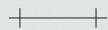




EAT JAPAN



AN ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO THIS CULINARY HOT SPOT



JNTO



Japan.
Endless
Discovery.



RAMEN

One of the most popular and inexpensive fast-food favourites in Japan, ramen – wheat noodles in a salty meat- or (occasionally) fish-based broth – is served in four major soup styles: miso, soy sauce, salt and *tonkotsu* (pork bone). To experience the best, head to Tsuta, a humble ramen restaurant in Tokyo's Sugamo district, which was recently awarded a Michelin star for its efforts.



TEMPURA

It would be a crime to dismiss tempura as 'deep-fried food', for imagine if you will large chunks of fresh seafood and vegetables dipped in a light batter, cooked in oil, and often served with a dashi-based dipping sauce or flavoured salt on the side. While many restaurants serve tempura, do yourself a favour and seek out a tempuraya (a restaurant that specialises in the dish) such as Seiju, again located near Tokyo's Tsukiji Fish Market.

OKONOMIYAKI

Okonomiyaki, a pan-fried batter filled with cabbage and topped with a variety of ingredients such as sliced meats, fish flakes, mayonnaise and/or *aonori* (dried seaweed), is Japanese comfort food at its best and should be tried at the bustling street stalls of Osaka where the dish is said to have originated.



THE MUST-TRY DISHES OF JAPAN

There's no better way of discovering the nation's cuisine – recognised by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage asset – than by lining up the following 'top hits'.



SUSHI & SASHIMI

Sushi has become almost synonymous with raw fish, but there is another term for this: sashimi. Sushi is rice, seasoned with vinegar, and accompanied by raw fish or other seafood, vegetables, egg, or even red meat! Whichever you'd prefer, there's no place fresher than the shops dotted in and around Tokyo's famous Tsukiji Fish Market. For something a little more upmarket, Sukiyabashi Jiro, with its three Michelin stars, will not disappoint; nor will the more purse-friendly Irifune.

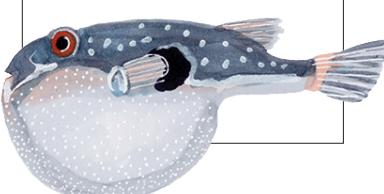
TAKOYAKI

What do you say to mouth-watering balls of batter filled with diced octopus, green onions and pickled ginger and topped with mayonnaise and *takoyaki* sauce? This ultimate street snack was first popularised in Osaka and should be experienced at either Aizuya (the restaurant that is rumoured to have created the dish), or Yamachan, the only takoyaki restaurant to ever be listed in a Michelin guide.



UNUSUAL SUSPECTS

- Fugu (puffer fish):** so poisonous that even the tiniest morsel can kill; only a highly trained chef will do.
- Natto:** slimy (and smelly) fermented soy beans.
- Basashi:** raw horse meat served in thin slices with soy sauce, ginger and onion.
- Shirako (milt):** a popular bar snack.
- Hachinoko (bee and wasp larvae):** a sweet snack beloved in central Japan.





5 FOOD SOUVENIRS TO TAKE HOME



1 KNIVES

Japanese knives are beloved by chefs the world over for their precision and longevity. Much of this has to do with their hand-made construction by master craftsmen. Some blades can cost thousands of dollars to purchase, but small kitchen knives can be had for a reasonable price. Shop for them at renowned Aritsugu Knives inside Kyoto's Nishiki Market, where your choice will be sharpened on a giant whetstone in store and engraved with your initials, or take a quick train trip from Osaka to the city of Sakai, where the tradition started: apparently ninety per cent of professional chefs in Japan use Sakai kitchen knives.



2 KITKATS

A SWEET TAKE-HOME TREAT, KITKATS COME IN MYRIAD FLAVOURS THAT CAN'T BE FOUND ANYWHERE ELSE IN THE WORLD, FROM RUM AND RAISIN AND PURPLE SWEET POTATO TO GREEN TEA AND EVEN SAKE. YOU CAN BUY BOXES FILLED WITH INDIVIDUALLY WRAPPED MINIATURE BARS AT THE AIRPORT BEFORE YOU HEAD HOME.

4 PICKLES

Tangy, sour vegetable pickles or *tsukemono* are a cornerstone of the traditional Japanese meal, and they are great to take with you to use at home. Pickles are so revered in Kyoto that there are plentiful stores dedicated exclusively to them; choose pickled ginger (*gari*), cucumber (*kyurizuke*) and irresistible plums (*umeboshi*).



3 POTTERY

Japanese ceramics and pottery are lovely, with everything from rice and ramen bowls to sake sets produced in a rainbow of colours, including distinctive browns, greens, and blue and white patterns. Shops can be found all over the country but, if you want to be spoilt for choice, head to Kappabashi Street in Tokyo, known as Kitchen Town, or go straight to the source: Arita and Imari, in north-western Kyushu, are pottery towns worth exploring.



5 SWEETS AND CANDY

There's a tradition of giving sweets as thank you gifts in Japan so they are widely available and seriously cute. The imperial household historically bestowed *konpeito*, tiny pastel-hued sweets that come in pretty boxes, on visitors. These are available everywhere along with *kintaro ame*, little discs that traditionally featured the face of the Golden Boy (*kintaro*), but now feature everything from flowers to Hello Kitty. Also look out for little bento boxes filled with candies made to resemble sushi and rice, and traditional *wagashi* (pictured above).



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AND THE AWARD GOES TO...

With so many award-winning eateries scattered across the country, it's almost impossible to have a bad meal in Japan, explains chef Michael Ryan.

I DON'T KNOW about you, but when travelling I feel a real pressure to make every meal 'count'. When you are in a new city for just a few days, the idea of having a bad meal can be a serious issue. The often-quoted line that you can't have a bad meal in Tokyo isn't entirely true – while it is certainly harder to have a bad meal in Tokyo than many other cities, they are out there. So doing research and getting recommendations is important.

One of the highest-profile guides to the restaurant scene is the Michelin Guide. And there is no denying that the Michelin Guide has had an impact on the restaurant scene in Tokyo; the city has more Michelin stars than any other city critiqued by the guide, including Paris.

It's been a success for the Michelin Guide too. Hundreds of thousands of Tokyo guides are sold each year, and Michelin's decision to expand to other cities (Kyoto and Osaka now have a joint guide) has certainly reinvigorated the brand. The expansion of the restaurants featured to include traditional Japanese cuisine, including sushi and even ramen, shows an awareness of the booming Japanese food scene and a willingness to embrace the best of the best, no matter the style.

Many of Tokyo's restaurants are so small (think eight to ten seats), and beloved, that receiving an anointment from Michelin doesn't really change the bottom line, although it may change things for the customer, sometimes pushing out bookings to six months in advance. But cooking and running restaurants is hard work, and getting recognition for it can be very satisfying; it is also great for those working with you.

While Michelin is possibly the best known restaurant guide in the world, it

Kobe, Nara and beyond. You need to be your own meta-critic, sourcing information from many sites to create a wish list of restaurants. To restrict yourself to just one source means you could well miss out on the less known, more off-the-beaten-track places that can be just as rewarding as the higher-profile offerings. There's a lot to be said for the feeling of 'discovering' a place that's not so well known.

One thing's for sure: with so many great restaurants on offer, your bucket list will no doubt be long and probably require more than just one visit to the country to get through.

WHEN YOU ARE IN A NEW CITY FOR JUST A FEW DAYS, THE IDEA OF HAVING A BAD MEAL CAN BE A SERIOUS ISSUE.

is just one of the many tools available to customers seeking the best of dining in Japan. In fact you would be doing yourself a disservice to use just one guide when exploring the country's vast and eclectic dining scene. There are many online sites, some customer reviewed, that you would be crazy to ignore (definitely try savorjapan.com), and Bib Gourmand, Michelin Guide's listing of the best restaurants offering great food at a reasonable price, includes choices in Tokyo, Kyoto, Osaka,

MICHAEL RYAN'S TOP TOKYO PICKS.
Den, jimbochoden.com;
Florilege, aoyama-florilege.jp; Craftale, tables.jp.net/craftale;
Kotaru, ameblo.jp/kotaro-info;
Salmon & Trout, Setagaya; Namikibashi Nakamura, Shibuya.



TEA CEREMONY 101

Bringing together theatrical movement, objects of beauty and centuries-old customs in a spellbinding performance, a traditional tea ceremony is a feast for the senses.

WHEN YOU hail from a country where using a saucer is all too often considered a formality, the splendour of the Japanese tea ceremony can be dazzling to watch. A choreographed ritual of preparing, serving and drinking *matcha* (a powdered green tea) that in its current form dates back to the 16th century, the ceremony works to instil tranquillity and mindfulness by bringing together the mind and body in a series of pre-determined movements. Curious? Make the most of your first ceremony by getting to know the basics.

HISTORY

Tea has been a fixture in Japan since it made its way into the country via China in the 800s; however, ritualistic drinking didn't begin until the 13th century when tea-tasting parties became popular under Kamakura Shogunate rule.

VENUE

Although tea ceremony can be performed anywhere, a tatami-floored room is



considered the ideal venue. In Kyoto, try En, a small teahouse with plenty of atmosphere, or the elegant Club Okitsu. In Tokyo, head straight to the gardens of Hotel Chinzanso.

DETAILS

It's not as simple as booking into any old ceremony; gatherings are either *chakai* – a simple event that includes thin tea, a light meal and confectionery – or *chaji*, which is a far more formal (and time-consuming) affair with a full-course *kaiseki* meal, thick tea, confectionery, and thin tea. Seasonality is also important, with

variations in the *temae* (serving methods) performed and equipment used.

TIMELINE

Beginning with a quick ritual cleanse, guests can expect to spend some time viewing and appreciating the tea-making items before the meal is served in small courses. Once finished, the host will ritually cleanse each tea-making utensil before preparing the tea. Bows are exchanged as each guest receives their tea bowl in turn, rotating it slightly to avoid drinking from the 'front' of the bowl and wearing away the design. In some variations of tea ceremony, all guests may share the same bowl and rotate it as it is passed along.

ETIQUETTE

Taking time to show appreciation is essential, and it is also considered polite to enter the room on your knees and let the host seat you. Be sure to also eat and drink everything the way it is served – no requests for sugar!

SAKE FOR BEGINNERS

Here's what you need to know about the national drink.

1 Sake is a rice wine made by fermenting rice that has been polished to remove the husk or bran. The brewing of the clear liquor is similar to beer in that it involves converting starch into sugar and alcohol. Unlike beer, sake packs a punch: beer usually contains up to 9 per cent alcohol while sake can contain up to 20 per cent, but can be diluted with water to end up at 15 per cent.

2 Sake has evolved over millennia, with mention of a brewing department being established in the Imperial Palace in Nara in 689. But it was during the Edo period (17th to 19th century) that it started to be produced on a wider industrial scale.



3 There are various sake-producing regions where you can visit a brewery, take a tour, and taste the wares: try Fukumitsuya Sake Brewery (fukumitsuya.co.jp) in Kanazawa, founded in 1625; Shirataki Brewery in Echigo Yuzawa, Niigata Prefecture, where the winter snow provides ample clear mineral water for the brewing process; or Fukuju Brewery (enjoyfukuju.com), located near Kobe.

4 Sake can be served hot or cold, although high-grade *tokutei meisho-shu* is usually drunk cold so as not to lose the flavour and aroma. Hot sake is more often than not served in winter.

5 Sake is served in a small earthenware or porcelain bottle known as a *tokkuri*, and sipped from tiny cups called *choko*; at special celebrations sake is served in ceremonial cups or *sakazuki*.

6 The amount of polishing that has been done to the rice, as well as the absence of additives, governs the premium status of the sake. Rice polishing is described in the following levels: Junmai, Ginjo, Junmai Ginjo, Daiginjo, and finally Junmai Daiginjo. Look for these terms to guide you when choosing your drink.





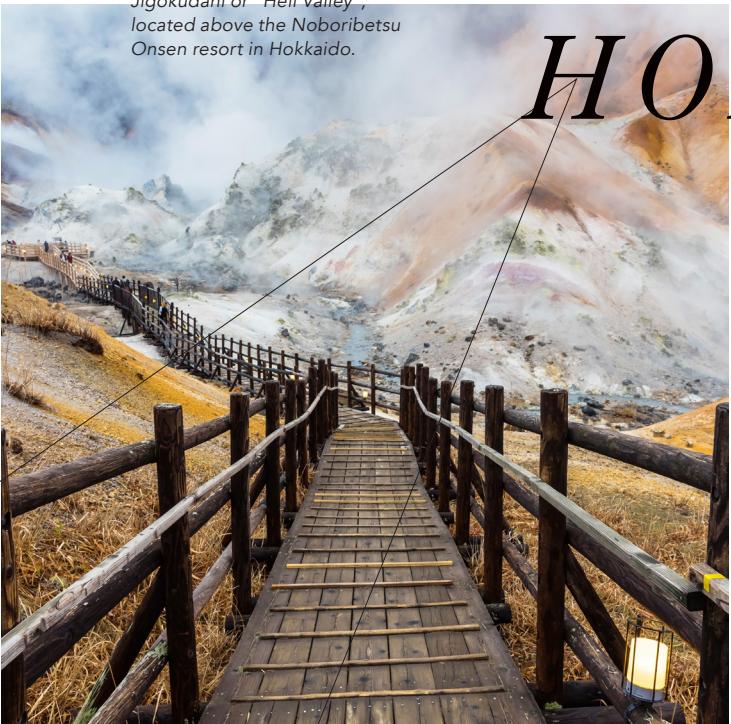
EATING JAPAN (FROM TOP TO TOE)

If you think you know Japanese cuisine based on eating sushi every now and then, think again. Japan has one of the most interesting and diverse food cultures in the world, with myriad unique delicacies and traditional dishes specific to each region.

WHEN IT COMES to eating your way around an entire country, France and Italy often spring to mind, but Japan is now taking its rightful place as a gastronomic destination on a world scale. Much of its appeal has to do with the intricacies of Japan itself: the country is made up of a number of distinct regions, from the winter wonderland of Hokkaido in the north to the balmy islands of Okinawa to the south, with 47 prefectures (like small states with their own local government departments) found within these. While much of what we recognise as Japanese cuisine can be found throughout the country, each of these regions and many of the prefectures – along with the cities they contain – also have their own distinct variations and unique dishes influenced by everything from traditions and customs to locality. The best way to sample all that's on offer is to work your way through it from top to bottom, literally.



The stunning scenery of Jigokudani or "Hell Valley", located above the Noboribetsu Onsen resort in Hokkaido.



TOHOKU

THE TOHOKU REGION, located in the north-eastern part to the northernmost tip of Honshu, offers up a diverse collection of six prefectures that take in everything from coast to mountains. The area is famed for its stunning countryside, hot springs and lakes, and the rice produced here is considered some of the most delicious in the country, especially *hitomebore* from Sendai, the capital city of Miyagi Prefecture, and *akitakomachi* from Akita. Given its size, there are numerous unique dishes on offer, many of them featuring the aforementioned rice; one such dish is *kiritanpo*, cooked rice that is kneaded and then toasted on a skewer and subsequently added to soups. Another dish unique to the area is the comically named *Wanko Soba*, a favourite of Iwate Prefecture, which involves mouthful-sized servings of buckwheat noodles being flung into the bowls of diners by a server as each one is finished; they repeat the process until the diner is full, sometimes after 50 to 60 serves.

MUST-TRY BITES: *Sasakamaboko* is a steamed fish paste that is a specialty of Miyagi Prefecture, especially Sendai; it's a popular gift or souvenir.

MUST-SEE SIGHTS: Tohoku has a fascinating samurai history; visit Kitakami in Iwate Prefecture, Aizuwakamatsu in Fukushima Prefecture and the lovely town of Kakunodate in Akita Prefecture.

HOKKAIDO

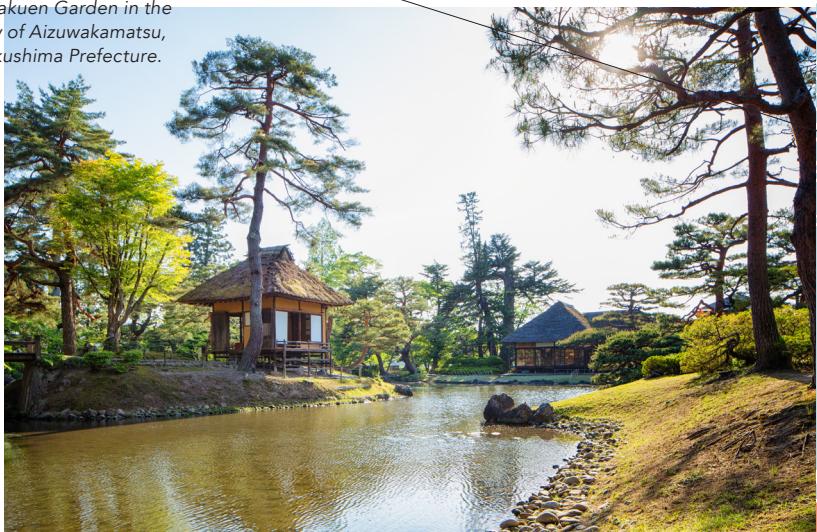


JAPAN'S NORTHERNMOST ISLAND, Hokkaido is known as a winter paradise, with its capital city of Sapporo playing host to a world-famous snow festival every February and ski fields such as Niseko stealing much of the thunder of more renowned European resorts. But beyond snow, the island also boasts stunning scenery and abundant national parks to enjoy in the warmer months. The food here is honest and hearty, relying on the natural flavours of its local ingredients. Naturally the island offers specialty seafood, including crab (queen crab, horsehair crab, red king crab and blue king crab are all found locally), sea urchins and scallops: order a bowl of *donburi meshi* (rice topped with sea urchin, scallops or salmon roe) to get a sample of what's on offer. Another seafood speciality is *Ishikari nabe*, a stew of salmon, locally grown potatoes and cabbage, *konnyaku* (a plant stem also known by the much more enigmatic name of devil's tongue) and tofu in a kelp stock flavoured with miso. Ramen is also a staple on Hokkaido, but as with all things Japanese there are regional differences: Sapporo specialises in miso ramen with garlic, wiggly noodles and generous slices of braised pork; Asahikawa is all about soy sauce ramen; and in Hakodate, believed by many to be the best place in the entire country to slurp this irresistibly delicious noodle soup, the ramen has a lightly salted broth.

MUST-TRY BITES: Swirly soft-serve ice-cream made from creamy, pure Hokkaido milk is one of the best iced treats you will ever eat in your life.

MUST-SEE SIGHTS: Hokkaido has a fine tradition of brewing crisp, fresh beer; it is the home of Sapporo, after all. The annual Sapporo Summer Festival takes place for a month in summer (starting around July 21), with Odori Koen, the park that runs through the heart of the cosmopolitan city, transformed into a giant jovial, colourful beer garden.

A view of the tranquil Oyakuen Garden in the city of Aizuwakamatsu, Fukushima Prefecture.



KANTO

ENCOMPASSING the national capital of Tokyo, one of the most vibrant and compelling cities in the world, and including its surrounding prefectures, this region's abundance of food choices is truly staggering. Whole streets in Tokyo are dedicated to the pursuit of excellence in just one dish, and the rivalry between Kanto and Kansai (taking in Osaka and Kyoto) is legendary. Two dishes unique to Tokyo that must be tried are *Fukagawa-meshi*, a jumble of shelled clams and leeks cooked in miso that is served on a bowl of rice with the soup, which takes on the taste of the shellfish, served on the side, and *Monjayaki*, a loose batter mixed with your choice of toppings; there are endless restaurants specialising in *Monjayaki* on Nishinaka Street, just a few steps from Tsukishima Station. But Tokyo isn't the only place worth eating in Kanto: take the train to Chiba (Narita International Airport is located in this coastal prefecture) to try *namero*, a fisherman's dish of fish pieces, miso, sake, leeks, ginger and Japanese basil (*shiso*) that are finely chopped into a paste that when served on top of rice with green tea poured over it is called *magocha*.

MUST-TRY BITES: *Yuba* is the bean curd skin skimmed from the surface of boiled soy milk during the making of tofu, and it is a speciality of Tochigi Prefecture, especially in Nikko where you can eat it dried and wrapped around fillings, or with soy sauce and wasabi like sashimi. While you're in the area be sure to experience an onsen or hot spring bath; there are a staggering 630 onsen in the prefecture.

MUST-SEE SIGHTS: Less than an hour from downtown Tokyo, Kawagoe in Saitama Prefecture is known as Little Edo due to its preserved streets of old warehouses evocative of the Edo period; stroll through the warehouse district and then head to Candy Alley (Kashiya Yokochō), lined with stores selling traditional Japanese sweets and treats that make perfect souvenirs.



Looking out onto the compelling international city that is Tokyo.



CHUBU

TRANSLATING as 'central region', Chubu is located in central Honshu, as its name implies, taking in the bustling city of Nagoya, extensive coastlines, stunning mountain resorts and Japan's most famous natural landmark, Mount Fuji. Here, miso is a staple, being consumed in more ways than just as a soup like in the rest of Japan. *Miso katsu* involves covering a fried pork cutlet (*tonkatsu*) in a miso-based sauce beloved in Aichi Prefecture, while *Goheimochi*, white rice that has been pounded until sticky, skewered and coated in a sweet glaze of soy sauce or miso before being toasted, is a traditional snack of the Chubu area. Eel, or *unagi*, is another specialty of the region, cultivated in Lake Hamana in Shizuoka.

MUST-TRY BITES: *Hoto* hails from Yamanashi, and while its combination of flat wheat noodles, pumpkin and vegetables cooked in miso tastes delicious, it also has mystical health-giving benefits; locals believe that if you eat pumpkin on the winter solstice you will never catch a cold.

MUST-SEE SIGHTS: Mount Fuji of course! But instead of admiring it from a distance get up close on a day tour that takes in the rugged natural beauty as well as the man made, including the lovely Fujisan Hongu Sengen Taisha Shrine.

TAKING IN the ski fields of Nagano, the Hokuriku region has some of the highest volumes of pristine white snow in the world, so it is not surprising that many of its indigenous dishes have been designed and adapted over centuries to keep people warm, from thick soups to hearty stews such as *noppojiru*, a collection of meat, seafood and vegetables simmered in a broth. Another thing warming visitors from the inside around here is sake, one of Niigata Prefecture's specialties. You can take tours of various sake breweries in the area to sample the wares.

MUST-TRY BITES: *Hegi soba* is a Niigata institution, consisting of silky smooth noodles made from a type of seaweed called *funori* that are wound into mouthful-sized servings and layered row upon row in a *hegi*, or plain wood box.

MUST-SEE SIGHTS: Visit Toyama Bay to see the *hotaruika* or firefly squid, luminescent squid that glow an ethereal bluish-white as they spawn in shallow waters from April to May each year. Of course, they can be eaten as well; try them as sashimi or cooked *shabu-shabu* style at the table.

The stunning Kanazawa Castle in Hokuriku's Ishikawa Prefecture.



HOKURIKU

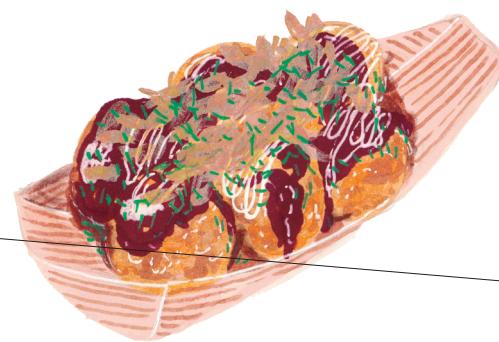
ALSO KNOWN as Kinki, the Kansai region has some serious big-name cities within its limits: Osaka, Kyoto, Nara, Kobe. It is touted as the food capital of the country, with the locals even coining an expression to describe what they like to do with their time, *kuidaore*: literally “to eat until you drop”. Given the diversity of destinations, it’s hard to know where to start when describing the dishes of the region, but there are a few staples for any visitor. In Osaka, where eating is almost a hobby for most, *takoyaki* or octopus balls are a staple: small batter balls filled with diced octopus, onion, cabbage and pickled ginger, and served drenched in a sweet *takoyaki* sauce, mayonnaise and bonito flakes. There’s even an Osaka Takoyaki Museum dedicated to the dish. In Kyoto, visit the bustling Nishiki Market, filled with stores selling local specialties such as tangy pickles, delicate sugary sweets and *tako tamago*, tiny octopus stuffed with quail eggs, and finish off with a bowl of *yudofu*, hand-made tofu cooked in a kelp-based soup. In Wakayama, it’s all about *koyadofu*, the ancient process of freezing tofu and drying it out. And in Shiga Prefecture, *funazushi* is a real ‘only in Japan’ delicacy involving catching *funa* (carp) during spawning season, cleaning it but leaving in the eggs, pickling it in salt for a month, washing it again, and then pickling it for another six months with cooked rice; the result is sour in taste and pungent in aroma!

MUST-TRY BITES: “Eat until you drop” at Dotonbori, Osaka’s neon hyper-lit eat street where you can watch *takoyaki* being whipped up and mammoth crabs, puffer fish and gyoza denote where each is sold.

MUST-SEE SIGHTS: Go further afield than Kyoto and Osaka to the city of Himeji in Hyogo Prefecture to see UNESCO World Heritage listed Himeji Castle, considered the most stunning castle in the entire country.



KANSAI



WITH HIROSHIMA at the region's heart, it is fitting that one of the most famous dishes hails from the prefecture. Okonomiyaki was a popular snack before the Second World War, but afterwards it became a meal in itself, bulking up the poor diet being endured here. Other must-tries are *Izumo soba*, noodles made from unhulled buckwheat seeds that are stacked in bowls called *warigo*, each layer with different accompaniments popular in Shimane Prefecture; and Okayama's *barazushi*, sushi rice topped by local fish, tofu, vegetables and pickles. And Yamaguchi Prefecture is the best place in Japan to sample *fugu*.

MUST-TRY BITES: Hiroshima Prefecture is the country's leading oyster producer, with the plump, shiny mollusc containing more nutrients and taste than others. Try them in *kaki no dotenabe*, oysters simmered in a miso soup with tofu and vegetables.

MUST-SEE SIGHTS: Miyajima, less than an hour from Hiroshima City, is famous for the centuries-old Itsukushima Shrine, built largely over water, and the giant red *torii* gate anchored in the sea; outstay the day-trippers and book a night at a ryokan.



CHUGOKU

THE SMALLEST OF the four main islands of Japan, there are a lot of mountains in Shikoku, and not much flat land. Those mountains act as barriers, and individual regions have developed a unique and deep-rooted food culture as a result. Being surrounded by the sea, there is a great selection of seafood, including *katsuo no tataki*, a dish made by grilling the surface of a piece of bonito tuna over a straw fire, slicing it and serving it with a splash of broth. Meanwhile, Kagawa Prefecture is famed for its *Sanuki udon*, characterised by its square shape, flat edges and smooth texture; the Sanuki region is known as 'Udon Kingdom' due to the proliferation of udon makers and restaurants.

MUST-TRY BITES: *Sawachi ryori* are platters laden with seafood and vegetables that represent the generosity of the people in Kochi Prefecture, with the selection laid out to show appreciation to the gods for a bountiful harvest. Everyone helps themselves from the same plate.

MUST-SEE SIGHTS: An island in the Seto Inland Sea, and part of Kagawa Prefecture, Naoshima is filled with modern art museums, architecture and sculptures, including a giant polka dot pumpkin by famed artist Yayoi Kusama and a bath-house-cum-art-installation.



Celebrated artist Yayoi Kusama's giant Pumpkin installation greets visitors to the island of Naoshima.



KYUSHU

BOASTING CITIES such as Nagasaki and Fukuoka, the island of Kyushu has a distinct personality and some serious food credentials. Fukuoka has its own version of ramen, *tonkotsu* ramen, made from boiling down pork bones into a cloudy broth; restaurants specialising in the dish can be found around the station area of Hakata in Fukuoka, resulting in it being named Hakata ramen. Nagasaki also lays claim to a signature noodle dish, *sara udon*, which eschews broth in favour of frying the wheat-flour noodles in oil and adding seafood, bamboo shoots, mushrooms and pork, and then a pork-and-chicken stock sauce. Seafood is another staple here, with a favourite of Miyazaki Prefecture being *hiyajiru*, a fish-and-miso soup that is chilled before being poured onto hot rice and served with vegetables and pickles. Apparently the dish is a perfect antidote for too much *shochu*, the local rice wine that features ingredients such as sweet potato, wheat, buckwheat and black sugar.

MUST-TRY BITES: Miyazaki mango or *Taiyo no Tamago* (eggs of the sun), grown here since the mid '80s, have reached cult status in Japan; the first fruits of the season are auctioned off with prices reaching upwards of \$3500.

MUST-SEE SIGHTS: Celebrated for more than 400 years, the colourful Nagasaki Kunchi Festival honours the Suwa Shrine with dance and performances involving large floats and lots of noise. It is worth taking in from early October.



OKINAWA



The colourful traditional costumes of Okinawa.



SAKURA MOCHI

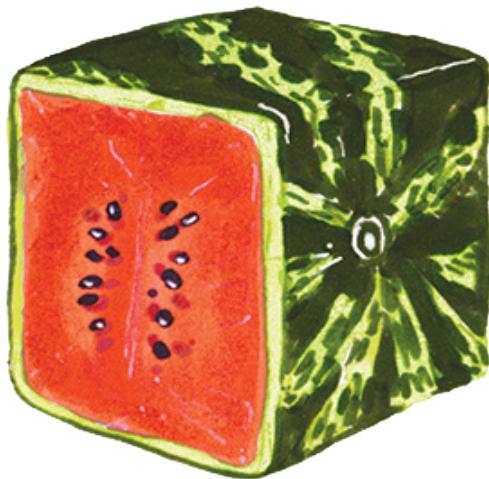
Mochi are traditional rice cakes made from pounded glutinous rice, served throughout Japan, but *sakura mochi* is the pretty pink princess of the lot.

Usually served during the spring cherry blossom (*sakura*) season, the cakes, of course, differ from one place to the next. In the Kanto region, *sakura mochi* are constructed from flat, round rice cakes that have a silky smooth texture; these are wrapped around a dollop of sweet bean paste and finished off with a cherry leaf that has been soaked in brine. In Kansai the *mochi* has a nubblier texture and is fashioned into little balls and swaddled in a leaf to resemble an actual cherry blossom. The one thing they have in common is the taste: sweet and delicate.

THE SOUTHERNMOST islands of Japan, Okinawa Prefecture consists of a cluster of islands that once formed part of the ancient Ryukyu Kingdom. Closer to China than Tokyo, the islands here possess a wonderfully laid-back pace that is influenced by the tropical climate and beach culture. The food presents a unique personality, and is also credited for its health benefits: the fiercely proud Okinawans live longer than people almost anywhere else in the world. Ingredients such as purple sweet potato (*beni imo*), *goya* (a nobby bitter melon) and *umibudo* (sea grapes), as well as locally grown herbs and iron-packed leafy greens, turn up in many of the dishes here, including the hugely popular *champuru*, a stir-fried mix of vegetables, tofu and meat or fish. The deep-purple sweet potato flesh is mixed into vividly coloured sweet tarts and ice-cream or made into noodles. Another dish that speaks volumes of Okinawa's unique history is the cheap and cheerful taco rice – minced meat served on rice mixed with green salad and salsa sauce – an influence of the American soldiers stationed on Okinawa Island since the end of the Second World War. Also try melt-in-the-mouth Ishigaki beef.

MUST-TRY BITES: Okinawa has its own tipple: *awamori*, made from rice and distilled like whiskey, can have an alcohol content of up to 45 per cent.

MUST-SEE SIGHTS: Taketomi Island, 10 minutes by ferry from Ishigaki Island, has traditional Ryukyu architecture, sandy laneways for roads and deserted beaches that give it a blissful time-forgot feeling.



TOKYO'S HALLS OF HAPPINESS

In order to find some of the finest food on offer in Tokyo, Adam Liaw takes a deep dive into the fantastical subterranean world of the department store food hall.

Some of the best food in Tokyo isn't found in tiny holes-in-the-wall or behind the heavy gilded doors of award-winning restaurants. It's hidden in plain sight, just underground beneath some of the city's busiest and best-known locations.

Known as *depachika* (a contraction that roughly means 'department store basement'), these are anything but your average food court. Part-supermarket, part-specialty store, part-restaurant, and part-gift shop, *depachika* are the art galleries of Japanese gastronomy, often featuring outlets from the most impressive restaurants and food stores.

If you're looking for *yatsuhashi* (sweets) brought on the bullet train direct from Kyoto every day, a particular type of *kombu* (seaweed) grown only in the far reaches of Hokkaido, or \$400 square gift watermelons (that you secretly suspected were a YouTube prank, but which actually exist), these halls are the place to go.

Even if you're not in a shopping mood, a walk through a *depachika* is one of the best things a food lover can do. You

get an insight into what makes it all tick – exquisite supermodels of produce, deep-fried family favourites elevated to an art form, and care and dedication put into every step of the food production process, from the farmers through to the packaging, which is as elaborate as you'd find in any high-end fashion boutique.

You need to remember, however, that these aren't actually places to eat. The

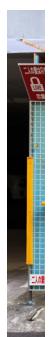
their higher levels, again filled with hand-picked outlets serving extremely high-quality food in kid-friendly non-smoking environments. But if you can afford to wait a little for your food, your options are even more attractive.

If the weather is fine, plan for a picnic. Tokyo Food Show, under Shibuya JR station, is just two stops from Harajuku's entrance to Yoyogi Park, and from the

immaculate food hall below the Isetan department store in Shinjuku 3-chome it is an easy walk to Shinjuku Gyoen National Garden. Or you can just take

your food up to the rooftop garden: Takashimaya in Shinjuku has a nice one.

My pick, however, is the Mitsukoshi in Ginza. It has one of the city's most impressive food halls, and if you arrive before 10:30am you can see the store's opening ceremony at the main entrance. Browse for a while, then pick up lunch from the food hall. The Imperial Palace is a short taxi ride away and you can easily find a spot to enjoy your lunch before seeing the palace. A perfect day in Tokyo!



EVEN IF YOU'RE NOT SHOPPING, A WALK THROUGH A DEPACHIKA IS THE BEST THING A FOODIE CAN DO.

lack of space to sit and enjoy your food can be a frustration for visitors who want to dive in straight away. But plan right and you won't find yourself crouched in a stairwell trying to scoff down a croquette, eating on the train to judgmental stares (it's considered impolite on local trains), or wandering around Tokyo with pockets full of rubbish because you can't find a bin.

If you must eat immediately, head up, not down. Most department stores will have impressive restaurant precincts at



CAT CAFES

Fancy your long black with a side of purring kitten? Cat cafes – essentially a place for people who always wanted a pet but could not own one – are big business in Tokyo where new spaces of all shapes, sizes and themes open on a regular basis. The premise? You pay a time-based entry fee, then, it's a simple matter of ordering a coffee while you play out your pet-ownership fantasies.

HANAMI

Nothing says Japan quite like the visual feast of cherry blossoms in bloom, with their appearance (often heralded by news reports) kicking off the annual cherry blossom festival all over the nation. Taking place from the end of March to early May (depending on location), the celebrations mark the arrival of spring with gatherings, called *hanami*, under the cherry blossoms for food, sake and the delight of feeling a petal graze your cheek as you dine.



WEIRD AND WONDERFUL DINING DESTINATIONS

From dining with maiko to getting raucous at a robot restaurant, there's little about Japanese dining that could be considered run-of-the-mill. Here, the top (and wholly unique) dining experiences to be had in the country.



VENDING MACHINES

Fun fact: there are more than 5.5 million vending machines scattered around Japan, offering hungry diners in a rush the chance to trial push-button everything from hamburgers and ramen to flying fish soup. While it's doubtful the machines are likely to deliver anything Michelin star-worthy (although they can offer up tickets to local Michelin-ranked restaurants), it's worth having at least one culinary vending food experience, just to say you have.

KAMAKURA

How does dinner for two in a warmly lit igloo sound? If you find yourself in Northern Japan in February, join in on the local fun where townships such as Yokote and Iida celebrate snow festivals, or specifically *kamakura*, which are the igloos built for the occasion.

KAWADOKO

The vogue for dining with water views is taken to the next level by *kawadoko*, a style of eatery where the floor or deck is placed over or beside a scenic waterway to keep customers cool during the warmer summer months. Particularly popular in Kyoto, which it must be said is home to some of the country's most scenic waterways, *kawadoko* is usually available from May until September. Your mission? To get in early enough to score one of the best seats in the house right near the water.

SHOJIN RYORI

Picture an ancient temple with a chef of pure mind, body and soul at the helm, preparing the ultimate vegetarian feast: a complete meal comprising five colours and five flavours to bring joy and balance to each of your senses. Known colloquially as 'Buddhist temple cuisine', *shojin ryori* can be experienced in restaurants – particularly those around Arashiyama in Western Kyoto – but it's worth paying a little extra to enjoy it while lodging at a temple (called *shukubo*). Koyasan is a great place to experience this.





DRINKS + CHEAP EATS

OSAKA

By Adam Liaw

THANKS TO the huge variety of ways to enjoy a drink in Japan, heading out after dark is one of the most exciting things you can do on your visit. Osakans have a reputation for being the most fun-loving people in the whole country, so there's no better place to wet your whistle.

The first thing you need to know about Osaka is that the city's nightlife is divided conceptually into Kita (North) and Minami (South). The Minami areas of Namba, Shinsaibashi and the Dotonbori restaurant strip are packed with restaurants and bars and have a real party atmosphere. The Kita area near Osaka Station is more popular with the locals, with the buzz centred on Umeda and neighbouring Kitashinchi.

Every area in Osaka has a personality, and you need to decide what you're in the mood for. Namba is fun, young and rowdy, but 30-something office workers might feel more drawn to the slightly more sophisticated entertainment offerings of Umeda.

In Japanese culture drinking alcohol is usually combined with food so "stand

THE BEST WAY TO GET UNDER THE SKIN OF A CITY IS TO HEAD OUT AFTER DARK AND SEE HOW THE LOCALS HAVE FUN.

and drink" bars are less common.

Those that you do find tend to be run by foreigners and cater for a more Western bar experience. These expat bars are fun and casual, and are just as popular with young Japanese punters as they are with tourists and foreign workers. There are a lot of these in Minami, and a bite to eat along Dotonbori and a few drinks in Namba will be a great night out, but my suggestion is to try something a little bit off the beaten path.



Not far from Shinsaibashi, near the Tanimachi stations you'll find the Karahori district, a taste of old Osaka that is now a network of small streets overtaken by artists, boutiques and teahouses. Try SO, a renovated 'mall' of small shopfronts filled with interesting places to eat and drink, from counter sushi at SUSHI FUKUMAN to a splendid kimono-themed bar called LE MUSEE. Or right nearby there's YUION CHAHÓ, a cocktail bar specialising in drinks made from Japanese teas.

In the heart of Namba you should also try the MISONO or "leisure centre", a five-storey function centre popular with office drinking parties, but which also has a whole floor of tiny bars that hold no more than a handful of people each.

In Kita, drop into YAMABUKI in Kitashinchi, a sophisticated bar specialising in different types of sake, or BAR JUNIPER for gin in gorgeous surroundings.

And once you've had your fill, grab a late-night ramen on the way home.

CONVENIENCE STORE BITES: THE TOP FIVE FOODS TO FIND

Forget soggy pre-packed sandwiches and dry old muffins; Japanese convenience stores offer up a veritable feast of grab-and-go delicacies.



BENTO

A meal in a box, the ubiquitous bento can contain any combination of rice, pickled vegetables, tempura, salad, cooked chicken, meat or fish, sashimi and/or fruit. They are made fresh daily, and come displayed in open fridges with see-through lids so you can see exactly what you are getting.

2 ONIGIRI

Triangles of rice filled with everything from tuna and mayonnaise to flaked salted salmon to fish roe to pickled plum, and either wrapped in nori or finished off with a little square at the bottom providing a handy holding spot. They are convenient, delicious and super cheap: expect to pay about Y150 (the equivalent of \$1.80) each.





HOP

S

By Michael Ryan

CATERING TO all levels and budgets, the high-quality dining scene in Tokyo is possibly the biggest draw for tourists choosing to travel to this wonderful city. But Tokyo's bar scene is equally unique and equally fascinating.

While Tokyo is a mega city that appears to be all about the macro, once you get into the heart of it and see its restaurants and bars, you realise it is actually all about the micro. The bars are as small as the restaurants; an establishment that seats eight is almost the norm. Many feel as if they're run by hobbyists, and the fact that you happen to enjoy their hobby and want to drink in their bar is just a bonus.

There are plenty of gimmicky bars specialising in any weird quirk you may want, but it is the bars obsessively focused on producing the best cocktails possible that interest me. A drink at a bar after a meal is a great way to make your night in Tokyo last a little bit longer (sometimes much longer), and there are plenty to choose from. But be warned: they can be even harder to locate than the often-difficult-to-find Tokyo restaurants.

TOKYO

More temple than cocktail bar, **GEN YAMAMOTO** offers set courses of cocktails based on perfect seasonal fruits and vegetables, sake and spirits, all served in a serene environment at this establishment, named for its owner-bartender. And as his cocktails aren't overly strong, having a set of four or six is manageable and actually a great way to start the evening. Bookings are essential.

An import from Oslo, **FUGLEN** has a more international vibe but still feels as though it could be nowhere but Tokyo. Located in Shibuya, it's a coffee shop by day and a bar at night, with a great beer selection and a relaxed vibe that is a hit with the expat set. While you're in the area, drop into **BAR TRAM** and **BAR TRENCH**, a block from each other. Specialising in absinthe, both are dark moody affairs that are hugely popular with Tokyo's inner-city crowd. The owners recently opened another bar close by, **BAR TRIAD**, if you can't get enough.

BEN FIDDICH in Shinjuku is one of my favourite Tokyo bars, the sort of place where you can end up spending far too long. With the look of an old apothecary, bartender Hiroyasu Kayama creates



concoctions to order from his selection of fresh and dried fruits and spices; his Campari is legendary.

Another Shinjuku must-visit is **THE NEW YORK BAR** at the Park Hyatt. Having played a starring role in *Lost in Translation*, it now stands on its own merits for its wonderful ambience.

In Ginza, **BAR HIGH FIVE** is the bartender's bar. You come here as much for the wonderfully balanced drinks as to watch bartender and owner Hidetsugu Ueno create drinks with style and precision. It was Ueno, along with a few others, who put Tokyo's cocktail scene on the map. **STAR BAR**, also in Ginza, is another of the original bars, with classic drinks and exquisitely attired staff.

And if you find yourself in Kichijoji, a vibrant area of laneways filled with great eating options, **SCREWDRIVER** is a great option – before finishing the night with a quick bite to eat, of course.

3 KATSU SANDO

Juicy, golden fried pork schnitzels coated in crunchy panko crumbs (*tonkatsu*) resting between two slices of pillow-soft white bread and drenched in Japanese mayonnaise; they even come complete with the crusts removed, further enhancing their super sandwich status.



4 SOBA

These buckwheat noodles are served cold in summer (*zaru soba*), making them very portable and surprisingly refreshing. The chewy noodles come with various accompaniments or *yakumi*, such as finely sliced green onions, toasted sesame seeds and thin slivers of nori, as well as a light soy and dashi-based dipping sauce (*soba tsuyu*).



5 SUSHI

The fact is that Japanese convenience store sushi is probably better than restaurant sushi anywhere else; it is fresh, offers up good variety and comes with all the requisite accompaniments (wasabi, soy sauce, pickled ginger) at a fraction of the price of restaurant sushi.





EAT JAPAN

For more information on culinary experiences in Japan, visit the
Japan National Tourism Organization's website: www.jnto.org.au



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