

Umami in the Sydney International Food Festival Report

Date: From October 9th to 11th, 2009

Venue: At several locations in Sydney, Australia

Event producer: The Sydney Morning Herald

Partners and Supporters: Food industries such as Ajinomoto Co., Inc. Financial sectors and the City of Sydney as a government partner

Programs: Cooking demonstrations by over twenty world renowned chefs and seven talking sessions by food experts were almost fully booked by chefs, cooking school instructors, students, foodies and media from abroad at three venues in the Star City Hotel, Sydney.

1. Chef Yoshihiro Murata (Kikunoi, Japan) Umami Talk and Demonstration of Vegetables in Aromatic Kombu Dashi

In his presentation, Chef Murata focused on the importance of dashi in Japanese cuisine. Then he moved onto the explanation of umami as an essence of dashi taste and a synergistic effect by combining glutamate and inosinate in dashi. The participants experienced umami and its synergistic effect in combination of kombu dashi and pork bouillon. Then he demonstrated his exquisite menu "Vegetables with kuzu jelly and aromatic kombu dashi"; vegetables cooked in kombu dashi with Yuzu citrus flavored arrow root jelly topping, served with kombu dashi separately. Participants enjoyed not only Murata's cooking but also his humorous and insightful talk on the topic from umami rich ingredients to umami in mother's breast milk.

His idea of matching Japanese traditional ingredient kombu with pork bouillon as an example of western taste gave a very innovative impression for westerners. In addition, his method to cook carrots with juice of grated carrots and kombu dashi, and to cook turnips with juice of grated turnips and kombu dashi captured the attention of the participants. Chef Tetsuya Wakuda, one of the most famous chefs in Sydney, came up on the stage and tasted Murata's cooked carrot. He noted that cooking with dashi enhanced carrot's natural taste and brought forward its original flavor. His comment helped the participants to understand umami's unique effect to boost the original taste of natural ingredients.

In Q & A session, a participant asked whether he considered about nutrition during his cooking. Chef Murata answered that he didn't care because Japanese cuisine used less fat-rich ingredient as compared with French cuisine. He added that he would rather focus on cooking delicious dishes.

2. Talk and Taste ~What is the "fifth taste" and where do you get it?

MC: Simon Thomsen (travel and Food Journalist, Australia)

Panelists:

Kumiko Ninomiya (director, Umami Information Center, Japan)

David Thonpson (chef, "Nahm" London, and Thai food writer)

Alexandre Bourdas (chef, "Sa Qua Na" Bretagne, France,)

Following Chef Murata's demonstration, the Talk and Taste session opened with Ms. Ninomiya's presentation on the basic information of umami. In her presentation, she explained how European chefs defined umami in their own words and why they did so. According to her, European chefs express the sensation of umami as "mouth watering," "pleasant aftertaste," "tongue coating sensation," and "lingering sensation." Tomato tasting let the participants have the same experience.

Chef Bourdas who has a three-year career at Windsor Hotel of Toya Lake in Hokkaido, Japan had participated in Japanese Culinary Academy fellowship program through which he grasped the idea of umami. He explained that Japanese vegetables excelled in intensity of taste and their sweetness and umami were evident, while he could hardly feel the same level of intensity in European vegetables. This experience made him assured that Japanese vegetables were very flavorful.

David Thompson, Thai cuisine expert, offered a tasting of nampula (Thai fish sauce) and oyster sauce. He defined umami's effect as a mouthwatering feeling which spreads throughout the mouth. In addition, using Thai dish as an example, he showed that a combination of umami and salt enhances the flavor of the dish.

Ms. Ninomiya concluded this one-hour discussion with a story of the discovery of umami by Dr. Kikunae Ikeda and a short speech about how glutamate had been commercialized and marketed.