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## Japan's unwanted low-fat diet

Two years ago, Japan had too much milk. But today, butter is suddenly a scarce commodity. The global food crisis strikes again.

Andrew Leonard

Apr. 23, 2008 | A drastic shortage of butter in Japan is providing the hook for some gloomy stories about the future of food in one of the richest nations of the world. Forget about Haiti or Kazakhstan -- Japan, too, is experiencing a food crisis.

From Australia's [The Age](#):

While soaring food prices have triggered rioting among the starving millions of the third world, in wealthy Japan they have forced a pampered population to contemplate the shocking possibility of a long-term -- perhaps permanent -- reduction in the quality and quantity of its food.

From [The Times](#):

Japan, its leading food importers say, will inevitably take a step backwards in the food it eats. "The time will come," says Akio Shibata, the director of the Marubeni Institute and one of Japan's foremost experts on food supply, "when the Japanese people will realize that they will not have the quality, taste and prices of food they are used to."

The basic story line is familiar: a global surge in grain prices and animal feed, fueled by growing demand for meat and dairy in China and India, the trickle-down effect of corn-ethanol mandates in the U.S., and years of bad weather in key exporting nations such as Australia. But the trend poses particular challenges for an island nation that, in 2006, produced locally only 40 percent of the calories it consumed.

But there's an important twist. Just two years ago, a [vast milk surplus](#) in Japan forced local dairy farmers to literally pour raw milk down the drain and kill off excess dairy cows. [According to the Asahi Shimbun](#), domestic production accounted for 86 percent of Japan's butter as recently as 2006, but after the painful resolution of the glut, butter production plunged.

The problem: You can pour milk down the drain in an instant, and kill off your herd of cows in a blink of eye. But you can't reverse the process so quickly. Building up a productive dairy herd takes years. The laws of supply and demand work slowly with food, a fact we sometimes forget in our ultra-instant-gratification society where a shortage of, for example, the most popular video-game machine at Christmas is seen as vile sin against fundamental consumer rights.

The combination of high oil and food prices and a burgeoning world population has everyone wondering whether humanity has finally reached the limits-to-growth end of the line. And sure, we must grant the possibility that the long, steady *decline* in the price of basic foodstuffs that has been a fact of post World War II life may have come to an abrupt end. But it's also true that a massive reconfiguration of the planet's productive capacity to produce desirable agricultural commodities, in response to current high prices, will take years to accomplish.

-- Andrew Leonard

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