

Chopsticks

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Overview

From the back roads of Yunnan to the sushi bars of New York, epicures of Asian cuisine the world over rely on chopsticks as a handy eating tool. In use since at least the Shang Dynasty (c. 1500 BCE), these slender sticks, averaging 20 centimeters long, are daily utensils in China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam, and common companions of rice and noodle dishes in many other countries.

Chopsticks have been carved from cedar, bone, plastic, ivory, jade, and precious metals. But today, the disposable wooden chopstick, mass-produced from white birch, poplar, or bamboo, reigns supreme. Known as *waribashi* in Japan and *yicixing kuaizi* in China, disposable chopsticks date to the 1870s and were originally deemed a thrifty way to use up wood scraps. They became widely available in the 1980s, after technological improvements sped up the production process. The Chinese government promoted their use to fight disease, and across Asia interest in the one-use sticks skyrocketed as more people ate out.



Toshiyuki Aizawa/REUTERS © 2001
Japanese government ministers sample beef to alleviate fears of mad cow disease.

Closing the Loop

Every day, hundreds of millions of chopsticks are used once and then tossed. While restaurants in some countries wash and restock them, in Japan most people “don’t want a chopstick that is used by someone else,” explained Yuki Komayima, former president of the Canadian Chopstick Manufacturing Company, in the early 1990s.

But times are changing. Some Japanese producers now recycle the used sticks into items like particleboard, paper, and facial tissue. And in October, China issued new standards requiring that chopsticks be made only from birch, poplar, and other widely planted trees, or carved from fast-growing bamboo. The rules ban the use of certain chemicals and limit the water content of bamboo sticks to 10 percent to prevent mold.

Some Japanese consumers are swearing off *warabashi* altogether, instead carrying a set of reusable lacquer or stainless steel sticks as part of the country’s “Let’s Carry Our Own Chopsticks” campaign. In China, Shanghai imposed a partial ban on disposable wooden chopsticks in restaurants and snack stores in 2000, and a 5 percent tax is being considered nationwide to discourage their use. South Korea, meanwhile, has switched largely to metal sticks.

Manufacture and Use

Rising global demand for disposable chopsticks began sparking concerns about deforestation in the early 1990s. A subsidiary of Japan’s Mitsubishi Group was reportedly razing centuries-old aspen groves in western Canada to generate 8 million pairs per day, using only the finest-grain (knot-free) wood and leaving as much as 85 percent of the timber to waste. After milling and drying the wood to reduce moisture content, the rough sticks were then shipped to Taiwan for finishing and packaging.

Japanese output plummeted with the advent of cheaper Chinese imports, and in 2000 more than 95 percent of the 25 billion disposable chopsticks used in Japan were imported. China is now the world’s leading producer, exporter, and consumer, making some 45 billion pairs a year for domestic use alone. This requires some 1.7 million cubic meters of timber a year, the equivalent of 25 million trees.

To prevent the wood from becoming yellow, black, or moldy, some manufacturers of lower-quality chopsticks bleach them with sulfur dioxide (SO_2), which at high dosages can cause asthma, vomiting, and skin rashes. In July 2005, the Consumer Foundation of Taiwan found traces of SO_2 on 10 of 37 chopstick samples tested. Arthritis is also a concern: a 2003 survey of 2,500 elderly Beijing residents linked joint decay with long-term chopstick use.

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Just the basics.

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