

TOKYO TALES

By Carole Hallett Mobbs

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

My first mission was to explore the local supermarket. What an eye-opener! I spent ages there, gazing at the bizarre vegetables, exotic fruit and the incredible displays of fish. There are so many unrecognisable foods and with most of the labels written in Japanese I have no chance of identifying them.

Enormous white “carrots” required further clarification and to my amazement they turned out to be a type of radish called *daikon*. The range of mushrooms look like the fungi my Mum used to tell me not to eat because they might be poisonous, and the various roots, stalks and even flowers still have me baffled.

The fish department is the most fascinating. Some of the objects on display look truly inedible to my uneducated and inexperienced Western eyes. Many items are quite daunting. However, the colours are beautiful; colossal rainbow-scaled whole fish, huge red fish eggs that look like glistening jewels, deep maroon octopuses with the tentacles all neatly tucked up and iridescent silver fish. You can also buy dried fish like squid and packets of something I am convinced is krill.

After dragging myself away from the fish department I discovered many other intriguing items. I gave the Asparagus Biscuits a miss, but very nearly bought a huge bag of monosodium glutamate instead of sugar. Confusingly, it's displayed next to the sugar and, apart from the size of the granules, looks very similar.



All food is expensive. Bread is a relatively new concept for Japan and it's impossible to find loaves of wholemeal bread except in rare, specialised bakeries. Sliced white bread is about £3 for 8 slices and many fruits are packaged as “gift fruit”. This means they are top quality and usually very large. Apples the size of melons are sold, beautifully packaged, for the equivalent of £10 each, and melons sell for £50. I have also seen a slice of fish about the size of a standard

beef steak that was priced at £350. I do hope it wasn't whale or dolphin.

I managed to gather enough food and felt rather pleased with myself... until I got home and tried some of my acquisitions. The bread rolls contained red Soya bean paste which is an acquired taste – and none of us have acquired it yet. My daughter had discovered what she thought was “sherbet”; sachets decorated with cartoon characters and displayed in the sweet section. Unfortunately for her, it turned out to be *furikake*, a Japanese condiment which is usually sprinkled on top of rice. It's a mixture of sesame seeds, chopped seaweed, and monosodium glutamate. The poor child's face was a picture of horror when she tasted it. It looks like I'll have to try harder to learn to read the language!

