

Bonito flakes
dance on a tray
of hot takoyaki

TAKOYAKI: SHARING THE LOVE



The signature dish of Osaka, *takoyaki* octopus dumplings are now a popular hot snack all over Japan.

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The main Tsukiji, Tokyo store of the Tsukiji Gindaco chain

IN one survey of Osaka's biggest bragging points, it came runner-up to Osaka Castle, one of Japan's most historical landmarks. The pride of Osaka in question is *takoyaki*, a humble dish whose lofty regard among local residents is perhaps unsurprising.

Often translated as "octopus dumplings," the golf-ball-sized orbs of batter cooked in an egg tray-like griddle with a chunk of octopus in the middle seem somehow emblematic of Osakans' offbeat sense of fun.

"Takoyaki," says food marketing designer and self-styled "takoyakist" Mana Kumagai in her book *The Mystery of Takoyaki*, "is the representative player in Osaka, where people brag about eating themselves out of house and home."

While in recent years the dish has wrapped its tentacles around a more national audience, in Osaka and the Kansai region (which includes other major

conurbations such as Kyoto and Kobe) it's not just a mere foodstuff, but an integral part of the culture, tradition, art and humor, the author adds in another book, *The Correct Way to Eat Takoyaki*.

While partaking of takoyaki does present its challenges (particularly for those with chopstick-itis and a low oral heat tolerance), making the dish is relatively straightforward.

First a batter made from eggs, flour and a bonito-based *dashi* stock is poured onto a griddle that has been heated to around 220°C and greased using an implement resembling a shaving brush.

Pieces of boiled octopus and other ingredients – most commonly pickled ginger and scallions – are added to each of the grill's numerous hemispherical hollows, and after a few minutes cooking each one is deftly rotated using two awl-like implements.

Then comes takoyaki's crowning glory – a lavish dousing of a rich savory sauce, which is topped with a sprinkling of dried *aonori* (green laver) and bonito flakes. A blob of mayonnaise is a popular extra.

Takoyaki is a relatively new addition to Japanese cuisine, first gaining popularity in the Kansai region during the 1950s, when it was, and largely still is, seen as an afternoon snack, despite several takoyaki stores having attained Michelin status.



A takoyaki chef prepares a fresh batch.



Each dumpling is deftly rotated using two awl-like implements

Yet its roots date back much further, evolving from a dish known as *tamago-yaki*. Also known as “Akashi-yaki” (named after the Kansai city of Akashi where it originated), the dish dates back to the Meiji period (1868-1912), and also features a batter filled with octopus pieces, though the dipping sauce is a much thinner dashi-based affair.

Subsequent variations on the theme included the humorously titled “Chobo-yaki” and “Radio-yaki,” named after the item they were thought to resemble – the dimpled exterior of a transistor radio.

Takoyaki’s popularity can be seen in the numbers of places serving the snack. According to 2014 government statistics, there are 16,551 officially registered stores nationwide serving takoyaki or its close cousin *okonomiyaki* (a savory pancake also originating in Osaka that uses similar ingredients) (see HJ August 2017, pp. 28-29).

In fact, it has only been over the past couple of decades that takoyaki has taken off in the capital, according to the PR manager of Hotland Co., operator of Tsukiji Gindaco, Japan’s largest and most popular takoyaki chain, which prides itself on its original *dashi* and using only high grade ingredients, including the king of cephalopods, *madako* (octopus vulgaris).

“For Tokyoites, takoyaki was a bit of a novelty, something you could only find at summer festivals and so on,” he says outside Gindaco’s flagship store, conveniently located opposite the globe’s largest fish market, Tsukiji. “Today, however, it’s popular throughout Japan with people of all ages.”

Inside the Tsukiji main store, chefs busily ready a new batch behind a protective glass window, a common feature that allows customers and passersby to observe the creation process. All chefs undergo extensive training before they can twiddle at the griddle.

“We don’t use a timer or anything, but cooking time is key,” says one as he expertly spins a row of takoyaki, which are also made with other ingredients and sauces, such as the thin dipping sauce for tempura and teriyaki sauce. “The trick is to make sure the outer part is crispy and the inside soft and chewy.”

Peering in from the other side of the glass is a row of students, some of whom are already tucking in to a shared serving of takoyaki. “I like the dual consistencies - the crispy outer shell and the soft texture inside,” says one college student. “I also like the culture of sharing takoyaki, not hogging it to yourself.”

Hotland Co. shares the joy of takoyaki beyond its permanent retail outlets, serving piping hot takoyaki all over Japan from its “Gindaco Car” food trucks as one of its social contribution activities. Gindaco Cars regularly appear at events, nursery schools and senior citizens homes, as well as at shelters for disaster evacuees. Following the Great East Japan Earthquake of 2011, Hotland Co. relocated its head office to disaster-hit Ishinomaki City in Miyagi Prefecture for about three years to contribute to reconstruction over the long term by providing employment and local tax payments.

Takoyaki, the signature dish of Osaka, now brings happiness to people all over Japan, even in times of hardship. 🍡