

The Safe and Right Place to Be

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You are alone in a foreign town, and no one speaks your language. You are exhausted, starving and have little money left in your pocket. Your eyes begin to wonder in the air. Then suddenly, you see that familiar old man with his white beard, in his white suit, smiling and holding his hands out to you. Yes, that familiar Colonel Sanders. Or maybe it is that yellow big arch; shaped like the letter M, with Ronald McDonald's clown face, inviting you to go in, full of temptation.

This was exactly how I felt when I was walking down the streets of Hong Kong this summer on vacation. Not understanding a word of Chinese, and trying to cut down my costs, the Colonel Sanders or the yellow letter M arch seemed the safe and right place to be.

However, are these fast food places really safe? Do we know what is actually in the food? Today I would like to discuss the problems of these fast foods, and what should be done about the present situation.

Firstly, why are we so dependant on fast foods these days? The obvious reason is, that they are convenient. It does not consume time, and can be eaten anywhere. Today, since more women work, as well as men, fast foods seem to be the answer. At home, the same thing can be cooked for half the price, but still the image of 'cheap meal' remains.

As far as eating habits are concerned, Japanese people are more American than Americans. According to the magazine called, 'Restaurant Business', the number of McDonalds Restaurant in Japan increased from 450 to 608 in past 3 years alone, and Kentucky Fried Chicken also added another 200 restaurants.

The choice of food is determined largely by its looks, tastes, and feelings these days, rather than its nutritious values. The demand for fast foods rises easily, as long as there are customers and meal times. Moreover, they guarantee the same burger and milkshakes whether you are in the streets of Shibuya or in central Moscow.

But just by eating your daily supply of hamburgers and French fries, one would not know whether they are safe or what is actually in them.

An editorial of the New York Times in 1986 reveals that if one asked for a chicken burger in order to avoid cholesterol, instead, the customer would be exposed to fat and cholesterol worth the amount of 11 chunks of butter. The customer is also exposed to artificial preservatives and colourings. Some companies refuse to indicate the information of their products to the public. Some have not even conducted a nutritious analysis of their products. The fast food businesses argue that even if they reveal the content and the processing methods, the consumers will not understand the difficult chemical terms, and will lead to more confusion.

However, we cannot overlook the fact that, as we became more dependent on fast foods, its effects on our bodies became more serious. The average consumption of French fries per person was only 900 g a year in 1960, but now it has increased to 6000 g. We also drink 3 times as much soft drinks compared to 30 years ago.

Now, what do these numbers mean to us? National Cancer Association and American Science Academy warn no more than 30% of our calories should be consumed from fat, and that 10% is enough. However, these fast foods give 40-50% of fat, which is far above the limit. They also increase our daily intake of sugar, as well as sodium from salt. These push up our death rates of heart disease, cancer and diabetes. JAS, known as Japan Agricultural Standard, which often appear on the fast food packages, are these days considered as JITSUWA ABUNAI SHOKUHIN, or Actually Dangerous Products!

Eating is listed as one of the three most important things in life, together with clothing and shelter that concerns all of us. But the present tendency to depend strongly on giant grease burgers is surely not what we want! I am not saying we should not use fast food restaurants. We have fallen in love with the convenience of them, and since we are so busy, it is impossible to separate us from the fast foods. However, we can change the fast food business and we should at least be entitled to know what is actually in the food.

The indications of nutritious values and processing methods should be made legal, so that the fast food restaurants will not only compete on tastes and looks, but what is actually in the food. Today, since many people are health-conscious already, the nutritious values printed on the packages will actually make people more nutrition-conscious. And, the customers may make a different choice of fast foods next time, or may even come back to it again if the indications are satisfactory.

If we show our preferences by rejecting fatty, sugary and salty foods, then our eating habits will gradually change, and so will the fast food businesses. Some fast food businesses are already on the move, by introducing fresh salad bars and fruits, and also low-fat cooking methods.

If we keep this up, then, the old man in the white suit or the yellow letter M arch may really become the safe and right place to be.