

In the current crisis people in Japan are actually fighting over Tofu, one of Japan's premier soybean products, in what might be called the *Battle of the Bean Curd*. A search in Japanese for the words 豆腐激安 (*tofu gekiyasu*, or *drastically discounted tofu*) brings up nearly 350,000 sites!

Tofu comes in various price ranges, a small block retailing for 160 yen might be a typical price, but some supermarkets are offering Tofu blocks for as low as 29 yen. Since they are estimated to be purchasing the product for around 36 yen wholesale, this is clearly a loss leader, designed to draw customers into the store. And it works, according to interviews featured on a recent newscast, as shoppers get more and more price conscious to save money wherever they can.

This is great news for consumers, but it is killing the specialist Tofu producers, who depend on this single product and its variations for their livelihood. Tofu makers pride themselves on maintaining quality, and also producing original tofu products through variations on a theme.

But the price difference between the Tofu specialty shops, and the supermarkets who are almost giving it away, is so significant that it has decimated the specialty shops. In some areas, the number of specialty shops surviving is down to one in ten from its former level, a disaster by any measure.

It may take a stretch of the imagination to connect *melodious beans* to abundance, wealth, and richness, but it is a happy image, and *abundance* is different from the scarcity mentality which leads to *winner-takes-all* competition.

If you live in Japan, it might be worth visiting a Tofu Specialty Shop, and ask them the difference that makes their products better than the discounted Tofu slabs sold at supermarkets.

Supermarkets need to attract customers too, but do they need to focus on a single product as a loss leader, to the point where they decimate the neighborhood specialty shops?

Why not rotate among different products to reduce the damage, and still provide consumers with an incentive to shop for bargains?

Specialty shops for their part, would do well to educate consumers online about what makes their products special, and worth the difference in price.

Can you think of other examples where superstores are flattening local producers because of a similar price war?

As a consumer, do you think about the consequences of your purchases when you fill your cart with low-priced items?

Food for thought.

TOFU WARS



The character above is the word for *Abundance* (豐 *yutaka*).

Interestingly is made of two radicals, the upper radical meaning *melody* (曲) and the lower radical meaning *bean* (豆).

Alas poor Tofu! I knew her my friend:

A fellow of infinite tastes, of most excellent flavours:

She has satisfied my stomach a thousand times;

And now how outraged she must be

As customers fight over her at 29 yen, or 15p.

Here hung those lips that I have tasted with I know not how oft;

Where be your recipes now? Your gourmets? Your woks?

Your flashes of masterly cuisine,

That were wont to set the taste buds on a roar?

Not one now, to mock your own selfish want

Quite crest fallen as this tofu war rages on.

Now get you to my lady's larder, and tell her:

The tofu producers will soon be swept away

In the supermarket frenzy, unless we can save the day.

To this favour she must come

Lest the future of these melodious beans be undone.

No deceased court jester this,

A culture rather, at the edge of abyss.

Verse by Hugh Purser