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Tokyo Sugoi! - Episode 14 by Steve Gillick

It's Cool to bring on the Heat in Tokyo



Chirashi with wasabi

In Tokyo, cooler heads prevail when it comes to adding "heat" to the food. Unlike the current trend of burying culinary creations under a blanket of deliciously pungent chilli peppers and hot sauces, Japanese dishes tend to focus on *moritsuke*, which is the visual appeal of the food, as well as the dish's flavour and mouthfeel (*umami*), along with a discretionary gentle kiss of accentuating heat.

Wasabi, the grated green root paste, comes to mind immediately. Food historians can trace the use of wasabi back to the 8th century. In the early 17th century, Tokugawa Ieyasu, the first Shogun, promoted the taste of wasabi and encouraged its cultivation. This was given a boost in the early 19th century, when wasabi was

discovered to have antibacterial properties that, when placed in sushi between the raw fish and the rice, inhibited food poisoning. And now wasabi is mainstream, in the form of grated wasabi root or manufactured and served from a tube. The horseradish-like tang and the immediate rush to the nasal passages add a unique dimension to food that some consider almost addictive in its appeal.



Wasabi Meshi - fumes make you cry but the dish is delicious at Tsuzuku. Photo by Mitsuru Sasaki



Adding seaweed to calm the heat of a Wasabi Meshi at Tsuzuku

Case in point: The Wasabi Meshi at Tsuzuku, an izakaya near the Ushigome Yanagicho Metro Station, is so good that we had tears of joy while eating it. Well, actually, they were tears from the mountain of freshly grated wasabi root that had been sprinkled over a bowl of steamed rice. The fumes caused our noses and eyes to water. A handful of seaweed added to the rice seemed to ease the heat a bit, and afterward, the staff served bananas to calm the lingering heat in our mouths.

In some restaurants, you can grate your own wasabi. One example is Chiwaki, in Okutama, known for fresh mountain vegetables, fish, deer, boar, and Wasabi Meshi. Patrons are provided with fresh wasabi root at the table, and can grate to their heart's content.

(Photo right) Grate your own wasabi at Chiwaki in Okutama



While in Okutama, aside from wasabi farm tours, visitors can shop at Yamashiroya, specializing in wasabi root, wasabi cream cheese, smoked *wasabizuke* (pickled wasabi), wasabi rice toppings, wasabi crackers, and more. And yes, sample tastes are available!



Hayashi Satoru and Ujiie Yuki at Sakanaya Tetsu in Shimbashi

For a twist on the wasabi recipe, Sakanaya Tetsu, a tasty seafood izakaya in Shimbashi, adds salt to their wasabi. Hayashi Satoru, the Chef/Owner, explained that tourists seem more attuned to tasting the soy sauce than the fish. By adding salt to the wasabi, they can avoid soy sauce entirely and showcase the essence of fresh sashimi and other dishes, complemented by the zest of fresh wasabi.

However, there's more to heat than just wasabi.

When we ordered sashimi at Zakoya Kiyomaru, a seafood restaurant on Oshima Island, our guide, Kana Nishitani, explained that there were no wasabi farms on Oshima, as the island's terrain and natural environment were not suitable for wasabi cultivation. She then picked up a small, hot, green pepper (*ao togarashi*) from a dish, removed the seeds with her chopsticks, and mixed them with the soy sauce. "This is how they do it on Oshima". We tried it, and it was not only fiery but also delicious. (*umai karai*)

And turning the heat on high...

A healthy dollop of super-hot *karashi*, mustard, enlivens the taste of Oden, a stew of *daikon* relish, boiled eggs, fishcake, and deep-fried tofu, simmered in savoury dashi broth. And the same holds true for *natto*, where a dab of *karashi* and soy sauce, mixed into the fermented soybeans, adds depth to its unique taste.

(Photo right) Oden, with a dollop of *karashi*



For the *soba-udon-ramen*-loving crowd, a generous sprinkle of *shichimi togarashi* can seal the deal between "mundane" and "off-the-charts". The small red shaker on the table or counter contains Schichimi, a medley of ginger, red chile, black sesame, perilla leaf, sansho (mountain pepper), chimpi (orange peel), and poppy seed. It adds a nice "kick" to the noodles. But if you want to ratchet it up a notch, there are spicy ramen dishes that use *rayu* (chilli oil).

Japanese cuisine isn't necessarily known for its hot and spicy character; however, in the spirit of catering to international tastes, it's perfectly cool and acceptable in Tokyo to customize a dish and bring on the heat!

*All the photos in this article were taken by Steve Gillick and Mitsuru Sasaki (as noted), *Talking Travel*



Steve Gillick loves to travel and loves to talk to people who love to talk about travel. He's been at it since 1967 when he visited nine European destinations on a school trip. Steve has had over 390 articles published in consumer and travel trade publications. To date he has explored 85 countries and over 770 destinations. He recently returned from his 23rd trip to Japan. Steve is the author of *A Symphony of Camels: Travel Adventures & Conversations Around the World*, available on Amazon.com

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