# JREF Essay Contest – “Why are you interested in Japanese culture?”

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At a first glance, all breweries are the same. Silos, distillation towers, fermenters, and storage facilities are little more than equipment and facilities. The process centres on the same basic fermentation reaction. Everything is in its place. Yet no matter how well you stick to a blueprint and regulations, every brewery is unique, and this has an effect on the final product.

The smallest differences will define the drink. If the storage is barrels, then the wood and its age will be in the taste. New copper replacements will never give the same character as the original equipment. Above all else is from where the water is drawn.

As an engineer, I spend my days piecing together what happens inside a reactor, sorting which actions take place where and caused by what, or bringing equipment together to create a complete system. For me, there is no greater thrill in life than investigating a system and trying to uncover what makes it function. In a way, that is what drew me towards Japanese.

I have moved around a lot in my life from the Netherlands to the US and several places in between, but of all the languages I’ve encountered thus far Japanese is the only one that felt familiar from the start. It is an appealing blend of logic, function, and beauty: marking out the parts of a sentence according to the function fulfilled; the ability to drop extraneous detail to bring an idea into sharp focus; the way words can be subtly nuanced and highly individualized while still following basic rules, both in speech and writing. It is not often when learning a language that you are made to consider the true meaning behind the words chosen and the order in which they are placed.

There is more to my desire to learn Japanese than academic interest. The question posed for this essay is “Why are you interested in Japanese culture?” The straightest answer is the way old traditions are maintained while new ones are explored. As may have been gathered from this essay’s start, I appreciate the effort and expertise behind a good drink. That drink could be an unchanged recipe passed from generation to generation; it could be brand new and the product of the latest technologies. There is merit in both.

This juxtaposition of new and old shines through nearly all things I have learned about Japan. Many new technologies and fashions originate in Japan, yet traditions are maintained. The most interesting thing is that these traditions are kept for the sake of preserving Japanese culture, not for the sake of tourists.

In two years, after I have completed my PhD, I plan to spend a long holiday traveling Japan. At the moment there are no plans set beyond starting in the south before heading north. As I speak to more people, more possibilities are added to the list. My maps are covered with all manner of activities. There is a trail marked out from Kagoshima to Sapporo from talking to brewers at the events in London. Along the map’s coastline, beaches are picked out for surfing. The to-see list ranges from traditional kimono to the emerging trends on Cat Street. The to-eat list is perhaps even more wide-ranging. It includes not only traditional foods, but those which have crossed borders and have become uniquely Japanese, such as nikujaga.

These are the things I plan, but when I finally arrive? Everything could go out the window based on a single person’s suggestion. There is so much about Japan I know I will only be able to learn from those living there. Whether that suggestion completely changes my plans or simply improves them, I will do everything I can to prevent missing it.

When I finally visit Japan, I do not expect to see a single Japanese culture. Just like a brewery and the Japanese language itself, there may be a shared basis, but each person has their own culture. I am interested in all of them.