



THE FLAVORS OF FRIENDLY STREET

Exploring Osaka and revisiting the street foods of childhood BY CLARE KLEINEDLER

We all have a particular food that takes us straight back to childhood. For some, it's as basic as boxed macaroni and cheese; for others, it can be as sophisticated as fresh oysters on the half shell.

For me, two specific foods evoke memories of sticky-hot summers in Osaka, where I'd visit my *ojisan* and *obaasan* (grandpa and grandma) in the small district of Juso. *Okonomiyaki*, a pancake filled with shredded cabbage and other savories, and *takoyaki*, a round, doughy ball filled with octopus pieces, are commonly found side-by-side at many food stands in Japan. I remember watching the feathery bonito flakes, which top both dishes, dancing against the rising steam of the *takoyaki*, and taking the first bite with care so as not to burn my mouth on the hot chunks of octopus inside each ball.

Because both national favorites originated in Osaka, and the Kansai region in which the city is located, it is here that, according to many Japanese, the best of both dishes can be found. Though the city doesn't have the same international reputation as Tokyo or Kyoto, all Japanese people understand that Osaka

is the country's true food paradise for locals and foreigners alike. The word *kuidaore*, which is associated with Dotonbori, a large restaurant and shopping area in Osaka, means "to ruin oneself by extravagance in food." The true sentiment of the word is more about stuffing yourself silly and enjoying every last bite until you can eat no more—an activity embraced wholeheartedly by Osakans.

I recently returned to the city for the first time in over twelve years, and found that little has changed in Juso. My *ojisan* is long departed, and my *obaasan* is now in an elderly care home, but the neighborhood—especially "Friendly Street," the outdoor shopping and dining arcade in the center of Juso—has remained very much the same. My sister and I spent many hours there as kids, and my *obaasan* knew nearly all the vendors. Whenever we went there with her, shopkeepers and food vendors would stop us to give her freebies and small gifts. Though she was clearly proud of the attention, she'd say to us, "I just want to be able to walk through here without being disturbed!" *Obaasan* tried to keep

a straight face while saying this, but the smirk she fought so hard to hide would always reveal her true thoughts.

When I stepped off the train at Juso Station on my recent visit, I was immediately hit with the smell of *okonomiyaki* and *takoyaki*. There was a vendor with two huge flat-top griddles and a large *takoyaki* grill just outside the station.

The two foods have some of the same ingredients, but that's where the similarities end. For *okonomiyaki*, finely shredded cabbage, pickled ginger and green onions are mixed into a thin batter, and then poured onto the flat griddle. From here, there are a myriad of ingredients that can be added; the mentality is much like the American approach to pancakes, with different fillings and toppings. Depending on the region, everything from noodles to cheese are added. But for purists, and especially in Osaka, it's bits of pork belly and shrimp. After it's taken off the griddle, the *okonomiyaki* is topped with a thin layer of Japanese mayonnaise, a sweet/savory brown sauce called *tonkatsu*, a dash of finely ground green seaweed powder called *ao-nori* and dried bonito (a type of fish) flakes.

Unlike okonomiyaki, the basic, Osaka-born takoyaki recipe is favored throughout Japan. In order to make these round balls, cooks use a special takoyaki grill, which is a cast iron griddle with round indentations. The thin batter is poured into the indentations, and then the fillings—steamed octopus pieces, chopped green onions, pickled ginger and tempura crumbs (leftover bits from making tempura)—are added. After cooking for a few minutes, the half-balls are flipped to create the round shape. This can be a bit tricky, but the experienced vendors sim-

ply take what looks like a thin ice pick, prick the underside of each takoyaki, and quickly turn it with a flip of the wrist. The key is to wait just until the underside is cooked enough to flip, otherwise, the pick will pierce and shred the ball and make it impossible to turn. The finished dish is also topped with the same mayonnaise, tonkatsu sauce, seaweed powder and bonito flakes as the okonomiyaki.

Both dishes are considered fast food, and hence found mostly outside on the street rather than inside restaurants, though there are some takoyaki restau-

rants that allow customers to cook their own (which, amusingly, can often lead to disaster!) For most Japanese, they're a quick bite on the run, as prized and common as a slice of pizza in New York.

On Friendly Street in Juso, there are dozens of takoyaki and okonomiyaki vendors. I stopped at a stall where a young man was cooking both. He was very proud to be making the traditional versions, showing off his expert skills at flipping and cutting the pancakes with his sharp spatula and flipping the takoyaki balls with a pick, all without breaking

OKONOMIYAKI

MAKES 4 PANCAKES

For batter

- 3 cups flour
- 1 cup cold water
- $\frac{3}{4}$ teaspoon baking powder
- 2 eggs
- $\frac{1}{2}$ head of cabbage, finely chopped
- 3 green onions, chopped
- 3 tablespoons finely chopped pickled red ginger (benishoga)
- Vegetable oil, for coating pan

For filling

- 8 shrimp, shelled, deveined and coarsely chopped
- $\frac{1}{2}$ pound chopped pork belly

Condiments

- Tonkatsu sauce
- Mayonnaise (preferably a Japanese brand like Kewpie, a.k.a. QP)
- Bonito flakes
- Green seaweed flakes (ao-nori)

1. In a large bowl, whisk together flour, water, baking powder and eggs until smooth. Add cabbage, green onions and pickled red ginger, stirring with a wooden spoon until well blended.
2. Heat a cast-iron skillet over medium-high and when hot, coat with vegetable oil. Use a paper towel to spread evenly. Place $\frac{1}{4}$ of shrimp and chopped pork belly on griddle

and cook, stirring for 2 to 3 minutes or until cooked through.

3. Place sautéed toppings neatly in center of pan (do not pile), then pour $\frac{1}{4}$ of batter over toppings to form a pancake shape. Cook until bottom begins to brown; center should still be somewhat loose. Using a spatula, flip okonomiyaki and cook on other side until brown.

4. Transfer to a plate and repeat to make 4 okonomiyakis. Brush each with a generous coating of tonkatsu sauce and mayonnaise. Sprinkle with bonito flakes and green seaweed flakes and serve.

TAKOYAKI

MAKES 12

You can buy octopus and steam or boil it yourself for this recipe, or use pre-cooked octopus tentacles which can be found at a good fish market or Asian market. Most people don't have tempura crumbs around the house, but if you want to capture the crunch, try adding a sprinkle of panko breadcrumbs.

For batter

- 1 cup flour
- 2 cups cold water
- 1 egg

For stuffing

- 1 cup chopped, steamed or boiled octopus
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup chopped green onion

- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup tempura batter crumbs (optional)
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of finely chopped red pickled ginger (benishoga)
- Soy sauce
- Vegetable oil, for coating the pan

Condiments

- Tonkatsu sauce
- Green seaweed flakes (ao-nori)
- Bonito flakes
- Mayonnaise (preferably a Japanese brand like Kewpie, a.k.a. QP)

Special equipment: takoyaki grill, bamboo skewers or chopsticks

1. Whisk together flour, water and egg until smooth.
2. Heat takoyaki grill to medium-high heat and oil each section with vegetable oil using a pastry brush or paper towel. Pour batter into indentations of grill until each is just about $\frac{3}{4}$ full. Drop 1 to 2 pieces of octopus, a few slices green onions, a sprinkle tempura batter and a bit of ginger into each indentation along with a few drops of soy sauce.
3. Cook 2 to 3 minutes, until underside is brown. Use skewers or chopsticks and turn over. When bottom side gets crisp and you can easily turn ball again, use skewers or chopstick to remove from grill.
4. Top with tonkatsu sauce, mayonnaise, green seaweed flakes and bonito flakes while still warm.

a sweat. When I asked him why such a young man would stick to such old recipes, he said, “There is a need to make the original takoyaki and okonomiyaki here. I don’t mess with all those other ingredients.”

Both of his offerings were delicious. The octopus, or *tako*, was cut into large chunks, and the sprinkle of leftover tempura crumbs gave the takoyaki a nice texture. The cabbage in the okonomiyaki was cooked perfectly, and the pieces of salty pork belly added a nice depth of flavor. The flavors took me right back to

those humid summers so many years ago.

When I visited my obaasan at the elderly care home where she lives, I asked her about both dishes. Now ninety-eight years old, she doesn’t get out much, and she admitted it had been a while since she’d eaten either takoyaki or okonomiyaki. I assumed she would prefer the traditional varieties, since Osaka has been her home for so much of her long life. But surprisingly, she said, “Oh, I like them both and you can put anything, anything in them. That is what makes them so good.”

GETTING THE GOODS

If you do not have an Asian supermarket near you, you can order all ingredients online.

For takoyaki grills: www.amazon.com

For Kewpie mayonnaise, bonito flakes, tonkatsu sauce, red pickled ginger (benishoga): Asian Grocer, www.asiangrocer.com

For green seaweed flakes (ao-nori): Surf, www.surfasonline.com

