

Excerpt One (taken from Chapter One)

On a monthly basis, there were numerous get-togethers after class, and these were great chances to get to know the instructors and the club members on a more personal level. I learned about their jobs, their families, their backgrounds, and their true characters. We shared ideas and discussed many things about life in general, as well as about karate, of course. My knowledge of the Japanese people and also my Japanese language ability improved, as the dojo members were always willing and ready to teach me something new about their culture. All of these valuable interactions took place over food and drinks, which brings me to an aspect of the Honbu Dojo culture for which very few people are adequately prepared—the food challenges.

I grew up in a traditional middle-class family in northeast England, and my daily diet consisted of meat, potatoes, and vegetables, with fish maybe once a week. Fortunately, I had branched out a little in my culinary tastes while at university, and I had begun to enjoy several Italian, French, and German dishes. But nothing could have prepared me for what I was about to eat in Japan.

At the socials, the sensei and members of the dojo took great pleasure, if not an almost sadistic pleasure, in introducing me to various kinds of Japanese food. This was like an initiation ceremony, only it lasted for several months rather than one night. During that time, I ate sushi (of course—and, by the way, I love it now), pig knuckles, pig's feet, and a soup that is kind of like menudo with chopped pig small intestine. I ate raw beef, grilled chicken heart, squid innards, raw octopus tentacles, raw horse meat with ground garlic, salmon roe, and, on one occasion, a pig's ear as a kind of pork jerky. If you have ever seen the TV show *Fear Factor*, you will understand what I mean when I say that I think I qualify as having met the eating challenges. Despite my squeamishness about some of the delicacies that I was presented with, I always ate them. I never asked questions until after I had finished, and I continued to go back for more.

Before long, I wasn't required to demonstrate my eating ability and, instead, was left to eat the things that I actually liked, while trying to indirectly translate to the next unsuspecting foreigner that the squid he was about to eat tasted "just like chicken" and not like chewy rubber. It was at this point that I finally saw the humor in these indirect challenges to we *gaijin* (foreigners)—particularly when the said *gaijin* would, upon being told that he had just eaten a piece of pig intestine, hold back his natural impulse to vomit and attempt a very weak exclamation of *oishii* (delicious). A few seconds later, I would receive a sharp kick to the shin under the table and a look that implored me to tell the kicker what he was actually eating the next time. I could only smile back and say, almost as an excuse, "I had to do it too!" I guess I also have a sadistic streak. I think what actually had happened though was that I had become an accepted member of the dojo. I was no longer an outsider, and it was this feeling that gave me the most pleasure.