

THAT MANGO WILL BLOW YOUR DAMN MIND

by ADAM PLATT

Published September 2007



"Curiouser and curiouser!" cried Alice. Adam Platt has a similar take on the wonderland of fanatical foodies that is modern-day Japan. Tucking into Tokyo with a relish befitting his day job as a New York restaurant critic, he finds evidence of the national character in immaculate sushi, limited-edition pastries—and a piece of fruit that just might warrant its \$100 price tag

I'd been wandering from one endless food and restaurant queue to another in a Bill Murray–like daze for a day, maybe more, when a kindly woman named Teiko revealed to me the essential Zen truth of the situation. It was a Saturday afternoon, and we were standing outside the shop of a celebrity pastry chef named Toshi Yoroizuka. Prior to that, I'd waited half an hour at the new Krispy Kreme Doughnuts outlet in Shinjuku ("In America, does it take so long for doughnuts?" asked Aki, the girl in front of me), before giving up when that line rounded a corner to reveal an even more serpentine one by the restaurant's entrance, replete with traffic cones and attendants wearing white gloves and gesticulating wildly. I'd also lined up to taste an éclair flavored with green tea, and stood in front of two ladies dressed in kimonos waiting patiently, along with exactly 138 other people (yes, I counted), at a brasserie by the noted French chef Paul Bocuse in the brand-new National Art Center.

Toshi Yoroizuka calls his eponymous pastry boutique a *salon de dessert*, and although his line was not the longest, it was perhaps the most impressive. Pastry chefs are the perennial divas of the glittering, fashion-conscious Tokyo food scene, and Yoroizuka is most famous for his pistachio tart, which he prepared, to great acclaim, on national TV. Local starlets patronize the *salon de dessert*, where they sit at a bar of shiny black marble as the chef prepares his creations to order. To secure a lunchtime seat, the city's pastry devotees begin showing up at 9 a.m. There is also a second line, in which Teiko and I stood, for purchasing pastries to go. Yoroizuka insists on making batches of only fifteen to twenty so that they are perfectly fresh. A lady with a clipboard, a microphone, and an earpiece was letting people into the salon in twos and threes. There, they bought perfectly rendered éclairs and

madeleines, and many snapped pictures of their purchases with tiny digital cameras.

As we approached the door, I asked Teiko which of the delicacies were worth the wait. "I'm sorry, I've never tried any," she said. Being a clueless and jet-lagged foreigner, I asked her why then had she been patiently standing outside the door of this little shop for the past hour? "It's a long line," replied Teiko, "so the pastries must be very good."

And so it goes these days in Tokyo—the food-crazed capital of what is arguably the most food-crazed nation in the world. Like their gourmet cousins the Chinese, the Japanese have a culinary culture stretching back centuries. But in this, the age of the Internet and *Iron Chef*, the country is in the grip of what one of my Japanese gastronome friends refers to as "the madness." Fourteen years after the first episode of *Iron Chef*, according to the *Washington Post*, between thirty-five and forty percent of the shows broadcast nationally on Japanese TV involve cooking. Tokyo alone has roughly two thousand Italian restaurants, twice the number of New York. Cruise the World Wide Web and you will find obsessively detailed Japanese blogs devoted to pastries, to sakes and soba noodles, to Burgundy wines, and to the obscure and variegated pleasures of *kombu*, the thick, flat seaweed we call kelp.

"We have all kinds of food booms here," said Robbie Swinnerton, the gregarious and enviably trim restaurant critic for the *Japan Times*. "Many years back there was a tiramisu boom, and everyone ate tiramisu. There was the pastry boom, which is still upon us, and the chocolate boom, which has lasted for three years now. Lately, we've been in the midst of a Spanish restaurant fad, caused by a boom in the consumption of *Ibérico* hams." We were sitting in the bar of the new Ritz-Carlton, which opened this spring in the city's latest food/fashion destination, a glittering shopping plaza in Roppongi called Tokyo Midtown. At the lobby bar, on the forty-fifth floor, you can pay approximately \$65 for a Lobster Martini (organic tomato juice, Belvedere vodka, lobster, caviar, and crème fraîche) or \$14,700 for the Diamond Is Forever Martini, served straight up, with a one-carat gem by Bulgari.

If you don't feel like dropping that kind of cash, you can descend to the plaza, where there are thirty-four new restaurants to choose from, including Toshi Yoroizuka's pastry salon and the Tokyo branch of New York's famed Union Square Café. Wander among the restaurants and boutiques and you will see on display many of the ingredients of the current Japanese food boom. There is the obsession with fashion and ceremony (elaborate comestibles are often given as gifts), the maniacal attention to presentation and technique, the national predilection for moving in packs. The day Midtown opened, one slightly panicked chef told me, 170,000 people crushed into the complex; a month later, all the restaurants still had lines outside their doors. At a store called Noka, twenty-dollar pieces of "*grand cru*"

chocolate were displayed in shining glass cases, like jewelry. And at a fruit boutique called Atelier du Soleil, one beautifully proportioned mango was selling for the equivalent of one hundred dollars. "That's not your average supermarket mango," one Tokyo fruit connoisseur told me. "That mango will change your mind forever about mangoes. That mango will blow your damn mind!"

These days, mind-bending mangoes are available all over Japan. But as London is to England and Paris is to France, so Tokyo is to Japan: the self-appointed capital of style, the clearinghouse for everything that matters in the realms of finance, fashion, and of course food. During my extended culinary ramble through the city, I would experience the joys of such radically overpriced fruit and many other wonders besides. I would dine on grilled eel gizzards and skewered chicken uterus and slices of Kobe beef so ineffably tender that they seemed to dissolve on the tip of my tongue. I'd wake up at four-thirty in the morning to stand in line for a perfect sliver of goldeneye snapper sushi, and patronize Italian bistros as good as any you'll find in Italy, where gray-suited salarymen slurped up bowls of impeccably prepared pasta smothered in the freshest sea urchin from Hokkaido. I'd visit a museum in Yokohama, on the outskirts of Tokyo, devoted entirely to the ramen noodle; pay twenty dollars for an uncannily rendered madeleine made entirely of plastic; and consort with the city's food geeks, of which there are so many (rice geeks, sake geeks, tempura geeks, ginkgo-nut and biodynamic-Italian-wine geeks) that they are impossible to count.

Tokyo is a famously private city, a patchwork of back alleys and old neighborhoods, many of them hidden from view. Unlike in, say, New York, where dining out is a theatrical event, many of the best restaurants tend to be hidden, too. Many of them require introductions ("If I don't take you, they won't let you in because you are a *gaijin*," one lady said, using the Japanese term for foreigner), have runic menus, and are difficult to find. Luckily, my guide on this strange culinary safari was Shinji Nohara, a young gastronome who, like many of his generation, forsook the traditional salaryman life in favor of more eclectic, pleasurable pursuits. He is conversant with the quality of the pastrami at the great Michigan delicatessen Zingerman's and can expound on the merits of various vintages of California zinfandel. He has a college degree in law, but his real expertise is hunting down obscure delicacies and destinations in a city where such things are increasingly the coin of the realm. He has squired Anthony Bourdain around Tokyo and keeps a little black book in which he scribbles the names of his favorite places for *gyoza* (Japanese dumplings), the highest grade *ohoro* (fatty tuna), and that most fetishized of modern Tokyo delicacies, the French madeleine.

Our explorations began as many tours of Tokyo do these days, with an early-morning trip to Tsukiji, the largest fish market in the world. For tourists from Japan and around the globe, a visit to this sprawling complex has become an obligatory pilgrimage, the Tokyo equivalent of rising to see the Pyramids at dawn. The daily tuna auction is the spectacle most people come for, and I

briefly stood in a big refrigerated warehouse, watching the buyers and brokers in gum boots moving among the giant headless fish, calling out prices and ringing their bells. But our real reason for rising so early was to join the crowds of sushi cognoscenti in line for a raw-fish breakfast at the market's destination of the moment—a thirteen-seat *sushi-ya* (sushi house) called Sushi Dai.

At 5:02 on a Tuesday morning, there were fifteen people standing outside the door of the little establishment, which sits next to a coffee shop and across from a store selling pots and pans. An hour later, there were forty. And on Saturday mornings, when Tsukiji is mobbed with visitors, this is the hardest restaurant to get into in all of Tokyo, said Nohara. At 6:01, we wedged ourselves into two seats at the end of the little bar. Mr. Dai himself stood before us in a white hat; behind him, carved into wooden tablets on the wall, were the names of his suppliers. Immediately, the sushi began to appear: orange-pink pieces of goldeneye snapper; silvery Spanish mackerel with grated daikon radish and green onion; pearly white, impossibly fresh *shiroebi* (white shrimp), hauled up just hours before from chilly Toyama Bay in northern Japan.

Between bites, Nohara discoursed on Tokyo's sushi aesthetes. In a city filled with food fanatics, sushi devotees are perhaps the snobbiest, the most querulous, the most fanatical of all. They fixate on the texture and the size of the fish, and especially on the quality of the rice. They judge how large the grains are and how long they were cooked, and even how the rice is molded to match the texture of a particular fish.

There are more august *sushi-yas* in Tokyo, but few combine freshness, technique, and price (the prix fixe *omakase*, or chef's choice, menu costs about \$30—compared with \$110 at the famed Kyubei) better than Sushi Dai. "The rice is perhaps not perfect," pronounced Nohara, as he popped a piece of tuna belly in his mouth, "but for the money, it's the best sushi in Tokyo."

Lunch was a bowl of perfectly al dente spaghetti, smothered with creamy, sweet sea urchin, at an elegant little Italian bistro in Ginza called La Bettola Ochiai, and dinner was at a small restaurant called Ryugin, home of Seiji Yamamoto, the foremost molecular gastronomist in Japan. The father of molecular gastronomy is a madcap Spanish chef named Ferran Adrià (see "Oh, Pioneers!"), who is famous for serving oddities such as quail eggs encased in gold leaf, and test tubes filled with foam. Yamamoto was an acolyte of Adrià 's and is a master of the traditional cuisine of the Kyoto emperors called *kaiseki*. The seven-table room was filled with Tokyo gentlemen in coats and ties nursing expensive glasses of Gevrey-Chambertin, and the multi-course dinner included slivers of deep-fried shark skin served in paper cones, grilled snapper obscured in lime bubbles, and a single sweet crab apple, frozen in nitrogen oxide to minus 106 degrees. My waiter, a man named Takeo, had recently returned from Sydney. I asked

Takeo who was more nutty about food, the Japanese or the Australians. "Of course the Japanese," he cried. "The Japanese are crazy about eating!"

The next evening, at a gathering of local wine enthusiasts, a young academic named Fumi Morizumi attempted to explain this phenomenon. The venue was a popular wine store called Cave de Re-Lax, and the connoisseurs had assembled around a small counter in the corner, where the store's ebullient proprietor, Kunio Naito, was cooking them an Italian dinner. There were multiple courses, each paired with a specific wine, and before serving each dish Naito would snap a picture of it for his personal blog. "My father's generation was more traditional," said Morizumi, who is a teacher of English language at Waseda University, in Shinjuku. "The younger generation won't make do with a well-cooked steak; we have more eclectic tastes." She herself is a devotee of fine whiskies and had recently been on a trip to southern Italy with Naito in search of noteworthy organic wines.

Wine consumption in Japan has increased tenfold in twenty years, said Naito. "In the beginning, it was only French reds people were buying for status, but now they are more sophisticated. They are drinking wines out of habit. For some of us, it's a daily obsession." According to these connoisseurs, there are all sorts of Japanese phrases for obsessive behavior. I'd heard someone describe herself as a kelp *kodawari*, or freak. Morizumi prefers *otaku*. "I'm a wine geek," she said between sips of a very nice '98 Burgundy Grand Cru. "The word doesn't have the negative connotation it might have in English. You can call me a wine *otaku*, and I wouldn't be offended."

The next day, I rubbed elbows with sake *otakus* (at the newly renovated food halls of the Isetan Department Store), vinegar *otakus* (the nearby Takashimaya Department Store employs a "sommelier" to help patrons with their vinegar purchases), and legions of well-dressed chocolate *otakus* (ogling individually wrapped truffles—twenty-four dollars for four—at Jean-Paul Hévin). After that, Nohara took me to Butagumi, a modest establishment in Roppongi where the city's fraternity of *tonkatsu otakus* gather for lunch. Tonkatsu is fried pork cutlet—a casual workingman's dish, served with shredded cabbage. At Butagumi, however, you can get bottles of rosé champagne with your *tonkatsu* and a tasting menu of five varieties of artisanal pork, including an overly greasy cut of *Ibérico* that comes with a commemorative ticket stating the hog's number, just like they do when you order the pressed duck at the famous Parisian restaurant La Tour d'Argent.

"Sometimes the Japanese like to get lost in the facts and the minutiae," an expatriate gastronome named Bryan Harrell told me later that evening. "In a non-confrontational society, it absolves them of judgment." Harrell is a native Californian but has lived in Tokyo for thirty years and is a habitu  of the city's *izakayas*, or traditional neighborhood drinking establishments. He took me to an epicurean favorite called Akaoni, in Sangenjaya, where we sipped a smooth, clear sake made from the waters flowing off Mount Fuji, in

between bites of a crunchy, tangy dish which he genially described as squid guts.

"Food has entered the designer realm in Japan. It's part of the national conversation," said Harrell. Salarymen debate the quality of different French chefs, and it is common for Japanese couples to go on holiday pilgrimages in search of the ideal mountain mushroom, say, or the perfect bowl of miso soup. Much of the dining culture, however, is still conducted on a small scale, down back alleys and in semiprivate restaurants. Tokyo is a city of connoisseurs and everyone has his favorite spots. The result, said Harrell, is confusion, occasional argument, and also unparalleled quality and variety. "The rule is, small is good; if you can't see the chef working at the bar, you're in trouble." Follow this rule, Harrell said, and Tokyo is a better food town than even New York. "In Manhattan, so many of the restaurants are an ordeal. You order a bottle of wine, your food comes in a rush, then they kick you out."

As I continued on my mad blitzkrieg through Tokyo, I was inclined to agree. For lunch the next day, I visited a new eatery called Tofuya Ukai, where the wait for a table at dinner, the lady at the front desk told me, is two months. Built on the site of a former bowling alley, it is an exact replica of a prosperous merchant's courtyard home, complete with giant two-hundred-year-old sake casks and carefully clipped gardens filled with carp pools and gently spinning waterwheels. I was given a tour of the grounds by a hostess in a silk kimono, followed by tea and a series of tofu-centric dishes brought to the table in little lacquer boxes. There were skewers of delicately grilled tofu; tofu balls floating in a clear, salty broth; and a healthful tofu soup sprinkled with salty shreds of kelp.

Tea that afternoon was at a salon in the chic neighborhood of Nishi-Azabu called Ori Higashiya, where ladies with Chanel handbags sat sipping bowls of esoteric green teas from Kyoto. Dinner was a feast of delicious, equally esoteric Kobe beef at a discreet little *teppanyaki*, or grill restaurant, called Shiozawa, frequented by politicians and power brokers. I was the guest of a gastronome friend who divides his time between Tokyo and New York. The set-course menu (although in fact there is no menu) hasn't varied in more than thirty years, he said. It costs roughly four hundred dollars per person; Kobe beef is the main dish, and it is always prepared in front of you.

There were only two others at the bar when we sat down: an elderly gentleman and a young woman who was possibly his mistress, sharing an expensive bottle of Bordeaux. We ordered an expensive Bordeaux ourselves, and soon the food arrived. First came spoonfuls of Iranian caviar on toast. Next came pieces of fresh abalone grilled in butter, served with mounds of frizzled parsley; a taste of seared foie gras; and then the Kobe beef itself, which was a milky pink, the color of roses. I'm not usually a big fan of Kobe beef—it's too rich, too expensive, too over-the-top. But here, the chefs carved the marbled, beer-fed beef into little triangles and served them

wrapped around crunchy garlic chips, with some fresh wasabi to cut the richness. There were bowls of *ponzu* sauce for dipping, along with varieties of gourmet rock salt from far-off places like Mongolia and Peru. The beef was cut from the rib and then the sirloin, and both varieties were rich, without seeming fatty, and so bizarrely tender I felt as if I were dining on some strange, fast-melting form of trencherman's candy.

I experienced similar moments of culinary satori the next day and the day after that. At L'Atelier de Joël Robuchon, in Roppongi, run by the famous French chef, I dined on plump pieces of langoustine wrapped in little origami packets of frizzled basil and on a bowl of a soothing chicken soup specked with tiny, crescent-shaped ravioli stuffed with foie gras. I sampled three kinds of madeleine, the best being at Pâtisserie Hidemi Sugino, in Ginza, where they're individually wrapped and even time-stamped to indicate their moment of production. I enjoyed an obscure form of bamboo made famous at imperial-era *kaiseki* restaurants in Kyoto called *wakatake* and pondered that ineffable state of tempura nirvana called *hitoshimeri* (literally, "a delicate wetness") in the company of a group of tempura geeks at Kondo, an excellent bar down the street from the Cartier store in Ginza.

Between meals, I drove out to Kappabashi, a distant neighborhood in eastern Tokyo where you can buy perfectly rendered plastic replicas of cheeseburgers, Kobe beef, and strawberry ice cream used as displays in the windows of restaurants all over Japan. And I watched the frenzied filming of a popular TV show starring former members of the famous boy band SMAP. To spice up the ratings, the producers had introduced a cooking segment called *Bistro SMAP*, in which the young men competed, *Iron Chef*-style, to cook dinner for visiting celebrity judges. According to Stetsuko Yuuki, the show's food coordinator, Cameron Diaz had singled out a particular bowl of wheat noodles for praise during her time as a *Bistro SMAP* judge, and Nicolas Cage had judged his SMAP-cooked Italian dinner to be better than the food at the noted L.A. restaurant Wolfgang Puck.

Yuuki is a cherubic, chatty lady, who wears glittering rings on her fingers and a well-pressed blue kitchen apron. She had been the food coordinator on the mother of all Japanese food shows, *Iron Chef*, which meant she chose the show's sometimes bizarre ingredients. "*Iron Chef* was the turning point," she said. "Now when food appears on a show, the ratings will always go up. We Japanese have food in our DNA. We are fascinated with cooking techniques. We are fascinated with ingredients. Being closed off for so much of our history, we are fascinated with the different styles of cooking from France and Italy and other countries around the world. We are a nation of food people!"

On my last day in the food capital of the great foodie nation of Japan, I woke blearily at 6 a.m., took four Tums tablets, and watched images of starlets cooking Kobe beef on TV. Usually on gastronomic journeys like this one, the appetite tends to decrease with time, but on this trip the opposite was true.

Lunch was dainty pieces of jack mackerel at the famous sushi parlor Kyubei, which happened to have a branch in the basement of my hotel. After that, Nohara picked me up in his battered Jeep and we got on the raised expressway that twists over the rooftops of the city and drove south toward the final stop on my tour: the Shin-Yokohama Ramen Museum, in the city of Yokohama.

The museum, which opened in 1994, was the brainchild of a local real estate developer and avowed ramen *otaku*—"ramen geeks," Bryan Harrell told me, "they are the worst"—who thought it would be a popular idea to bring all the different styles of Japanese ramen together under one roof. He was right. The three-floor facility attracts more than a million visitors a year, many from neighboring noodle nations such as Thailand and Singapore. At lunchtime on weekends, according to Osamu Hitoe, the museum representative who greeted me, the noodle shops are jammed with as many as five thousand people. Indeed, the museum's popularity has given rise to other epicurean theme parks across the land. There is the Sweets Forest, in Tokyo, and if you ever happen to visit the city of Yamanashi, in central Japan, you will find a modern glass-and-chrome museum devoted entirely to fruit.

"There are many imitators, but we are the original," said Hitoe, who cultivated a serious air and was dressed, like a more traditional museum curator, in a dark suit and tie. Ramen noodles, he explained, are to Japan what pork barbecue is to the American South: a highly particular, regional comfort food redolent of all sorts of Proustian associations to childhood, to growing up, and to home. And as we descended from the souvenir shop into the vast subterranean space, I could see why. It had been transformed into an exact replica of an old Yokohama neighborhood, circa 1958, the year instant ramen noodles were introduced in Japan. Down the crooked little back alleys were mom-and-pop five-and-dime stores with costumed clerks selling the candy of that era, movie posters depicting 1950s Godzilla films, and of course noodle shops, all operating under the timeless, painted diorama of an early-evening sky.

We dined on a bowl of hearty noodles and pork produced by a Tokyo ramen chef famous for his attention to artisanal ingredients, then ambled around for a time in the perpetual gloaming of 1950s-era Japan. "I told you the place is a little crazy," said Nohara, as we peeped into the fake little buildings and listened to the echoing recordings of street hawkers and old subway trains, which rumbled up from empty stairwells. Nohara was right; it was a little crazy. But like lots of things I'd encountered during the course of my antic travels in Tokyo, it was also beguiling and, in accordance with the Japanese craftsman ethos, expertly done. In fact, it occurred to me, as I wandered through this evocative stage set, that the ramen museum wasn't really a museum at all. It was a living, breathing monument to the country's romance with food. And suddenly, I could picture myself as a ramen *otaku*, eating

bowl after steaming bowl as a kid in Japan and returning, as a food-obsessed old man, to a place just like this one, again and again.

Published in September 2007. Prices and other information were accurate at press time, but are subject to change. Please confirm details with individual establishments before planning your trip.

Concierge.com © 2007 CondéNet Inc. All rights reserved.

