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MEMOIRS OF A GOURMAND



Visiting Tokyo, Anthony Rose finds a city of diverse eating experiences, from luxurious hotels to fast and frantic food stalls, before boarding a speedy bullet train out to the countryside, discovering sushi, sake and Japanese traditions along his way

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHARMAINE GRIEGER



PREVIOUS PAGE:
THE GION GEISHA
DISTRICT IN KYOTO.
LEFT: HAKUTSURU
SAKE MUSEUM.
OPPOSITE PAGE:
ANRAKU-JI TEMPLE
IN BESSHO ONSEN;
SAKE BARRELS
AT THE MUSEUM;
SAKE PRODUCER
MATSUMOTO;
SEAFOOD AT
TSUKIJI MARKET

光 波 蕎 麦

Searching for authentic Japanese cuisine, the reward came when stumbling upon an inviting local restaurant in the precincts of Tokyo's bustling Meguro station. In the centre of each table sat a gaping hole ready for *shabu-shabu*, a traditional dish of wafer-thin slices of beef, pork or fish, dipped fondue-style into boiling water or *dashi* (stock). While enjoying strips of delicate boiled beef, I found myself for the first time enjoying the fragrant aroma and smooth creamy texture of the accompanying sake. Japan's national rice-derived drink also complements the subtle flavours of fish and *sushi*, so it is no coincidence that the region of Niigata, on the north coast of the country, known for its fresh seafood, uses its soft water to produce the highest percentage of high-grade sake in Japan.

The source of Tokyo's freshest seafood is, however, Tsukiji market which, to savour the noisy anarchy of the world's biggest and busiest fish market, should be visited at dawn. Forklifts, one-man trucks with drum engines that turn on a sixpence, motorcycles, bicycles and men dart perilously in and out of narrow, fish-lined lanes. Long samurai-sized knives swish through the air and circular-saws buzz hazardously. The volume and variety of fish is mind-boggling: china-like red pock-marked squid, giant spiky crabs, pulsating abalone, glistening tuna, shiny eels, mysterious yellow sea urchin, slender pen shell clams, plump red sea bream and deadly *fugu* (blowfish).

Sea creatures are sliced, chopped and sawn every which way in order to meet the insatiable Japanese appetite for fish – it is the freshness of these raw materials that are the secret component of Japan's excellent *sushi* and *sashimi*. After the bustle of the market, the prospect of queuing in the sweltering heat for breakfast at the legendary DaiWa Sushi Bar may not seem worth the effort, but for a taste of the authentic it is worth being patient. The flavour of sweet shrimp and eel *sashimi* is just reward for the wait, as is the revelation that real, flavoursome *wasabi* doesn't come in a toothpaste tube, but is ground into a paste from the knobbly, green, horseradish-like root.

Shinjuku station's 'Yakitori Alley', whose brightly lit shops, bars and cafés make Clapham Junction look like a country railway siding, is

the place for fast food Japanese-style. Even the platform booths sell eel *sushi*, labelled with a kilocalorie count, and other assorted bento boxes. Beneath towering skyscrapers, two crowded, narrow lanes are packed with *yakitori* bars specialising in grilled and barbecued meat and seafood as well as the occasional *tempura* stall. Typically, a bar contains space for half a dozen diners in a tiny room off the alley, with so little space to squeeze into your seat, that you can often lean back against the wall from your precarious stool. The food is cheap with *tempura*, costing no more than £1.50, and barbecued eel which, at £4.50, is one of the pricier dishes. Most serve beer or *sake*, including the reasonably priced *honjozo* which is poured chilled from the traditional 1.8 litre bottle into jugs, and from there into your own little cup.

After Tokyo's concrete jungle, it is a literal breath of fresh air taking the train through the wide open spaces of the Kanto plain and on into the wooded hills north-west of Tokyo, to the wine regions of Yamanashi and Nagano. Home to *ryokans*, the traditional Japanese inns, this is the place to head for dinner. At the charmingly basic Suzuki-en in Yamanashi, the wine on offer is so dire that many diners are grateful for the chance to stick to *sake* with the cured ham, pan-fried white fish and chunky, marinated pork ribs. In Bessho Onsen, a tiny spa village in the hills, the inviting Nanjyo Ryokan Onsen serves exquisite food, but it is the restorative powers of their 24-hour hot sulphur bath that are as much of an attraction. Before tucking into a banquet, we took a hot spa bath after quickly brushing up on Japanese bath etiquette: take off clothes, rinse, wash yourself clean from a tub of water scooped from the main bath before a relaxing, hot, smelly immersion.

From the high vineyards of Nagano, 'the roof of Japan' so-called because of its spectacular mountainous terrain, it's an enchanting train journey to the luxurious five-star modern *ryokan*, Myojinkan, 1,000 metres up in the hills. Dinner is served *kaiseki*-style, each dish brought separately by *kimono*-clad young women. Shellfish, washed down with fragrant *ginjo sake*, is followed by soup of *hojiso* flower with shiitake mushroom and chunky marinated *daikon* (radish), then a cold platter of grilled *aiyu*, Japan's revered river fish, sitting on smoky ————>





THE SOURCE OF TOKYO'S FRESHEST SEAFOOD IS TSUKIJI MARKET – THE VOLUME AND VARIETY IS MIND-

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WHAT IS SAKE?

Whether semi-sweet or dry, chilled or warmed, *sake*, the fermented product of rice, comes in many forms. Served as an aperitif or with food it is normally stored in ceramic decanters called *tokkuri* and drunk from small, ceramic cups known as *ochoko*, or slightly larger-sized cups, *guinomi*, and glasses. There are about 1,400 Japanese brewers making *sake* in Japan, the most traditional areas being Nada and Itami in Hyogo and Fushimi in Kyoto, along with Niigata and Hiroshima. Factors that determine the quality of sake produced are the type of rice, the method of brewing and the processing. The extent to which the rice has been 'polished' (the outer layers of protein and fat removed and starch left) is also an important factor. The more highly polished the rice, usually to between 40-50 per cent of its original size, the finer the *sake*.

Amakuchi – slightly sweet *sake*.

Atsukan – *sake* served warm.

Daiginjo – *sake's* answer to grand cru with a very low polished rate – at least under 50 per cent. The pinnacle of the brewer's art, it is light, complex and quite fragrant.

Futsushu – ordinary *sake*.

Ginjo – another premium *sake*, premier cru level, polished to at least under 60 per cent.

Honjozo – has at least 30 per cent of the rice polished away with a dash of distilled alcohol added to smoothen and lighten the flavour, and to make the *sake* more fragrant.

Junmai – pure rice *sake* with no added alcohol.

Karakuchi – dry *sake*.

Nama – unpasteurised, regular clear *sake*.

Nigori – cloudy, often sweet, *sake*.

Reishu – *sake* served cold.

Yamahai – a particular variety of *sake*, the result of a brewing method involving the presence of mature bacteria – often lending the *sake* a distinctive gamier, wilder flavour.

dried tea, and salmon in *houba* leaf sushi. Crisp, fresh *edamame* beans arrive, accompanying sweet river shrimp, then a distinctive cube of corn and eel pieces, and a square of delicately flavoured thin strips of beef with cucumber, Chinese radish sauce and boiled vegetables.

From here, a two-hour train ride to Nagoya is followed by the speedy 36-minute bullet train to Kyoto, which journeys across the heart of Honshu; over streams and broad rivers, and through narrow valleys bordered by steeply terraced rice paddies, with neat little villages crammed in between. In Kyoto's Fushimi district, famed for the purity of its water, is Matsumoto, a traditional family sake brewery and guesthouse. The owner's *yukata*-wearing wife serves *hojicha*, freshly-brewed roasted green tea, while her husband, Yasuhiro Matsumoto, explains the complex *sake*-making process: the importance of pure water, special *sake* rice and the polishing of the grains, before noting the revival of quality sake that is currently taking place in the country.

Dining at Touzan, the sophisticated, modern Japanese restaurant within Kyoto's Hyatt Regency, the sake sommelier matches Matsumoto sakes with a variety of dishes made by the hotel's executive chef, Matthew Crabbe. A cleansing light *daiginjo* is served with grilled sesame tofu and sea cucumber *offal*. Then a wilder, distinctive flavoured, super-traditional style known as *yamahai* comes with chilli lotus root, winter melon and radish with ginger broth, followed by *daiginjo* again with *aiyu*, eel and scallop, and a pure *junmai* with individually seasoned *sushi* of eel, red tuna, prawn, sea urchin and squid.

Cycling along the winding temple routes of the older, eastern region of Kyoto helps work up an appetite for dinner at Motosei in colourful Gion, the *geisha* district. The demand for such tiny, high-class restaurants makes it hard to get in, but once inside the atmosphere is intimate and relaxed. Watching a Kyoto chef prepare your food makes for an entertaining dinner diversion; experienced hands work delicately and swiftly, whilst keeping an eye on the customers and their dinners. Here at Motosei, the chef commands attention as he liberates giant clams from a tank, slices the quivering bivalves in two and serves them on a bed of ice along with mouth-wateringly fresh *sashimi* —>>



BOGGLING – GIANT SPIKY CRABS, SHINY EELS, PLUMP RED SEA BREAM AND YELLOW SEA URCHINS



OPPOSITE PAGE:
NISHIKI MARKET IN
KYOTO; ANRAKU-JI
TEMPLE. ABOVE:
NANJYO RYOKAN;
DAIWA SUSHI BAR;
MYOJINKAN RYOKAN

BELOW, FIRST ROW:
MOTOSEI IN GION,
KYOTO; BESSHO
ONSEN. SECOND
ROW: HAPPO-EN
GARDEN, TOKYO;
EDAMAME FOR SALE





LEFT: TSUKIJI MARKET IN TOKYO; DISHES SERVED AT NANJYO RYOKAN.

OPPOSITE PAGE: PREPARING HOJI-CHA – TRADITIONAL GREEN TEA

TRAVEL INFORMATION

Currency is the Japanese Yen (£1=211 JPY). Japan is 9 hours ahead of GMT. Visit during spring (March to May) when the famous *sakura* (cherry blossom) is in bloom, or autumn (September to November). Temperatures during these months are mild, with clear skies and relatively little rainfall. Summers are hot and often humid with occasional rainfall, and the winter months experience short cold snaps with snow in some areas. Visitors from the UK are issued with a 90-day temporary visa upon arrival in Japan. Tourists must have proof of an outbound air or sea ticket. No vaccinations are required, however immunisations against Japanese B Encephalitis and tick-borne Encephalitis are recommended for those travelling to rural areas.

GETTING THERE

Japan Airlines (0845 774 7700; uk.jal.com) offers a direct daily service to Tokyo and Osaka, and an extensive domestic network.

British Airways (0870 850 9850; ba.com) flies direct to Tokyo from London Heathrow twice daily.

Virgin Atlantic (0870 380 2007; virginatlantic.com) flies direct to Tokyo from London Heathrow once a day.

GETTING AROUND

Japan Railways is a highly extensive and efficient way to get around. Visit japanrail.com for timetables, networks and fare information on small local lines and the *shinkansen* (Bullet trains). If you are travelling extensively within Japan it is well worth buying a Japan Rail Pass, which must be purchased outside of the country. A seven-day adult pass covers most trains and costs from £138. Visit japanrailpass.net for details.

RESOURCES

Japan National Tourist Organisation (seejapan.co.uk) provides practical information, from visa advice and airlines that fly to Japan, to hotel and tour operator recommendations.

FURTHER READING

Japan (Lonely Planet, £17.99) Comprehensive guide which includes historical and cultural information and a number of itinerary ideas and restaurant and hotel recommendations.

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of prawn, tuna and flatfish. Deftly garlanded with fresh carrot twirls, baby maple and *shiso* leaf the taste is sea-salt briney and sweet at the same time. Shark, with leek and prawn, is followed by sesame *tofu* in a white broth with *edamame* beans and a firm, haddock-like white fish. Equally intriguing dishes follow, such as lotus root and duck stuffed with *tempura* eggplant, followed by a conger eel *shabu-shabu*.

After gaining a taste for the Japanese countryside in rural Kyoto, we head to the Niigata province – a scenic region of rivers, mountains and coastal beaches, and home to Kenji Ichishima and his family brewery. The provincial Hotel Okura is the place to rest weary feet, before heading to Yoshino Sushi, a favourite with local fish traders, serving the freshest fish imaginable from the Sea of Japan. Kenji, like many Japanese, doesn't like a strong flavoured *sake* with food, so tends to favour *honjozo* or the slightly higher grade *junmai*. As with many of the Japanese people we met on our travels, Kenji was keen to impart his advice; "*sake* contains a great amount of amino-acids" he says, "so it's good for washing down and neutralising fishy tastes."

Our journey complete, we took the bullet train back to Tokyo. Having ignored the *sake* on the plane out, we sacrificed wine on the return journey for a delicate *daiginjo* and the Yonetsuru *yamahai*. Back in the UK, it is clear that with new restaurants, like Alan Yau's Sake No Hana and Kyoto-style Umu, as well as *sake*-tasting events organised by the likes of Isake, *sake* is catching on. But I was anxious. What if my new affair turned out to be a fleeting pleasure? Like a chilled Provence rosé enjoyed whilst on holiday but not quite so clever on a wet Wednesday in Wensleydale. I needn't have worried. As Philip Harper, Japan's only English master sake brewer told me, "you've seen the light". I had, and it shines like a Japanese lantern in Gion.

Anthony Rose travelled with Japan Airlines (0845 774 7700; uk.jal.com)



京都 蕎麦 思い

CYCLING THE TEMPLE ROUTES OF THE EASTERN REGION OF KYOTO HELPS TO WORK UP AN APPETITE FOR DINNER IN COLOURFUL GION, THE GEISHA DISTRICT

FOOD GLOSSARY

Ayu or 'sweetfish' is known for the distinctive sweet flavour of its flesh, with notes of melon and cucumber. A highly prized fish in Japan, it is often served simply grilled and seasoned with salt.

Baby maple (*momiji*) these beautiful Japanese maple leaves are used for decorating traditional dishes.

Daikon a giant white radish around 35cm long, it is an important ingredient in Japanese diets and can be prepared in a variety of ways. Served raw in salads, used as a garnish for *sashimi* or served cooked, as an ingredient in *miso* or *udon* soup. It is also pickled in soy sauce, known as Chinese radish sauce.

Edamame is a young green soya bean, harvested before maturity and sold still on the stalk and in the pod. Boiled in salted water, they are eaten as a nutritious snack, hugely popular in Japanese beer gardens and served as a side dish in *sushi* bars.

Houba leaf a large magnolia leaf that is often wrapped around meat or vegetables like banana leaves in Asia or South America. The leaves prevent food from burning and add flavour to the dish.

Lotus root (*renkon*) these crunchy, sweet roots have a variety of uses and can often be found pickled, deep-fried or cooked with rice. The pale stems have empty air passages that make the sliced roots resemble delicate flowers.

Sashimi raw fish, shellfish and crustaceans sliced into thin pieces and served with a dipping sauce and simple garnish – such as *shiso* and shredded *daikon* radish.

Shabu-shabu is a traditional dish of wafer-thin slices of beef, pork or fish, dipped fondue-style into boiling water or *dashi* (stock). Served with tofu and vegetables, including Chinese cabbage, shiitake mushrooms and *nori* (edible seaweed).

Shiso leaf is one of the most commonly used seasoning herbs in Japan. Leaves can be red or green and resemble stinging nettles. Their peppery flavour tastes like a cross between lemon, basil and coriander. The flower buds of the *shiso* shrub are called *hojiso* and are used for pickling or as a condiment.

Sushi is the term for various preparations of vinegared rice topped with cooked and raw fish or vegetables.

Tempura seafood or vegetables cut into thin slices or strips, dipped in flour and batter (*panko*), then briefly deep-fried in hot oil.

Wasabi known as the Japanese horseradish, it is used as a root spice and has an extremely strong flavour. The plant grows naturally in running water and is found in mountain river valleys.

Winter melon (*tougan*) also called white gourd, this cucumber-shaped fruit is used in stir-fries, pickles or soups.

WHERE TO EAT

DaiWa Sushi Bar Tsukiji Market, Tokyo (00 81 33 547 6807).

Located in the fish market, this *sushi* bar is buzzing from 5am when locals start to queue outside for breakfast. Superb quality *sushi* for as little as £5 per person.

Michel Troisgros at Century Hyatt, Shinjuku-Ku, Tokyo (00 81 33 348 1234; tokyo.regency.hyatt.com). This two Michelin-starred French restaurant opened in 2006 and offers exquisite dining. Set in the Hyatt hotel, it is very centrally located. Reasonable too – dinner costs from £20 per person.

Yoshino Sushi Niigata (a two-hour train ride from Tokyo) is the capital of the northern region of Niigata-Ken and home to the annual Sake no Jin festival. The area is renowned for the quality of its seafood and, of course, *sake*. Enjoy fresh *sushi* for around £7.50 per person, including *sake*.

WHERE TO STAY

Hotel Okura 6-53 Kawabata-cho, Chuo-ku, Niigata (00 81 25 224 6111; niigata.okura.com). A huge luxurious hotel with 290 rooms and suites, five restaurants serving Japanese, Cantonese and French cuisine. Very centrally located. Doubles from £95 per person.

Hyatt Regency Higashiyama-ku, Kyoto (00 81 75 541 1234; kyoto.regency.hyatt.com). Kyoto's latest luxury hotel offers five restaurants, including Touzan, an Italian café, and a steak and seafood grill, in addition to serving up traditional Japanese cuisine. With 159 rooms and suites, all guests can enjoy access to the spa and Japanese gardens. Doubles from £159.

Myojinkan Ryokan Matsumoto, Central Honshu (00 81 26 331 2301; tobira-group.com/myojinkan). Offers a choice of modern or traditional rooms, all with huge windows and most with scenic views of the mountains. Hot spring bathtubs adorn the hotel, including one outside amongst the cherry trees. Doubles from £143 per person.

Ryokan Tabinoyado Nanjyo near Nagano, Central Honshu (00 81 26 838 2800). With a long and distinguished history that can be traced back over 1,000 years, this *ryokan* is surrounded by tranquil gardens and offers authentic Japanese-style guest rooms. A room for two to four people, sleeping on futon mattresses on *tatami* floors, starts at £35 per person, per night, including breakfast and dinner.

Minshuku – for an authentic experience stay in a family home and enjoy local dishes and produce. This B&B-style accommodation is generally more basic than a *ryokan* but offers a fantastic insight into Japanese life, visit minshuku.jp/english for more information. □



DINING AT MYOJINKAN
RYOKAN – TRADITIONAL
DISHS WITH A
MODERN TWIST USING
FRESH, SEASONAL
INGREDIENTS

明神飯