

SAMURAI GOURMET: “THE PLEASURE OF THE TABLE”

Ms. Ishleen

Assistant Professor, Department of English

Stella Maris College(Autonomous), Chennai 600004

ishleen@stellamariscollege.edu.in

Abstract

Food nourishes both body and soul. It provides not just vital nutrients but also vitality and happiness and sometimes an opportunity to connect with one’s inner self as Takeshi Kasumi, the sixty year old, lead character of the Netflix original series, Samurai Gourmet, discovers. Kasumi discovers various facets of his own character through his adventures with food. The series directed by Masayuki Qusumi is based on a slice-of-life manga with the same title. Kasumi, a diffident man, creates an alter ego for himself, after reading a book based on the adventures of a fearless, wandering samurai during the Warring States period of Japan. This alter ego gives Kasumi a newfound sense of confidence. Interestingly, the samurai surfaces only when Kasumi is on an adventure based on food –this is when the samurai and the gourmet come together. Food thus bridges the world of fantasy and everyday quotidian reality.

Food not only connects Kasumi and the samurai across temporal, spatial and cultural boundaries but also connects readers of manga and viewers of the show across temporal, spatial, linguistic and cultural boundaries. This paper traces the arc of Kasumi’s journey, from a diffident man to a samurai gourmet and shows how food is an intrinsic part of the habitus of any individual irrespective of whether he is a master-less samurai of fifteenth century Japan or a newly retired, fledgling gourmet of the twenty first century. Food straddles both worlds.

Key words: Food *Samurai Gourmet* fantasy/quotidian “the pleasures of the table”

Food is not only a source of nourishment and sustenance but also provides a unique sensory experience. However, philosophers and critics have often dismissed the significance

of food as it depends on the bodily and personal senses of taste, smell and touch. Immanuel Kant rejected food as an object of contemplative, critical appreciation as he believed that transient, personal preferences could not form the basis of a universal critical evaluation or appreciation. Kant posited disinterestedness as the chief requirement for objective critical appreciation.

Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, the French gastronome, on the other hand, provided a different point of view. Brillat-Savarin pointed out that a gourmand possesses an ability that would enable him to distinguish between “the pleasures of eating” and “the pleasures of the table”(197). The former are pleasures of the appetite while the latter pleasures involve a “reflected sensation” (197). These pleasures of the appetite are “born of the various circumstances of fact, place, things, and persons attendant upon a meal” (197). Brillat-Savarin thus shows how disinterestedness and reflection could be a part of gustatory experience. He defines gastronomy as the “scientific definition of all that relates to man as a feeding animal”(93).

Takeshi Kasumi, the sixty year old lead character of the Netflix original series, *Samurai Gourmet* can be considered one such man who slowly learns the “pleasures of the table”. Kasumi, in fact, discovers various facets of his own character through his adventures with food. This paper traces the arc of Kasumi’s journey, from a diffident man to a fledgling samurai gourmet who creates his own personal fantasy to help navigate the everyday realities of his life after retirement.

The series begins a day after Kasumi’s retirement and follows the shy, gentle man as he sets off from his house on a walk and finds himself taking the usual route to his office. He decides to break out of this auto-pilot mode by having lunch at an unfamiliar restaurant. He begins his journey towards becoming a gourmet by taking the giant step of ordering a beer with his lunch! This beer that he orders on a weekday, is a revolutionary step for the retired and retiring Kasumi as in order to take this step he creates an alter ego for himself -- that of a brave samurai warrior from the fifteenth century, based on a book he was reading that morning. Interestingly, the samurai is a wandering samurai as he has no master, just as Kasumi has no master now. However, Kasumi has many lessons in self-confidence

and assertiveness to learn from this samurai warrior from the Warring States period of Japan. Tellingly, the samurai surfaces only when Kasumi is on a food based adventure.

The samurai appears for the first time when Kasumi asks the waitress in a faltering voice for beer and when she doesn't hear him he is resigned to drinking water. He thinks to himself that if he were a samurai he would drink during the day. The arrival of the samurai is accompanied by a sudden change of setting to fifteenth century Japan with all the patrons and waiting staff in Japanese attire. The scene shifts to a sepia toned filter. This change clearly signals the arrival of Kasumi's alter ego, the fearless warrior. This technique is followed throughout the entire series. This dramatic shift presents an interesting visual of fifteenth century Japan and an anachronistic twenty first century man cowering in their midst. Food connects these two men across temporal, spatial and cultural boundaries. Food is the bridge between his fantasy of being a confident warrior and his reality as a diffident man .

The arrival of the samurai does not mean that Kasumi becomes a fearless travelling samurai overnight. In the very next episode titled "The Demoness' Ramen" Kasumi is brow-beaten by the proprietor of the ramen store. Clearly this transformation will take time and will explore the various roles played by food in Kasumi's life.

The connection between food and nostalgia is clearly brought out in two episodes -- one that deals with Kasumi's experience as a child at a seaside inn, and another that deals with his fond memories of eating chicken croquettes after school. Food thus acts as an intangible link between the past and the present and triggers various memories. As John S. Allen explains in the Harvard University Press blog

First, evolution has seen to it that food in general may be a privileged target of memory in the brain. There is a part of the brain called the hippocampus (one in each hemisphere) that is critical for memory..... Emotion and smell no doubt contribute to the power of some food memories, but the hippocampus has more direct links to the digestive system. Many of the hormones that regulate appetite, digestion, and eating behavior also have receptors in the hippocampus. Finding food is so important to survival that it is clear that the hippocampus is primed to form memories about and around food.

Kasumi's memories make him realise that as a child he was more confident and less worried about what other people thought of him. This realisation makes him ask for a second helping at the inn and eat his croquettes outside on the open terrace following the example of the samurai.

These food memories are sometimes also connected to particular places or spaces. For instance, Kasumi is overjoyed when he stumbles upon an old fashioned café and in another episode goes looking for an old restaurant that had since moved in search of his favourite dish of hashed beef and rice. The connection between food and space is interesting as the hippocampus "is also important for spatial memories, which may be its primary role for animals who do not possess language"(Allen). Humans who do possess language are thus better equipped to articulate their memories and spatial connections.

Food and family connections are not really explored in *Samurai Gourmet* as most of Kasumi's meals are eaten alone. An exception is made when he celebrates his wedding anniversary as well as when he rather unwillingly takes his niece out for dinner to a traditional barbeque joint. The latter instance is the only time Kasumi actually seems to *become* the samurai and scolds his niece for her selfish behaviour, and the niece is the only other person who glimpses the samurai in Kasumi as he is walking away from her. This incident clearly underscores the importance of Japanese etiquette centred around food.

The series makes a clear distinction between what is polite behaviour and what are merely pointless regulations. In the episode titled "Pasta the Samurai Way" Kasumi enters a fine dining restaurant and realises that in the space of one course he has made three glaring faux pas – he has forgotten to take off his hat and his sunglasses and has ordered beer instead of wine. The samurai's entry and clear enjoyment of the food puts Kasumi at ease and he realises that he was being paranoid over nothing. His food adventures clearly show that he is slowly learning to experience "the pleasures of the table" by articulating his thoughts in a "complex reflective hedonic" (Sweeney 99) manner.

Even in the episode of the catered bento box lunch when Kasumi realises that his lunch had tasted so good because he had been hungry proves Brillat-Savarin's point that a "healthy appetite will incline one to have a heightened enjoyment of a meal" (105) which clearly contradicts Kant's belief that only "ingesting without appetite" (Sweeney 103) could

lead to a truly contemplative experience. Kasumi's experience thus seems a happy mix of both Brillat-Savarin and Kant's points of view. He has enjoyed his meal and has discovered something important about his experience, upon reflection. He has learnt that his appetite, the location or space he is in, as well as the company of people around him, has an intangible yet important effect on his experience of eating. This underscores the point Brillat-Savarin makes that the "pleasure of eating requires, if not hunger, at least appetite ; the pleasures of the table, more often than not, are independent of the one and the other"(197).

Along this journey Kasumi also experiences the connection between food and community. In an episode, endearingly titled "Umbrellas at the Dinner Counter", Kasumi comes across a rude, rich man who makes derogatory comments about the "commoners" seated at the izakaya or traditional bar.

As in many traditional eating establishments, the most important (and sometimes most enjoyable) part of the proceedings is interacting with the person behind the counter. And though many izakaya have tables where individuals, couples, or parties might entertain themselves with drink and food, taking part in the counter's unofficial debating society contributes greatly to the fun (Ashkenazi, 136).

In spite of the samurai's dramatic example, Kasumi chooses to mildly point out that sake is meant to be enjoyed. This gentle remark makes the shamefaced man apologise. The episode then ends with all the patrons enjoying their dinner holding umbrellas aloft as the roof begins to leak in the rain!

Just as this episode tackles class differences the episode titled "The White haired Knight" tackles cultural and ethnic differences. An American couple is treated rudely by the chef of a yakitori restaurant because the man chooses to add pepper to his food even before tasting it. This makes the chef extremely angry. Kasumi finds it too daunting to intervene. Predictably, the samurai makes his entrance, but before the samurai can interfere, a white knight wearing full body armour comes to the couple's rescue. So, in a single frame there is the bewildered looking Kasumi, the Japanese samurai, the terrified Americans and the white knight! This strangely unlikely collage of characters is brought together by their love for good food. Good food clearly crosses not just linguistic and cultural, but also spatial and

temporal boundaries. Kasumi's experiences with different cuisines clearly underscore the universal appeal of good food.

Food has the ability to transform the socially awkward Kasumi to a more confident individual while offering him a great deal of enjoyment as his frequent, heartfelt exclamations of "Umai" (delicious) certify. Brillat-Savarin says "Gastronomical knowledge is necessary to all men, for it tends to augment the sum of happiness"(97). This series in its gentle, quirky way bears testament to Brillat-Savarin's claims of a "transcendental gastronomy"—an experience that surpasses the quotidian and the mundane.

Works Cited:

- Allen, John. "Food and Memory", *Harvard University Press Blog*, 18 May 2012, harvardpress.typepad.com/hup_publicity/2012/05/food-and-memory-john-allen.html . Accessed 23 June 2021.
- Ashkenazi, Michael and Jeanne Jacob. *Food Culture in Japan*. Greenwood Press. 2003.
- Brillat-Savarin, Jean Anthelme. *The Physiology of Taste: Or, Transcendental Gastronomy*, Translated by Fayette Robinson, Digireads.com Publishing, 2012.
- Masayuki Qusumi, creator. *Samurai Gourmet*. Sunshine Studio, 2017. *Netflix*. www.netflix.com/title/80132738
- Sweeney, Kevin W. "Hunger Is the Best Sauce: The Aesthetics of Food." *The Philosophy of Food*, edited by David M Kaplan, University of California Press, 2012, 97-126.