

CULINARY BLISS IN TOKYO



One of the energizing pleasures associated with travel and discovery is food. Those who wish to immerse themselves in a destination want to try the food and drink of every region and this desire is spurred on by the increasing number of television programs that celebrate food, the growing popularity of celebrity chefs, and the pure pleasure of being able to speak knowledgably about cuisine.

The City of Tokyo is no stranger to this global phenomenon where culinary bliss may be found around just about every corner!

Between 2004 and 2013 I was fortunate to explore Japan on 12 separate occasions, from Okinawa in the West to Hokkaido in the North and East, to Ogasawara in the far South. But as a travel trainer, writer and publisher, Japan is only one of seventy countries I've explored so far. And despite my culinary curiosity wherever I travel, Japan keeps drawing me back.

A culinary explorer seeks to satisfy all of the 5 senses: **tasting** the food (or sipping the drink); **smelling** the bouquet of spices or the 'nose' of the sake or beer or shochu; **seeing** the preparation and plating of the food as well as appreciating the atmosphere in which the food is served; **listening** to the sizzle or the bubbles or the conversation; **feeling** the texture on the tongue and palate. And all of these things add up to one word: "**Umami**", meaning "delicious taste" but also conveying the idea of holistic satisfaction with the entire dining experience.

The beauty of eating in Tokyo is the sheer variety of places and styles a traveller can try, including stand up sake bars, food stalls, formal and informal restaurants, Izakayas, fast food, chain restaurants, Do-it-yourself, convenience stores, department stores, travelling bento boxes, festive and specialty foods and food markets. Over the years I'm sure I have visited—and eaten—at every one of these.

But I do have my favourites. And for these places I also add one more 'sense' to the list: the sense of **humour**—which goes along with conversation, conviviality, trying new foods and drinks, chatting with the servers, the owners and the patrons, and generally turning a culinary event into a memorable experience. So, in no particular order, here are my favourites...

Tsuzuku: a tiny 14-seat seafood izakaya tucked away on a side street in the Kagurazaka district. Known for very fresh sashimi, incredibly tasty 'wasabi meshi' (rice with wasabi—a house specialty), harmonica (crispy, tasty, grilled back-fin of tuna) and other local dishes. The friendly atmosphere makes this a 'must visit' every time I'm in Tokyo.

Jokigen. A standing seafood/sake bar (where you literally stand at the counter). It can accommodate 10-12 at the bar but as a very popular neighbourhood gathering place, 30 or more can somehow fit into the very small space. And it's worth it. Very fresh seafood (try the

sashimi combo), an engaging owner who regales the patrons with tales of the sea, and a great selection of sakes. Located a short walk from the Shimbashi Metro station. Arrive before 6:00 pm—5:30 pm would be even better.

Sake: While beer is considered the number one drink in Japan, sake comes in at an honourable second (shochu is third) and one of the more casual places to enjoy the sakes from Nagano is at Shinshu Osake Mura, in the Shimbashi JR/Metro station. This is a standing sake bar where you can order samples of different sakes or even a draft beer. The owner is friendly and very knowledgeable. And the snacks are wonderful! Try the smoked tofu, the 'shamo' (smoked chicken) and the 'nametake' (enoki mushrooms with a sweet sauce).

Sushi Dai Honkan. This Tsukiji-area restaurant is known for its high quality sushi and sashimi. We always sit at the counter to watch the food preparation and ask the chef questions about when to add wasabi or dip the sushi in salt or just savour the flavour, plain. All the food is made, served and eaten by hand. My favourite is the aji sushi served with scallion and ginger, complemented by dry, crystal clear Otokoyama Sake from Hyogo Prefecture. Both set meals and à la carte are available.

Okonomiyaki. What's better than one stand-alone okonomiyaki restaurant? How about an entire street of okonomiyaki restaurants?. This is what you find near the Tsukishima Metro stop where the specialty is 'pancakes' with different fillings that add up to a delicious, casual meal. While you can order the Okonomiyaki already cooked, the fun and adventure lies in making your own on the table grill. Just order the ingredients (meats, seafood and vegetables), give them a good mix and then spread them out like an omelette on the grill using the small spatulas. Season generously with otafuku sauce, bonito flakes, parsley, nori and mayonnaise and then enjoy it while it's hot—before you enjoy another one. Shochu mixed with cream soda (ramune) or grapefruit or lime (chu hai) is a nice complement to the meal.

Onigiri . Most people associate Tsukiji with raw seafood but the outside market food stalls sell all sorts of treats for foodies including fish cakes, soba, ramen, tamagoyaki (grilled egg) and then there is the Onigiri shop. Formally called Kaisen Onigiri Maru Toyo, this is THE place in Tokyo to buy Onigiri: rice balls filled with delicious fresh treats ranging from salmon, to shrimp tempura and on to plum, vegetables, miso, small fish and Ikura (salmon egg). We usually buy 1 or 2 onigiri for our breakfast and then another 2 for lunch later on. They are made fresh daily and sooo good.

Yakitori. There are many Yakitori restaurants in the Yurakucho and Shimbashi areas. While 'yakitori' refers to chicken, most place offer grilled chicken, beef, pork or vegetable on a skewer, garnished with salt, spices or special sauce. My favourite is 'tsukune'—minced chicken with a sweet sauce, and also 'negima'- chicken with leaks-served hot off the grill and complemented by a cold mug of Ebisu or Asahi Beer.

Isetan department Store, Shinjuku. The food gallery in the basement of Isetan is amazing. We avoid the busy weekends and explore during quieter times when the vendors tend to offer samples of the uber-fresh, tasty foods. They have just about anything you can imagine: grilled salmon, pyramids of gyoza (dumplings), varieties of bento boxes, chirashi, cooked meats, fish cakes, desserts and more. We often 'shop' for lunch here, then find a park, buy some green tea from a vending machine and enjoy an inexpensive, gourmet meal.

And this is only a glimpse of Tokyo's culinary offerings. Adventurous travellers can sample whale meat, horse meat, Fugu fish (very tasty fried or as sashimi) as well as chanko-nabe, the thick protein-rich stew that helps the Sumo wrestlers bulk up. Indeed, culinary bliss comes in all shapes and sizes.

There are literally thousands of eating establishments in Tokyo and each contributes to the mosaic of taste offerings and satisfaction that comprise the memories—and stories—that travellers treasure after they return from a vacation. The attainment of Culinary Bliss is in the mind and stomach of the beholder. Tokyo offers travellers an incredible variety of options to savour on their culinary journey.