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Healthy Cooking, Taemi's Way

By Susie Iventosch



Taemi and Gary Westernoff

Photos Susie Iventosch

When I think of Japanese cuisine ... tempura, teriyaki, yakitori and sushi come to mind. That's why I was so delighted to receive an invitation to Taemi Westernoff's house in Moraga to learn how to make a dish I'd never heard of before, "Okonomiyaki." This is a traditional Japanese pancake made with Japanese yam, diced cabbage, egg, flour and bacon, or pork belly. Not only is it fun to make, but it's delicious and quite healthy, too.

And, healthy cooking is what Taemi is all about.

"She likes all types of food as long as it is healthy," says her husband, Gary Westernoff. "But, she feels that Japanese food is the healthiest. She will not eat in any fast food restaurants. She calls them junk food."

The couple divides their time between Moraga, California and Honolulu, Hawaii. Near their home in Hawaii, there is a corner with a few fast food restaurants, which Taemi calls "Junk Food Corner," and the only thing they use it for is a landmark for giving directions to their house.

Taemi teaches cooking classes in both locations and enjoys sharing her cooking knowledge with others because she doesn't think American people eat a healthy diet. Teaching helps her to learn and improve her English, too.

"I would love to teach healthy cooking classes to high school students," Taemi said. "Healthy bodies are important for happy, successful lives and before marriage and babies are born."

On a fortuitous trip to Hawaii five years ago, Taemi met her husband, Gary. After they married Taemi moved from her birthplace of Kyushu, Japan to the United States. Of course, she is still passionate about her native cuisine and, as a result, her husband has become a huge fan of Japanese cooking.

Gary, a former construction management executive, has collaborated with Taemi to co-author "Construction Like Sushi," an intriguing cookbook that likens sushi-making to the construction of a building.

"Before our marriage, I did not dine on

Japanese food because it was too difficult to prepare and too expensive in restaurants," Gary pointed out. "But I was brought up to enjoy all types and kinds of food because my mother and grandmother were wonderful cooks."

And, despite being from a lineage of rather skilled cooks himself, Gary is absolutely amazed by Taemi's food knowledge and her creative cooking and baking methods, techniques and skills.

"She's opened my eyes to a whole new world of healthy eating without any limitations to the kinds and types of foods—including baked goods," Gary noted. "For example, Taemi thinks sugar is harmful to the body so she will substitute honey or fresh fruits for sweetness. She avoids chicken or beef because she believes they contain enzymes harmful to the body. She likes eggs with bright orange yolks (hard to find in America but are found all over Japan) and she uses Himalaya rock salt in moderation."

But, what is music to most folks' ears, is that Taemi believes in eating at least three meals a day ... alas, always with a vegetable!

On September 11, Taemi will be giving a hands-on demonstration class on how to make healthy Japanese Tempura at the St. Mark's United Methodist Church in Orinda. You will learn the difference between fried and tempered, and other traditional Japanese dishes will be served to compliment the tempura. The class is scheduled for 2:00 p.m. and the \$20 cost for materials and instruction will benefit the church. See information box below to make a reservation.

In addition to healthy cooking instruction, Taemi holds licenses in Sado (Japanese Tea Ceremony), table setting and floral arranging. She and Gary also operate Tabi Tours, which specializes in small group tours to Japan, where they take travelers on an insider's journey through Japanese gardens, cuisine, art and culture.

- To reserve a spot in Taemi's Healthy Tempura Cooking Class, please call (925) 254-5965, or (925) 324-4718, or email stmarksorinda@sbcglobal.net. Class will be held at 2 p.m. on Sunday, September 11 at St. Mark's United Methodist Church, 451 Moraga Way, Orinda
- For information about Tabi Tours, please visit: www.tabitours.com or email: taegar@tabitours.com, or call (925) 324-4718
- For information about Taemi's upcoming Traditional Tea Ceremony on Saturday, Sept. 24 in Berkeley, please call (510) 549-7000, or email taste@berkeleycoffeeteafest.com
- To purchase copies of Construction Like Sushi or Construction Management Made Easy, please visit Moraga Hardware and Lumber and Across the Way in Moraga, or visit: www.constructionplace.com, or email: twg@constructionplace.com

Susie can be reached at suziven@gmail.com. If you would like to share your favorite recipe with Susie please contact her by email or call our office at 925-377-0977.

Taemi's Osaka Style Okonomiyaki

(Makes 3 large pancakes, or six small)

Okonomiyaki is traditional Japanese savory pancake, which can be served as a main dish or a side. It is made in three distinct styles: Osaka, Hiroshima and Tokyo. The Osaka Okonomiyaki is the type that Taemi prefers, and is made with a batter of flour, egg and water, mixed with assorted vegetables, including a Japanese sticky yam, and seafood, pork or other meat. Hiroshima style is made by layering the ingredients on top of a crepe-like base, and then served over fried noodles and a fried egg. Tokyo style is made as a very large, thin pancake, cooked to golden brown, and served family-style, with each person using their own Okonomiyaki spatula to scrape up bites.

The liquid used in the pancake can either be water or Dashi, a broth that is essential to Japanese cuisine, made from water, shaved Bonita fish and dried kelp. (See recipe below.)

Whichever style one chooses, the dish is usually served with traditional toppings such Okonomiyaki sauce, mayonnaise, dried Bonita fish shavings and even seaweed.

INGREDIENTS

- 1/3 cup water or Dashi
- 1 1/2 cups all-purpose flour
- 1 egg
- 1/2 cup grated nagaimo (Japanese mountain yam—available at Asian markets—see information box below)
- Pinch salt
- 2 cups finely chopped green cabbage
- 1 tablespoon mayonnaise
- Peanut or vegetable oil, for frying
- 1 tablespoon finely sliced scallions (optional)
- 1 tablespoon sliced, pickled ginger (optional)
- 9 slices of pork belly, or bacon

DIRECTIONS

In a large bowl, mix dashi (or water) with flour, egg, grated nagaimo (nagaimo will turn into a sticky, thick liquid when grated), mayonnaise and salt. Whisk until smooth with a wire whisk or chopsticks, until smooth. Add cabbage and any other optional ingredients and mix well until cabbage is evenly coated with batter.

Heat one tablespoon of oil in a frying pan or griddle over medium-high heat. When the oil is hot, spoon 1/3 of the batter into the pan to form a pancake shape, about 1/2-inch thick. If using the pork belly, place three pieces on top of pancake. When the edges of the pancake begin to dry and form bubbles (approximately 2-3 minutes), flip pancake so pork belly is on the bottom. When the pancake is golden brown and the pork is cooked, turn pancake over again, and continue to heat for 1-2 more minutes. Press the pancake and, if it is resilient, it's done. Place on warm plate.

Repeat process until all batter is used, or if you have a large griddle or pan, you can cook as many pancakes as will fit so you can easily flip them.

To serve, place the pancakes on individual serving plates. Toppings are optional, but recommended for a traditional taste. First spread the Okonomiyaki sauce over the pancake. Then squeeze mayonnaise on the top creating a swirl design. Sprinkle with seaweed seasoning of choice, and finally sprinkle with dried Bonita fish flakes. Ideally, the pancakes are hot enough when serving so the fish flakes will begin to move and shrivel up. This is fun to watch!

Dashi

(can be found prepared in Asian markets, too)

INGREDIENTS

- One 4-inch piece dried kelp
- 4 cups cold water
- 1 cup of Katsuobushi (shaved Bonita fish flakes)

DIRECTIONS

Rinse kelp and cook in the water to a simmer and remove from heat. Add the dried Bonita flakes and cover. Let steep for approximately 15 minutes. Any remaining Dashi can be refrigerated for a few days.

SHOPPING INFO	Koreana Plaza	Berkeley Bowl
*Asian stores where many of the ingredients can be obtained:	2370 Telegraph Ave. Oakland, CA 95670	(two locations) 920 Heinz Avenue, Berkeley (510) 898-9555
	Country Square Market 510 Contra Costa Blvd Pleasant Hill, CA 94523	2020 Oregon St, Berkeley (510) 843-6929



Taemi mixes batter with chopsticks



Taemi's Okonomiyaki cooking



Taemi-Nagaimo-Japanese yam



Taemi's Okonomiyaki with Bonita fish flakes

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