

# Japanese Restaurants

## Blossoming Around the World

By Yukari PRATT

As the explosion of Japanese restaurants expands around the world, what challenges do they face? Why is Japanese cuisine so popular and is this just a fad or is it here to stay? The global expansion of Japanese cuisine — is it just a trend?

**WHILE** the Japanese have always held their own cuisine in high regard, the publication of the premiere *Tokyo Michelin Guide* in October 2007 has Japanese cuisine being reconsidered around the world. Japanese food has a rich history contributing to the many facets of a meal, including the assembly of a wide variety of ingredients and exquisite presentations. Even a basic meal, “*ichiju sansai*,” would consist of a soup (*ichiju*) and three side dishes (*sansai*) with a bowl of rice. This would include a variety of colors, flavors and cooking methods that in the end guarantee a nutritionally well-balanced meal.

There are about 20,000 Japanese restaurants outside Japan, half of those in the United States. In that country in the last 10 years, the number of Japanese restaurants has increased by 225%; in 2007 there were 9,950 Japanese restaurants. It is estimated that only 20% to 25% of the restaurants in the United States are Japanese-owned. What sometimes may result is unauthentic Japanese food or culturally incorrect service or presentation. In March 2008 the Organization to Promote Japanese Restaurants Abroad (JRO), a nonprofit organization, sponsored “The Japanese Restaurant International Forum (for the) Promotion and Study of Japanese Cuisine Worldwide.” This symposium addressed pertinent issues such as marketing Japanese cuisine in foreign countries and the support for the export market of products from Japan for the restaurants.

The rising popularity of Japanese food is attributed to many factors, including belief that it is a healthful diet that is low in fat, rich in fresh and sea vegetables, seafood and soy. Soy products, which include *tofu* and *edamame* (green soybeans), are believed to lower the risk of breast cancer and help women in menopause. Sea vegetables are rich in nutrients. Seafood is often referred to as food for the brain and the heart.

*Umami*, a culinary buzzword, is the Japanese word for the fifth flavor on the palate. Often translated as “savory,” some chefs around the world are incorporating *umami*-rich ingredients such as *kombu* (kelp), *miso* (soybean paste) and *kat-suobushi* (dried bonito flakes) into their cooking.

Japanese cuisine, ingredients and techniques are some of Japan’s great exports. What is happening with Japanese cuisine outside Japan and what does the future hold? What ingredients are being exported and what can be produced locally?

### Sushi Becomes Mainstream

*Sushi*, once considered exotic, has become one of the most popular foods in the world. Currently there are 6,000 in-store *sushi* bars in the United States for “time-conscious consumers” with *sushi-to-go* home meal replacements (HMR). Advanced Fresh Concepts (AFC), the pioneer of *sushi* HMR, was established in 1986 by Ryuji Ishii. Originally they set up a *sushi* bar inside the supermarket to demonstrate *sushi* making and to sell *sushi*.

Popular exports from Japan for the *sushi* industry include *nori* (laver), rice wine vinegar and the rich diversity of seafood. Tsukiji, the world’s largest seafood market, has become a brand name recognized by many chefs and consumers. High-end restaurants can market this name as it may garner a higher price with customers.

AFC is constantly developing new items for addition to their menu to reflect food and health trends, for example including premium items and organic brown rice in their *sushi*. Genji Sushi, a vendor in Whole Foods Markets in the Northeast region of the United States, has recently added a whole-grain type of *sushi* to their line-up to appeal to the health-conscious consumer.

### Beyond Sushi & Tempura

The variety of Japanese restaurants around the world is expanding. What has long been limited to *sushi*, *tempura*, *teppanyaki* and *bento* lunch boxes has expanded to reflect what one may find in Japan. When Parisians tire of *sushi* they can have traditional *unagi* at Nodaiwa.

In New York City, it is possible to find hand-made *soba* (Soba Nippon), *yakitori* (Yakitori Taisho), *robatayaki* (Aburiya Kinnosuke) and even *okonomiyaki* and *takoyaki* (Otafuku). Umi no Ie has a long list of *shochu* (distilled spirits) in its subterranean bar. Japan-based restaurants are opening branches outside Japan, including Ippudo Ramen and Basta Pasta serving Japanese-style pasta incorporating ingredients such as *uni* or *tobiko*. En Japanese Brasserie serves home-made *tofu* and *yuba* that are made fresh four times each

Photo: Michael Corbin



Bincho opened a second restaurant in Soho in May and is ready for a third shop.

evening. Restaurants such as Sakagura and En Japanese Brasserie have knowledgeable *sake* sommeliers on staff to guide the diner on *sake* and *shochu*.

In speaking with Malcolm Simpson, the restaurant manager of Bincho in London, he lists the items that are imported from Japan, “*bincho-tan* (charcoal), *tosaka* seaweed, *unagi*, *miso*, soy, ginkgo nuts, green tea, *sake*, whiskey and *shochu*.” Bincho grills up traditional *yakitori* and *kushiyaki* over Japanese *bincho* charcoal on the Thames’ South Bank. In May it opened its second restaurant in Soho and is scheduled to open a third shop following that in central London. Simpson notes “60% to 65% of our customers are non-Japanese.”

Britain has seen the number of Japanese restaurants quadruple in the last five years. Consumers are also finding more and more Japanese ingredients in the supermarket for those who want to cook at home.

### Sake - Best Partner for Japanese Dishes

SAKAYA in New York City has quenched the appetite for *sake*-thirsty customers. Stepping into SAKAYA is a soothing experience. The shop’s understated design featuring simple *sugi* (cedar) plank shelving showcases the *sake* bottles. A traditional *sugidama* (cedar leaves bundled into a large ball shape) hangs in the window, as is often found in *sake* breweries in Japan, indicating that the new *sake* has finished fermenting and is ready to be consumed. There is a selection of *shochu* and



SAKAYA shop: “*Sugidama*” or a ball of cedar leaves is hung in a shopwindow.



they also offer a service where each *shochu* bottle may be wrapped in a square piece of colorful, traditional *furoshiki* cloth.

Owners Rick Smith and Hiroko Furukawa opened the first store dedicated to *sake* east of the Rockies in December 2007. Beau Timken opened the first US shop in San Francisco called True Sake in 2003. Smith and Furukawa, both *sake* enthusiasts and dedicated to education, have found that by inviting guests from *sakagura* (breweries) in Japan they are able to help make the connection for customers to personally meet, taste and speak with those who are most familiar with the *sake*-making process. Recent visitors include brewers of “*Otokoyama*” from Hokkaido and “*Dassai*” from Yamaguchi. SAKAYA also hosts tastings with importers and *sake* sommeliers where they will open up bottles to educate customers on unique types of *sake* including *kimoto* (specially brewed crude *sake*) as well as *namazake* (unpasteurized *sake*).

*Sake* imports to the United States are up more than 70% in the last six years. While SAKAYA has made a big splash in the New York City metro area, it is also receiving orders from around the country through its website.

“Americans are just beginning to discover premium *sake*. We do think that there is a tremendous upside for *sake*, particularly among wine and artisanal beer drinkers,” says Smith. “We’ve found that if we introduce a customer to something new by giving them a taste, they tend to buy it. So, there is an appreciation for and an interest in learning about all types of *sake*.”

“Education is our mission and reason for existing,” Smith continues. “It is our focus since helping people understand where *sake* originates, how it is made, and why it is made in a certain style, leads to greater appreciation and enjoyment.”



Photos: Hiroko Furukawa, Yukari Pratt



Inside the shop: A man in the “*happi*” coat, from Japanese brewery Fukumitsuya Shuzo, helps a visitor taste *sake*. (Upper left) Bottles of Japanese spirits “*shochu*” wrapped by “*furoshiki*” cloth



TAFU New York: The shop plays the role of an ambassador of Japanese cuisine by introducing varieties of Japanese tea and showing how to taste it.

### Traditional Tea Service

Japan is currently exporting ¥1.5 billion worth of green tea to the United States. TAFU New York is a sixth-generation shop that is serving traditional Japanese tea at a café in midtown Manhattan. All of the tea at TAFU New York is imported from the main store, Tafukoshunen Honten in Osaka. Noboru Inomata, the general manager of TAFU New York, enthuses, “We would like to be the ambassador for tea and tea culture to the United States.” Many customers understand the health benefits of Japanese tea, which is high in vitamin C, minerals and antioxidants. From classes on preparing tea to participation in events such as the Coffee and Tea Festival, TAFU New York is reaching out to share the rich culture that is associated with tea.

Each cup of tea at TAFU New York is made to order, guaranteeing that the correct temperature water is used. “The current state of Japanese tea in America is similar to how *nihonshu* (Japanese *sake*) was perceived about 20 years ago,” Inomata says. “Back then most customers only were familiar with the big producers and often asked for hot *sake*. Now consumers are asking for *reishu* (chilled *sake*) and are knowledgeable about terms such as *daiginjo* and *junmaishu*. We hope that in the future consumers will become familiar with tea terms like *matcha*, *kukicha* and *genmaicha*.”

With respect to the traditional service of tea in Japan, TAFU New York serves up a selection of sweets, including cheesecake made in Kobe, a city famous for its patisseries, and *daifuku* imported from Gifu. The café also sells tea powders of *matcha*, *genmaicha* and *houjicha*, some of which are used for the sweets made by Kyotofu, a dessert shop in Manhattan that also provides the café with some of its desserts.

Inomata also acknowledges the hard work done by Ito En,

another Japanese tea company, which entered the Manhattan market a few years earlier. “Ito En has helped to educate New Yorkers on the benefits of Japanese tea.”

### Supplying Japanese Restaurants

According to JETRO, the US market is the largest export destination for Japanese agricultural and marine products (¥59.8 billion in 2005 or 18% of the total export figure of ¥331 billion). Ami Nakanishi is in the business development and planning department of New York Mutual Trading Co. that has long supplied Japanese restaurants in the region. She notes that recently non-Japanese restaurants are expressing interest in Japanese ingredients. “We are starting to sell to chefs from French and American restaurants,” she says, adding that popular items include a new product, soy salt. “The soy salt is made in Kagawa from soy sauce fermented for three years before it is freeze-dried. This is popular with many chefs, regardless of the cuisine,” comments Nakanishi.

The *koshihikari* variety of rice from Japan is popular with top-end restaurants, she says. Its price, however, is five times that of the same *koshihikari* species harvested in California.” Kyozenan, a producer of *tofu* in New Jersey, makes *tofu* with soybeans harvested in Canada.

*Sake* is popular and *shochu* is starting to have a presence in New York City. “We often consult and do education for restaurants with non-Japanese staff teaching them about the different varieties of *nihonshu* from *honjozo* up to *daiginjo*,” Nakanishi says.

“Popular items in our portfolio include flash-frozen fish, Japanese mushrooms and *wagyu* (Japanese beef). While many Americans think they are eating Kobe beef, only three prefectures in Japan have been authorized by the US Food and Drug Administration to export *wagyu* to America: Kagoshima,

Miyazaki and Gunma.” (Kobe, in Hyogo Prefecture, is not permitted to export to the United States.)

Other popular exports that have made significantly positive changes in the last 10 years include noodles (*udon*, *soba*, *somen* and instant *ramen*), tea, scallops and *kamaboko*. Indispensable ingredients from the Japanese pantry include *miso*, *mirin*, *sake*, sesame oil and soy sauce.

Some ingredients can be farmed locally. In the heart of the Midwest in Ohio is a farm called The Chef's Garden. Farmer Lee Jones works closely with chefs to plant the vegetables and herbs they need for their kitchens. Jones says in an e-mail, “Just some of what we are growing include *mizuna*, *daikon*, *shiso*, *edamame*, *edamame* sprouts and *wasabi* mustard greens. Many of these are available in up to eight different stages of growth.”

### ■ Educating Chefs & Consumers

In speaking with chefs and industry professionals, education will be a key component to the success of Japanese restaurants outside Japan. Areas to focus on include service, having a truly Japanese sense of considering customer satisfaction (*manzoku*), hygiene in the kitchen, having presentation of food that reflects the seasons, and learning more about the ingredients and techniques. One example of this is the use of “*ikejime*” to kill fish. It is a technical process that drains the blood from a live fish to preserve its freshness. Another common practice in the Japanese kitchen is to cut vegetables to a size that will easily fit into the mouth when eating with chopsticks. It is the attention to fine details – ranging from the size of cut ingredients to how a fish is killed – that differentiates Japanese cuisine from others.

An organization that is reaching out to both chefs and consumers is the Gohan Society (a nonprofit organization), founded by Saori Kawano, who also happens to be the founder of Korin, a restaurant supply store in New York City. The Gohan Society on May 12 hosted an event for chefs to learn about Japanese knife techniques, particularly how to cut fish. This summer it is sponsoring a two-week educational, hands-on program for high school students to learn about the basics of Japanese cuisine.

The Japanese Culinary Academy, a Kyoto-based group, is committed “to set the future global standard for Japanese cuisine.” It sponsored a culinary education event in New York City in October 2007 attended by chefs and journalists from around the United States and Canada. The focus of the event was to define Japanese cuisine and to allow attendees to see and taste firsthand classical techniques from master Japanese chefs.

The Internet as well is helping with the education of chefs around the world. One site extremely helpful in particular is run by the Tsuji Culinary Institute, Japan's largest culinary school ([http://www.tsuji.ac.jp/hp/gihou/Basic\\_Techniques/index.html](http://www.tsuji.ac.jp/hp/gihou/Basic_Techniques/index.html)).

New ingredients continue to attract diners and keep chefs on their toes. Recent items such as *shirako* (fish sperm), artisanal vinegar, and seafood flown in from the Tsukiji Market are finding their places onto menus around New York City.

New techniques include marinating ingredients in *sake kasu* (lees), curing fish in *kombu*, and using *kuzu* (plant starch) as a thickening agent. The *ikejime* method of bleeding fish mentioned earlier is also a technique that seafood importers can use to their advantage to differentiate their products. Japanese

knives are also very popular with chefs.

Importers work closely with restaurants and retail stores to educate consumers with their products. *Sake* tastings, for example, with breweries from Japan at restaurants like Sakagura or SAKAYA help to give consumers the knowledge and confidence to purchase *sake* and what to look for when making the decision.

As customers eat out at Japanese restaurants, they learn about new food and beverages and start to ask for them at their liquor stores and supermarkets. We have seen this with items like *sake* and mushrooms, including *shiitake*, *maitake* and *enoki* mushrooms. *Tofu*, for a long time only available at health food stores, now can be found at major supermarkets.

### ■ The Future of Japanese Restaurants

The opening of Japanese restaurants around the world shows no signs of slowing down. The popularity of Japanese food continues, consumers continue to hunger for healthful foods, and distribution of Japanese ingredients is making it easier for restaurateurs to get the ingredients that they need.

One interesting take on the export of Japanese restaurants around the world is the return of these back to Japan. In March 2008, Genji Sushi New York opened an outlet in Roppongi, Tokyo, serving some of its signature *sushi* rolls, including those with non-traditional ingredients such as cream cheese and avocado.

One of the challenges in doing authentic Japanese food has been bringing Japanese chefs to restaurants. In the post-9/11 period, it has been harder for Japanese chefs to get visas to come to the United States, forcing many Japanese restaurateurs to train local chefs.

On a positive note, food and travel writers are flocking to Japan to document the cuisine that is now “trendy.” Japan as a tourist destination and Japanese cuisine are hot topics for publications and television. As the media continue to educate the consumer, the accessibility to cuisine becomes easier and more approachable.

Sasha Issenberg, the author of “*The Sushi Economy*,” traveled to five continents and traced seafood from the source, from oceans to the Tsukiji Market to restaurants around the world. His book is now out in paperback in the United States and in Japan (Nikkei Press). Issenberg notes in an e-mail, “As countries integrate into the global economy they tend to take rapidly to *sushi*: it requires modern supply chains to deliver fresh fish and a certain type of wealth and material sophistication to appreciate *sushi* culture. There's a reason *sushi* is the rage in Beijing and Dubai today – if you want to find the next developing economy, follow the fish.”

The hunger of the world for Japanese cuisine shows signs that Japanese restaurants will continue to spread. Key to their success will be the education of restaurateurs on preparation and service of authentic Japanese food, providing restaurants with proper ingredients, and educating the general public on this cuisine rich in history and traditions. **JS**

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