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THE IZAKAYA WAY OF LIFE

Achieving Culinary Nirvana in Japan

Steve Gillick

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06 JAN 2013: Everyone was crying! Tears were literally streaming down the faces of the three businessmen at the table behind me as well as the woman who was sitting at the counter to my left. The izakaya owner's wife was crying; her daughter was mopping away her own tears, and my two

companions and I could hardly talk. The only thing that distinguished this scene from a sad movie or tragic event was the fact that we were also convulsed in laughter.



This was my fourth visit to Tsuzuku, a tiny 14-seat izakaya, located on a side street in one of the residential areas of Tokyo.

In a lot of ways it is typical of an old-style izakaya, or restaurant/bar. In fact the name izakaya is derived from “i” meaning ‘to stay’ and “sakaya” meaning ‘sake shop’. Izakayas were originally way-stations for people to relax and enjoy a cup, or more, of sake. Today, most izakayas serve food – either a general menu of seafood and yakitori (grilled meat, fish or vegetables on a skewer) or they specialize in one type of food.

Tsuzuku is a seafood izakaya and finding fresher, better prepared seafood would be a challenge.

Tonight we savoured the assorted sashimi (raw

seafood), enjoyed the 'okara' (a traditional dish made from soy beans) and indulged in the delicate flavour of 'sake no harasu yaki' (the fatty parts of grilled salmon). We tried 'harmonica', grilled back-fin of tuna - crispy and tasty. And then, as the sobbing reached a crescendo, we decided to try the house specialty, 'Wasabi Meshi'.

This delicious treat consists of a bowl of steamed rice in which a lot (and I mean, a lot) of freshly grated wasabi root is mixed. Wasabi is often likened to horseradish. It is pungently hot.

The owner's wife was crying because she was grilling the food. It was cold outside so the vents were closed and the smoky cloud arising from the grill was reaching cumulus proportions.

The daughter was crying because she was energetically grating the wasabi root to add to the rice and, just like peeling onions, the wasabi 'fumes' filled the air. The businessmen behind me were the first to taste the Wasabi Meshi. They immediately put down their chopsticks to wipe away the tears and the sweat rolling down their faces. When we looked at them, they burst out in laughter, which set the tone for the rest of the patrons, including the woman at the counter to my left, who was having difficulty seeing, because her eyes were so red from the rice dish. And my companions and I joined in the party - mostly because the rice is incredibly tasty, and if you can get through the first few bites, things begin to calm down a bit.

After my first tearful venture into the rice, the owner's daughter told me to eat it with seaweed to absorb some of the heat. I delicately plucked some seaweed from a plastic container with my

chopsticks and was quickly reprimanded with “No no! Take a handful like this” as she took a fistful of shredded seaweed and threw it on top of my rice. Of course more laughter ensued.

Then the owner’s wife started to hand out bananas, which also tend to mellow the piquant bite of the wasabi. So now we are all crying, laughing and eating bananas in a seafood izakaya. Ahhh travel memories!

But it was, in a way, typical of many evenings spent in izakayas. Of course there are large independent and chain Izakayas throughout the country but the smaller ones tend to have a personality all their own. Once people found out that I was from Canada (in all cases I was the only non-Japanese patron) then everyone would try out their English, or speak with my companions to find out more about Canada or why I was in Japan or what we had seen on our travels so far.

Here are just a few examples of memorable izakayas from my recent trip:

Jo-Ki-Gen: This is a standing seafood/sake bar (i.e. no seats) in the Shinbashi area of Tokyo, not too far from Ginza. The place is extremely popular with locals so you have to arrive before 5:30 pm if you want a good spot at the counter. The chef/owner is a fisherman with a very engaging personality. The individually prepared dishes are excellent and the sake selection is very good too. The place ‘stands’ about 10 comfortably but can accommodate up to 30 people. *Recommendation:* The sashimi combo.

Hai-ran-sho: A very friendly place in Aizu Wakamatsu with a young chef/owner who

recently took over from his father. It's a very small izakaya with lots of chatter and laughter.

Recommendation: The assorted sashimi. The place has a great selection of Tohoku Region sakes. Try Snow Drop-which is a sake made with Yogurt - sweet, creamy and refreshing after a meal.

Ohana-bo: We were wandering down small side streets in the city of Sendai and noticed this tiny izakaya. We gave it a try and it turned out to be excellent. The very friendly owner/chef expertly prepares the seafood dishes, but the yakitori is amazing. *Recommendation:* tsukuneh (grilled minced meat with teriyaki sauce on a skewer). It was served fresh, hot and so delicious that we ordered more.

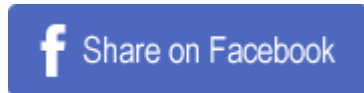
Torayah: Just north of the castle and temple in the city of Morioka, we walked into an old izakaya where just about every seat was occupied by businessmen. As the crowd slowly headed home, we started to chat with the owner and then other patrons became interested in the Canadian connection. By the time we left several hours later, we were taking photos with the owner and her daughter and some of the other 'regulars'. It was one of those comfortable evenings where everyone interacted like old friends - with ourselves included. And the food was amazing.

Recommendation: the Octopus and Scallop sashimi, but literally everything was great.

And there are dozens of small izakayas that are rarely visited by tourists, partially due to the language issue, but also there is a bit of an intimidation factor i.e. walking into a 14-seat restaurant filled with chatting locals. But just about every time we discovered such an izakaya, we ended up having a memorable evening.

What I refer to as ‘the izakaya way of life’ is a reflection of the current trend in travel to experience, taste, talk, listen, learn, laugh and go beyond the stereotype of the tourist watching the scenery. It is a way of becoming part of the scenery and enhancing the enjoyment and meaningfulness of your travels exponentially. Achieving culinary nirvana involves more than the freshness and quality of the food. It’s a holistic encounter of travel, food, culinary talent, atmosphere, relaxation, conversation, wonderment and awe.





Steve Gillick

A tireless promoter of "infectious enthusiasm about travel", Steve delivers his wisdom once a month in his column *The Travel Coach*.

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