

Tokyo's Theme Restaurants

by Barbara Balfour

It had been weeks since I'd landed in Tokyo, but I still couldn't shake off the semi-lucid, dream-like state that enveloped me. As I repeatedly questioned reality through scenarios both weird and wonderful, I finally realized I couldn't blame it on the jet lag any more. While the 16-hour time difference found me regularly scarfing sashimi at 4 a.m. from the excellent 24-hour chain, Sushi Zanmai – a favourite of Lady Gaga's whenever she's in town – that wasn't what was making me feel like Alice in Wonderland.

Tokyo – a metropolis of 13 million – is not just a haven for Michelin-starred restaurants and the foreign outposts of acclaimed pastry chefs such as Pierre Hermé, Joël Robuchon and, most recently, legendary cronut inventor, Dominique Ansel. It's also a centre for bizarre, creative, and completely far-out dining experiences – if you can dream it, chances are, you'll find it here.

After all, this is where public toilets offer a choice of ocean waves or symphony music to drown the call of nature, and "talking" garbage disposal trucks blare high-pitched, cartoon-like voices from their loudspeakers. It's where you can pick from a plethora of cafés, where young girls in maid costumes serve stern businessmen cupcakes in the shape of smiley faces. For an extra 1,000 yen, or about \$10 CDN, some offer the option of having the "maids" feed you.

If you've always wanted to sip a latte with a live owl perched on your head, or dine at a restaurant where the menu is all about toast, there's no better place to do so than Tokyo. Here are a few of my most memorable – and surreal – dining experiences in this Japanese city.

1) At **La Cantine Centre** in Tokyo's fashionable Ginza neighbourhood, about \$20 (1,700 yen) will get you a deluxe toast taster set and your pick of 15 different toasters, which you choose from a shelf and plug in at your table. Nestled in between tables of fashionably dressed ladies who lunch, I became a toast connoisseur, comparing Japanese, British and Canadian styles of bread for their chewiness, elasticity, and crunch.

The trio of toast is served with three generous pats of butter – a generic Japanese variety, lightly salted Eclairé from France (the world's most expensive butter) and rich, creamy butter from the northern island of Hokkaido, an area renowned for high quality dairy products. I also got a tray loaded with flavoured honeys, artisanal jams and nut-based spreads.

My hot pink toaster – chosen for its colour rather than its technical prowess – had a happy face sticker on it to indicate the optimum temperature setting for the perfect slice of toast. The bakery churns out 900 loaves of bread a day, for which the lineup will snake outside the door and down the block. Don't make the mistake of waiting there, but head straight into the café, where you can also choose from a substantial toasted sandwich menu.

2) Tokyo takes intimate, dimly lit bars to the next level in the historic neighbourhood of Golden Gai, where, crammed into a space the size of a football field, more than 200 tiny watering holes will make you feel you have the entire place to yourself. Some seat as few as two, and all have their own theme, ranging from flamenco music and photography to horror movies and old-school video games.

But my favourite **micro bar** was the one owned by mixologist **Gen Yamamoto**, located not in Golden Gai but in the Minato neighbourhood, where he serves artisanal cocktails atop a bar made from a 500-year-old Mongolian oak tree. Reservations are essential, as the bar only seats eight, and the menu offers only two options: a taster set of four cocktails that will set you back about \$54 (4,500 yen), or \$77 for six (6,500 yen).

Ingredients range from kiwi fruit native to the Shizuoka region of Japan to quince and Granny Smith apples from Nagano. Everything is locally sourced, down to the silverware and glasses. Each beverage is served to me on a sleek black tray, decorated with a perfectly unblemished bunch of lilac-coloured hydrangeas. On this sweltering summer day, I tasted fresh green plum juice mixed with shochu, an icy watermelon granita served with a tiny silver spoon, and sake blended with the tiny, white-fleshed peach-pineapple native to the Japanese island of Okinawa.

3) By now you may have already heard of Japan's ubiquitous cat cafés, a trend that has spread throughout Europe and North America, including several Canadian cities. But there are also cafés where you can enjoy the company of feathered friends.

Think of them as petting farms for adults. Called **Toro no Iru** cafés, or bars where birds are present, you can choose between owls, parrots and even penguins while sipping on your cappuccino, beer or green tea.

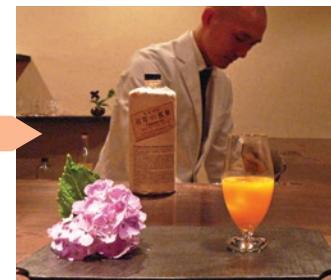
At **Fukoro no Mise**, located in Tokyo's Tsukishima area, I lined up at 1 p.m. to make a reservation for later that day, which included a drink at the price of 2,200 yen (\$26). Here the baristas double as owl handlers, placing the owl you choose from more than 20 perched around the room, on your arm, shoulder, or even your head. The owls, which range from tiny babies to great horned owls, have all been born and raised in captivity. None of them are caged, though they all have a tether around one foot. After a tiny, silent owl was placed on my wrist for a few minutes, I worked up the courage to request a much larger bird on my shoulder where it sat, Buddha-like, observing the room by swivelling its head a full 270 degrees.

4) Halloween lovers, rejoice – in Tokyo, you can celebrate 365 days a year by dining while handcuffed in a prison cell, being served by silent assassins or chowing down on cake in the shape of coffins.

The LockUp is a prison-themed eatery with several locations in Shibuya and Shinjuku. Once I'd passed through the house of horrors still in one piece, I found myself in need of a drink and you likely will, too. On the cocktail menu, you'll find libations with names such as Medusa's Eyeball and Pink Vaccine, while the izakaya-style food features items like skeleton-shaped hamburgers.

If you think that's tame, **Alcatraz ER** definitely takes things to the next level. This prison hospital-themed restaurant in Shibuya gets pretty gory – blood-smeared walls, cocktails served in life-sized mannequin heads and server interaction that includes having male diners' pants pulled down and their bums "injected" with a giant fake syringe. It just might make you lose your appetite. It made me lose mine.

For more family-friendly outings, **Ninja Akasaka** might be more appropriate. Hidden doorways and trapdoors, wandering magicians and staff dressed as ninjas who pull out swords from various menu items will not fail to delight. The best part is that the experience doesn't eclipse the food; the scroll-shaped menus include offerings such as foie gras, ceviche and wagyu beef, which arrive creatively plated and well-prepared. ❖



Barbara Balfour is a freelance writer, TV host and producer, whose favourite Japanese food is shaved ice made from mountain spring water and topped with sticky mango slices. Thanks to weirdjapan.org for the bottom 3 photos, where cameras were not allowed.