

JAPAN'S QUAKE

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Two years after Fukushima disaster, doubts of food safety linger in Japan



Catherine Winter

Some people don't worry about the safety of food grown near the Fukushima reactors, two years after the nuclear disaster, but others take pains to test their food, or in the case of David Wagner, avoid Japanese food. Wagner, who has lived in Japan for 30 years, shops in a Tokyo store that features imported foods.

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by Catherine Winter
Marketplace for Monday, March 11, 2013

STORY



Catherine Winter
Radiation detectors in the back of a Tokyo shop are used to test food for customers, for a fee.

In Japan, people call it 3-11. It's shorthand for the tsunami and nuclear accident two years ago. The disaster left behind devastation that may never be completely cleaned up. Tens of thousands of people still can't go home. People are still missing. And people are still afraid of radioactive contamination. Japan's government insists the food supply is safe. But some people have made big changes in their eating habits.

David Wagner has lived in Japan for almost 30 years. He loves Japanese food. But these days, he gets groceries at a store that sells imported foods. In the store, he says, "So I buy my granola here ... and the reason I'll take this is, it's from Germany."

Wagner doesn't want to leave Japan. He's got good work

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here as a business communication consultant. But after the nuclear accident, he started [a Facebook page on food safety](#). He stopped eating mushrooms, because they absorb radiation. If he wants fish -- here in the land of sushi -- he mail-orders it, canned.

"I just do not eat the fish in Japan anymore," he says. "They can't test all the fish."

Fish is still popular in Japanese restaurants and groceries, but uncertainty about food is widespread among the Japanese. Some people even use private testing services.

Customers come to this Tokyo shop for organic cotton towels and hand-dipped candles -- and also to use the radiation detectors. There are two of them in back.

Hidetake Ishimaru set up shop here after the disaster, checking food for radiation at 3,000 yen a test -- about \$32. Samples fill a shelf: "Brown rice and soybeans, white rice ... that is seaweed, I think," he says.

The Japanese government says the country's rice is safe to eat. But customer Yuki Yanagase is skeptical. Ishimaru translates for her: "I don't believe it. So I'm gathering many informations from Internet."

The Internet's full of scientific studies and conspiracy theories about radiation -- what you might expect when a danger is invisible and hard to understand. If your job is to try to explain things to the public, good luck.

Dr. Shuichiro Hayashi works on crisis management for the food safety division of the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare. Hayashi says after 3-11, Japan set such strict limits for radiation that you could eat food contaminated at that level every day and be just fine. Japan allows much less radiation in food than the U.S. or Europe.

His colleague in the Ministry of Agriculture, Mitsuhiro Doishita, says the government tested 10 million bags of rice from Fukushima in 2012, and only 71 were over the limit.

Many people told me they're reassured by these measures. Wakako Yamane is an interpreter at an ad agency, stopping by McDonalds for coffee before work. She was worried about food right after the accident ...

"Today I'm not concerned at all," she says. "Some people are. I'm not. I just want to continue the way we've been living and I think we're all right."

This may be a case of what David Wagner calls radiation fatigue. He says you get tired of being vigilant about food. When we had lunch one day, he had a salad -- something he wouldn't have done a year ago. But he wasn't sure he should.

"From everything I read, nobody can say definitively or non-definitively that it's safe or not safe, and that's what's confusing for people like me," he says.

Research about radiation is confusing. [A new World Health Organization report](#) on the Fukushima disaster says people are *not* at risk of health effects unless they were in the most contaminated areas. But the report acknowledges the limits of the research it relies on: Studies tend to look at people with higher levels of exposure -- such as atomic bomb survivors. The long-term effects of low-level exposure are not as well known.

So some people figure -- why take a chance? On yourself maybe, but what if you have kids?

Two-year-old Karera Tani demonstrates the English he's learning in kindergarten. The Tani family lives in Chiba, near Tokyo. When the nuclear plant 130 miles away started spewing radiation, they fled to Osaka. They're back now, but they buy drinking water from Hawaii. They use a grocery delivery service that tests food for radiation. Karera's mom, Momo Tani, is a doctor. She says the high grocery bill is worth it, for her son's health.

"Well, with things that aren't supposed to be there like cesium, even if it's under the limit it's

there, and you never know what the effect will be if it accumulates."

Tani worries about the research that shows that children are particularly vulnerable to exposure to radiation. A lot of parents told me they aren't concerned about their own diets, but they're careful about what their kids eat. Many of them told me they feel bad for not supporting the farmers in the disaster region, but they're buying their rice from Kyushu, far away from the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant.

About the author

Catherine Winter is a reporter for the public radio series BURN: An Energy Journal, hosted by Alex Chadwick, from SoundVision Productions with support from The Alfred P. Sloan Foundation.

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