅力的だと感じました。それからずっとクセになっています（笑）。それに納豆の紹介のされ方も良かったんだと

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 contact: [contact@gourmet-natto.com](mailto:contact@gourmet-natto.com)

思います。「食べてみたい！」という意欲がありましたから。

**JRN:** 昨年より、Japan Traditional Foods という会社がカリフォルニアで納豆を作っています。彼らはアメリカでの納豆の食べ方で様々な提案をしていますが、アメリカ人に受け入れられる食べ方はどのようなものだと思いますか？

**Tison:** 食べ方ももちろんですが、「マインドゲーム」だと思うんです。『美味しい』『健康に良い』という情報、そしてアプローチの仕方が「受け入れ」態勢に影響を及ぼします。だって、何十年前には、アメリカ人が生の魚を食べるなんて誰も思っていなかったのですから…。私が友人から学んだように、子供に「美味しいよ」と言って食べさせたり、Japan Traditional Foods さんが提案されているようにオムレツなどに入れたりして試させたり。一度慣れるとそのネバネバ食感がクセになる人も多いでしょう



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America, but what do you think is the way of eating it that would be most enjoyable for Americans?

**Tison:** Of course, there are also ways of eating it, but I think that is a "mind game." Reports about its "deliciousness" and "being good for the health," according to the approach that is used extend as far as to influence the attitude with which it is "accepted." But some decades ago no one thought that Americans would eat raw fish, and that is significant... In the same way that I learned from my friend, one can tell children that it is "really delicious" and have them eat it, or the proposal of Japan Traditional Foods to place it in omelets can be tried. One becomes familiar with it, there are many people who also become addicted to its stickiness on the palate, you know. I think that it also makes a good combination with tofu.

Today, amid the change that is occurring in American food culture, there is attention specially directed on fermented food products, so undoubtedly there will be an increase in the number of people who like *natto* in the future.

**JRN:** Recently in America children as well have been eating Japanese food, you know. It would be good if under adult guidance they would develop the habit in the future to have more healthy meals, wouldn't it?

**Tison:** I think that guiding children who go to school in regards to a healthy food lifestyle is the responsibility of adults and the nation. That is because their food lifestyles will absolutely cast a great influence on the children's future. Already there are elementary schools that have banned the sale of soda, and adopting things such as Japanese foods into school lunch programs is one way of addressing America's youth obesity problem. This is a strategy for promoting "health" among children. Speaking of the business aspect, as the number of schools incorporating Japanese foods increase, there will be a trend towards increased demand for tea, so that makes me doubly happy, you know.

**JRN:** Also, when looking at the business data of your company in America, one can understand how the sales of Japanese tea over the past several years have expanded, you know. In what way do you anticipate the food culture in America to change in the future?

**Tison:** I wonder. I think that those statistics also reflect the increasing percentage of Americans who are joining the trend towards health. What I expect is that in the future there will be a further "health food" boom coming. For example, from the standpoint of one of the traditional meals, breakfast, comparing Japan to the United States shows the food habit focused on eggs, bacon, pancakes, coffee and other things that have unbalanced nutritional

elements, contrasts with rice, fish, miso soup, *natto*, *nori* seaweed and the like that have a good nutritional balance, and I would like to have people become accustomed to the Japanese breakfast meal. I think that it would be ideal for restaurant owners to put out things like menus that inform the general populace how drinks and cola that can be replaced by tea, which is a healthy food for one's total constitution, and people like us food specialists, as well as the country, can improve things by moving the process forward. During this change, I believe that the rich variety of recipes for *natto* that Japan Traditional Foods offers plays a helpful role.

<Data>

#### ITO EN LTD Sales for 2008:

Consolidated Sales \$ 3,314.5 million  
ITO-EN US business has grown exponentially over the years- consistently 30% each year since we opened in 2002.

ね。豆腐との組み合わせも良いと思います。

今、アメリカの食文化が変化している中、特に発酵食品は注目されていますから、この先納豆を好きになる人がきっと増えるでしょう。

**JRN:** 最近アメリカの子供達も日本食を食べていますね。大人の指導で将来もっと健康な食事をする習慣がずっと良いですね。

**Tison:** 学校に通う子供達に健康な食生活を指導するというのは、大人や国の責任だと思います。食生活は子供達の将来にとっても大きな影響を与えますから。既に多くの小学校でソーダの販売を廃止したり、給食に日本食を取り入れるなどアメリカで問題になっている肥満児対策、子供の「健康」へ対策が進んでいます。ビジネス面で言えば、日本食を取り入れる学校が増えることは、お茶の需要の増加につながる傾向があるので、ダブルで嬉しいですね。

**JRN:** 御社のアメリカにおけるビジネ

スのデータを見ても、日本茶が過去何年かでどのくらい伸びているかが分かりますね。ロナさんは将来アメリカでどのような食文化の変化を期待していますか？

**Tison:** そうですね。この統計は健康志向のアメリカ人の増加率でもあると思います。今後期待するのは、更なる「健康食」ブームの到来です。例えば、日米間の伝統的な朝食一つとっても、卵、ベーコン、パンケーキ、コーヒーなどアンバランスな栄養素の食習慣から、ご飯、魚、味噌汁、納豆、のりなどの栄養バランスが良い日本の朝食を見習ってもらい、レストランのオーナー達がメニューを出すなどしてもっと一般の人が知り、飲み物もコーラからお茶という全体的な健康食への改善を私達、フードスペシャリストから、そして国から進めていくのが理想的だと思います。そんな変化の途中に Japan Traditional Foods さんが提案するパラエティ豊かな納豆のレシピがきっと役に立つと思います。

### Rona Tison

*Senior vice president of corporate relations at Ito En (North America) Inc.*

*An expert within the tea industry and has received the Green Tea Certification from Ito En Responsible for maintaining and developing the company's corporate image through branding, public relations and promotional events*

*A member of the US Tea Association, the Specialty Tea Institute, the Asian Art Museum and Japan Society*



### Natto ??? (food name please)

\* 2 1/2 cups cooked, still warm short-grain brown rice

#### Natto miso sauce:

- \* 5 tablespoons (rounded) natto, chopped
- \* 2 tablespoons miso, preferably mixed miso (made of 1 tablespoon white miso and 1 tablespoon brown miso)
- \* 2 or 3 walnuts, roasted and chopped
- \* 1/2 tablespoon pine nuts, roasted and chopped
- \* 1 white stem of leek, finely chopped
- \* 1/2 teaspoon sake (rice wine)
- \* teaspoon mirin (Japanese sweet cooking rice wine)

#### Preparation:

1. In a mixing bowl, add the miso, sake, and mirin and stir well.
2. Add the remaining ingredients of the natto miso sauce and stir to combine.
3. Divide the rice into 4 portions and make rice balls.
4. Spread the natto miso sauce on the rice balls.
5. Bake in a hot oven until the rice balls are crisp. Serve hot. Serves 2.

