

BIG IN JAPAN

CRISP BATTER, THE FRESHEST RAW FISH AND A BUCKET-LOAD OF UMAMI – JAPAN IS HOME TO ONE OF THE WORLD’S MOST DISTINCTIVE AND DELICIOUS CUISINES. FROM GLOBAL FAVOURITES SUCH AS SUSHI AND RAMEN TO LESSER-KNOWN DELICACIES LIKE TAKOYAKI AND TONKATSU, HERE’S OUR PICK OF THE MOST MEMORABLE JAPANESE DISHES

WORDS: TIM ANDERSON, NANCY SINGLETON HACHISU, JOEL PORTER



IMAGE: GETTY

1

RAMEN

Chef and food writer Tim Anderson recalls a transcendental noodle experience

Psychedelic drug users often describe a feeling of detachment from the physical world around them as they head off on a mental voyage into strange and mesmerising new sensory planes. This is how I feel when I eat ramen.

The first time I had really good ramen, the outside world faded into soft focus and the background chatter dropped to an indistinct murmur as the bowl in front of me became my entire world. I was spellbound by its heady, meaty aroma and the tremblingly soft pork belly and heavenly broth — as warming and

indulgent as a bubble bath, silken with fat, yet sticky with collagen. There were sparks of freshness and crunch from pickled ginger, spring onions and beansprouts, perfectly punctuating the sprightly bite of the noodles themselves, so that every mouthful was a little different from the one before. It commanded my attention until the very last slurp.

My first 'ramen moment' sparked an obsession with the dish and a drive to learn more. I discovered regional variations, such as Hokkaido's miso ramen topped with butter and corn, and the Tokyo version, an umami-rich broth flavoured with dried sardines and soy sauce, topped with droplets of chicken fat

that glisten on the surface. I learned about new trends, such as broth that's flambéed with hot fat, turning it charcoal-black and infusing it with a bittersweet, smoky flavour.

I also discovered that ramen's origins lie with Chinese immigrants, who introduced it to Japan in the late 19th century. And while there are certain rules to making it, those rules are constantly broken. Innovation and idiosyncrasy are hallmarks of ramen culture, which is why any given ramen shop is as singular as a snowflake.

WHERE TO START: In Tokyo, try Harukiya in Ogikubo, Kissou in Kiba and Fuunji in Shinjuku.



2

TONKATSU

Most people are familiar with chicken katsu, but in Japan the pork version, tonkatsu, is king. A thick, fatty pork chop is deep-fried in golden panko breadcrumbs and served sliced with shredded cabbage, rice, a dollop of mustard and best of all, a tangy katsu sauce that's like a thickened Worcestershire sauce. While this is the most common way to eat it, it can also be served with curry sauce, or as a katsu sando — sandwiched between thin slices of white bread with katsu sauce and mayonnaise.

WHERE TO START: While many restaurants will offer tonkatsu as part of a broader menu, it's better to head to a specialist such as Butagumi, in Tokyo, to experience the dish at its best. *JP*

IMAGES: STOCKFOOD; GETTY

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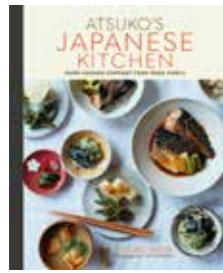
GYOZA

One of the country's most popular snacks are gyoza — dumplings, usually filled with minced pork, cabbage, spring onion and ginger, that have been grilled on a teppanyaki (flat-top grill). Glistening with fat on the top and a crisp, golden brown on the bottom, gyoza are simply served with a soy-and-vinegar dipping sauce and chilli oil. Much like yakitori (grilled chicken skewers), these juicy, meaty dumplings are perfect with beer.

WHERE TO START: Gyoza are found all over the country, especially at izakaya (a type of informal Japanese pub) and at ramen bars, where they're served as a starter or side. There are a number of gyoza specialist, too — typically, small late-night bars with just a few seats. *JP*



BOOK RELEASES



Atsuko's Japanese Kitchen
Atsuko Ikeda

Chef Ikeda focuses on umami-rich comfort food, with recipes including chicken teriyaki with lime on quinoa rice, and steamed fish 'pillows' and clams with yuzu ponzu sauce. £16.99, Ryland Peters & Small



Tokyo for Food Lovers
Jonas Cramby

This guide to Tokyo's budget food spots also includes insider tips like how to use a ramen machine and what to expect in a Japanese convenience store. £12.99, Hardie Grant



The Japanese Table
Sofia Hellsten

This tome celebrates Japan's ichiju-sansai tradition (one soup, three dishes) with simple recipes designed for sharing, like soy-pickled eggs and sweet miso cod. £18, Hardie Grant

4 UNAGI

'Unagi' is the word for freshwater eel, one of Japan's finest delicacies; in Tokyo alone there are three Michelin-starred unagi-ya that specialise in it. The most common style of serving it is known as kabayaki, in which the eel is filleted and covered in a sticky, sweet soy sauce, then grilled until glistening and golden brown with a slightly crisp skin. Traditionally served over rice in a black-and-red lacquer box, eel fillets have a rich fat content, making them the fish equivalent of Kobe beef, with a buttery soft texture and a serious punch of flavour. Due to a decline in the number of eels, as well as the long preparation time involved, unagi is one of Japan's more expensive dishes, with the coveted glass eel commanding the highest prices.

WHERE TO START: You get what you pay for when it comes to unagi and it's worth splashing out on a meal at one of Japan's Michelin-starred restaurants, such as the very traditional Nodaiwa, in Tokyo, which has been run by the same family since 1850. *JP*



5 SUSHI



Sushi master Rei Masuda elevates raw fish cuisine to an art form

There's so much more to sushi than raw fish. A true sushi master will have a discerning eye and a deft hand, doing everything from dry ageing to salt massaging (shiomomi), kelp-wicking (kobujime), vinegaring (sujime), scalding (yubiki) and searing (yakishimo).

Rei spent nine years training with Jiro Ono (widely regarded as the greatest living sushi craftsman) before opening Sushi Masuda, in Tokyo. Jiro — whose restaurant career spans 86 years — doesn't give compliments lightly, but has said Rei's sushi is the closest to his own of any former apprentice at his three-Michelin-starred Tokyo restaurant, Sukiyabashi Jiro.

Sushi Masuda received two Michelin stars of its own in 2015, within a year of opening, and has kept hold of them. Rei devises a new menu each week, featuring some of the most creative and delicious sushi you'll ever taste. He's proud to pass on his knowledge to a new generation, but rather than offering traditional, lengthy apprenticeships, Rei is spreading his expertise via sister restaurants, such as the recently opened Sushi Wakon in The Peninsula Tokyo hotel, overseen by him and manned by chefs he's trained.

IMAGES: GETTY; SUSHI WAKON

Why did you choose to work with sushi, and why Sukiyabashi Jiro?

I had decided to pursue a career in food, and was drawn to sushi as it's one of the top foods I enjoyed eating. I began visiting sushi shops to sample the different styles of sushi masters in Tokyo and, of the many I tried, Sukiyabashi Jiro clearly stood out as the best. I asked Jiro-san if he would accept me as an apprentice but at the time there was no open spot. A few months went by before I got the call that someone had quit, and that Jiro-san was willing to take a chance on me. This was almost 15 years ago.

It takes years to master the art of sushi-making — how long did you spend with Jiro?

I worked for Jiro-san for nine years. Sukiyabashi Jiro is a small shop, so everyone participates in prep work. And the apprentices clean, of course. In our spare time, we also practised on our own with cheap rice and scrap fish, so as not to waste precious resources. If an apprentice could finally master a certain fish preparation, then Jiro-san allowed us to do that job for the shop.

Some traditional restaurants are reluctant to accept non-Japanese speakers due to potential linguistic and cultural misunderstandings. What are your thoughts?

Foreign customers show positive reactions to the sushi I serve them and this, in turn, gives me positive energy. I love the process of making sushi and when I see the smiling, happy faces of my customers I'm revitalised. Foreign customers are respectful and knowledgeable about sushi — often more so than the Japanese. And I appreciate that they've taken the time to study or research the customs surrounding sushi. But mostly I'm happy if they just enjoy themselves and the food; and to that end, we develop the menu so that it goes well with both sake and wine.

What are your thoughts on the sustainability of fish stocks?

The world's fish reserves are shrinking, so it's our responsibility as sushi chefs not to waste it. In my shop, we operate on a no-waste philosophy, so the menu is meticulously planned with that in mind. *NSH*

6 TAKOYAKI

A street food staple, these crispy or octopus balls are an Osakan speciality

Street food is an interesting notion in Japan. Oxymoronic, even, given that eating in the street is generally frowned upon. Which is why there are comparatively few food stalls, and why some have chairs and tables, or little shelves for leaning on, allowing customers to sate their hunger outdoors without risking a social faux pas.

Walnut-sized takoyaki are made all over Japan but they originated in the port city of Osaka, on the island of Honshu, where they remain the most popular street food.

Across the city, roadside stalls, convenience stores and speciality restaurants dish up these savoury spheres (crispy on the outside, gooey inside), which are scorching hot when served fresh off the griddle. Better, then, to wait a few minutes before plucking one up with the

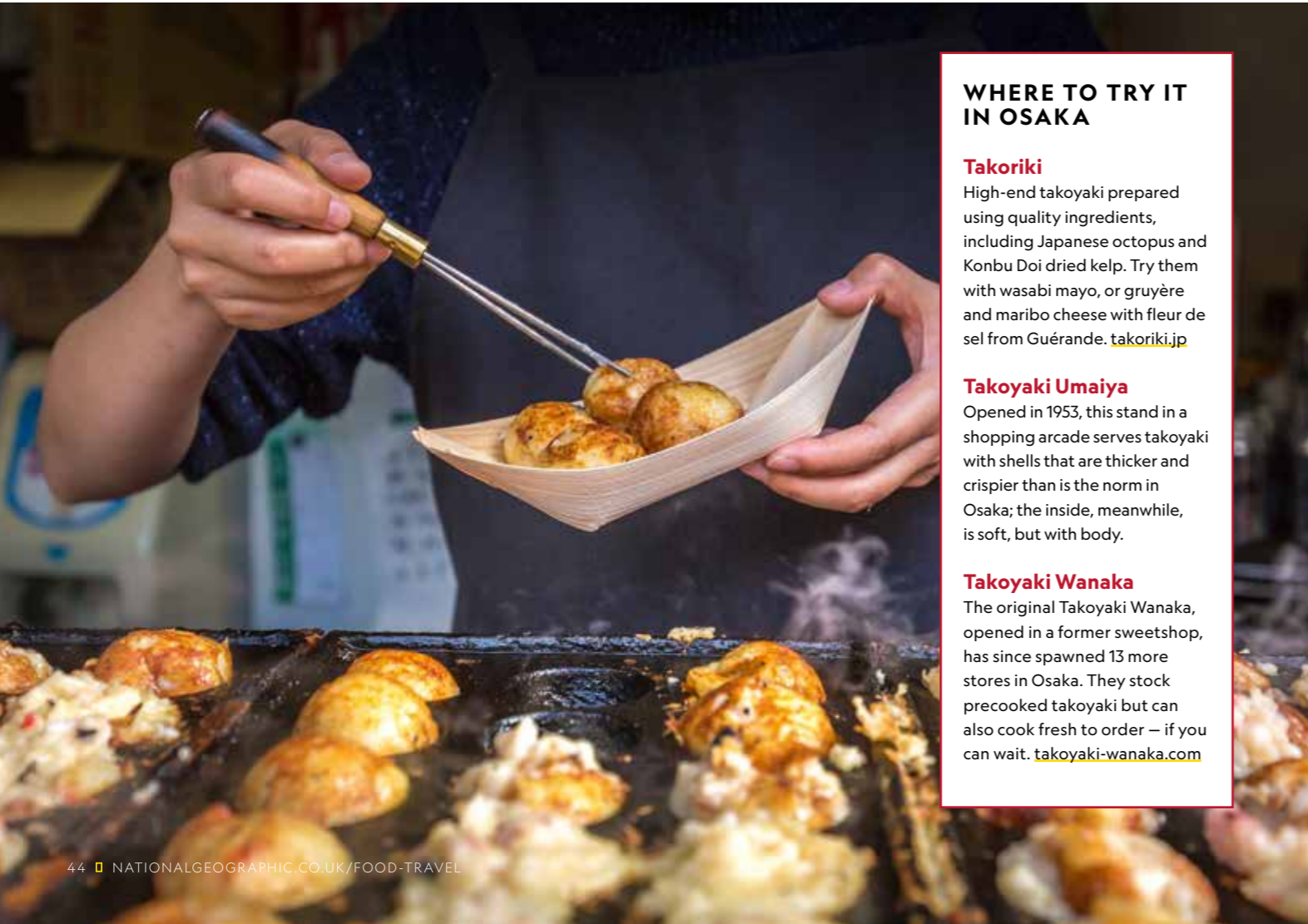
obligatory toothpick and taking your first, tentative bite.

Making takoyaki starts with a batter of flour, eggs, baking powder, dried fish and dashi (seaweed broth). Cast-iron or copper moulds, which look a little like egg boxes, are oiled and heated before a lashing of batter is ladled in.

Next, the filling is scattered across the top: boiled octopus pieces, chopped spring onion, tempura batter crumbs and pickled ginger. More batter is poured across the top and left to cook for a few minutes. The cook then turns the takoyaki, so that any uncooked batter flows into the bottom of the moulds. They're rotated regularly to create evenly cooked, spheres with a thin, crispy skin and an oozing, bechamel-like centre. Outside of Osaka, however, takoyaki tends to have a thicker skin and batter that's more firmly set, yet still soft and creamy.

In Osaka, most shops recommend eating their takoyaki 'bare', without sauce — although late at night, after a beer or two, there's something addictive about the addition of the thick, Worcestershire-like sweet sauce that's usually offered as an option, along with a squiggle of mayo, a sprinkling of powdered green nori and a large handful of shaved katsuobushi (dried, smoked skipjack tuna).

Most of the best places to find these delicious spheres are in Osaka. Some shops pride themselves on the broth that goes into the batter, while others focus on their cooking style or history. In truth, though, customer loyalty is usually the driving force behind a vendor's success. Look out for the busier spots, where the cooks churn out fresh takoyaki at a pace, rather than the places with sad, deflated precooked balls waiting for passing trade. You want pride in the product and a sparkle in the eye of the cook. *NSH*



WHERE TO TRY IT IN OSAKA

Takoriki

High-end takoyaki prepared using quality ingredients, including Japanese octopus and Konbu Doi dried kelp. Try them with wasabi mayo, or gruyère and maribo cheese with fleur de sel from Guérande. takoriki.jp

Takoyaki Umaiya

Opened in 1953, this stand in a shopping arcade serves takoyaki with shells that are thicker and crispier than is the norm in Osaka; the inside, meanwhile, is soft, but with body.

Takoyaki Wanaka

The original Takoyaki Wanaka, opened in a former sweetshop, has since spawned 13 more stores in Osaka. They stock precooked takoyaki but can also cook fresh to order — if you can wait. takoyaki-wanaka.com

7 YAKISOBA

Quick, cheap, filling and delicious, yakisoba is one of the pillars of Japanese food culture. The name refers to stir-fried wheat noodles, which can be mixed with just about any combination of meat, vegetables and seafood. That said, pork, cabbage and beansprouts topped with a fried egg is the classic. It sounds simple enough but, this being Japan, there's more to it — the whole thing is elevated by a variety of condiments such as dried seaweed, pickled ginger and a tangy yakisoba sauce. The dish's popularity has led to a host of variations springing up in Japan, including the yakisoba sandwich, a carb-heavy snack that involves stuffing fried noodles into a buttered hot-dog bun and topping them with mayonnaise.

WHERE TO START: Yakisoba can be found everywhere from train stations and street food stalls to specialist restaurants and outdoor festivals. It's also very easy to make, so is often eaten at home — as you'll discover if you're lucky enough to score yourself a dinner invitation. *JP*

IMAGES: GETTY



8 MOCHI

The quintessential Japanese dessert, mochi is a sweet, soft rice cake that's traditionally eaten at New Year but is now an everyday treat. There's a bewildering number of varieties, from the classic version, stuffed with sweet red bean paste, to a pink type flavoured with sakura (cherry blossom) — and even some that aren't made with rice at all, such as warabi, a clear jelly made from bracken plant.

WHERE TO START: Japan has several high-end dessert shops selling all kinds of beautiful mochi creations, such as Ginza Akebono and Toraya. They can also be found on restaurant menus and in convenience stores. *JP*

9

TEMPURA

The technique of coating seafood and vegetables in feather-light, fried batter is thought to have been brought to Japan by Portuguese traders and missionaries in the 16th century. A good batter should be light, crunchy and not greasy, encasing everything from shiitake mushrooms and kabocha (Japanese pumpkin) to prawns and fish.

WHERE TO START: Look for tempura-ya (specialist restaurants) where the chefs fry your food right in front of you. Try compact Tempura Motoyoshi in Tokyo, which has seats around the chef's counter.

Tim Anderson's tempura

Tempura is a fantastic crowd-pleaser. Make sure you're using a big pan, then simply dip, drop and drain.

SERVES: 4 **TAKES: 20-40MINS**

INGREDIENTS

1½ litres oil, for deep-frying (possibly more, depending on pan size)	200g skinless, boneless cod (or other meaty white fish), cut into 4 goujons
8 broccoli florets or Tenderstem broccoli stems	400ml tsuyu, to serve (optional)
1 large or 2 small onions, cut into 7.5mm rounds	lemon wedges, to serve (optional)
8 oyster mushrooms	FOR THE BATTER
1 courgette, halved then quartered lengthways	1 egg
8 king prawns, peeled and deveined, scored 5-6 times on the underside to prevent curling	400ml sparkling water
	200g plain flour
	100g cornflour

METHOD

1 Pour the oil into a large, deep pan, ensuring you keep the oil level at least 7.5cm below the rim of the pan to be safe. Set over a medium heat.

2 Meanwhile, make the batter. Beat the egg, then stir in the sparkling water, ideally using chopsticks – don't stir too much or you'll knock out the bubbles. In a separate bowl, combine both the flours and a pinch of salt. Pour the egg mixture into the flour mix, then stir until the batter comes together with the consistency of double cream. Little lumps are good; big lumps are bad, so break them up.

3 Use a thermometer to check the oil – it should be around 170-180C; alternatively, test the temperature by dripping drops of batter into the oil. If the batter sinks, the oil is too cold; if the batter immediately floats and sizzles, the oil is too hot. The batter should sink just below the surface, then rise and sizzle.

4 Dunk the veg, prawns and fish in the batter one piece at a time. Allow excess batter to drip off, then carefully submerge in the hot oil. Cook in batches, using tongs or chopsticks to separate the pieces as they fry. The tempura is done once it's a light golden brown and hard to the touch. Remove from the oil and drain on kitchen paper. Serve the tempura as soon as each batch is cooked, or place in an oven on low heat with the door slightly ajar until everything is ready. Serve with the tsuyu for dipping, if you like, or with a pinch of salt and lemon wedges.

This is an extract from JapanEasy, by Tim Anderson (£20, Hardie Grant)

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YAKITORI

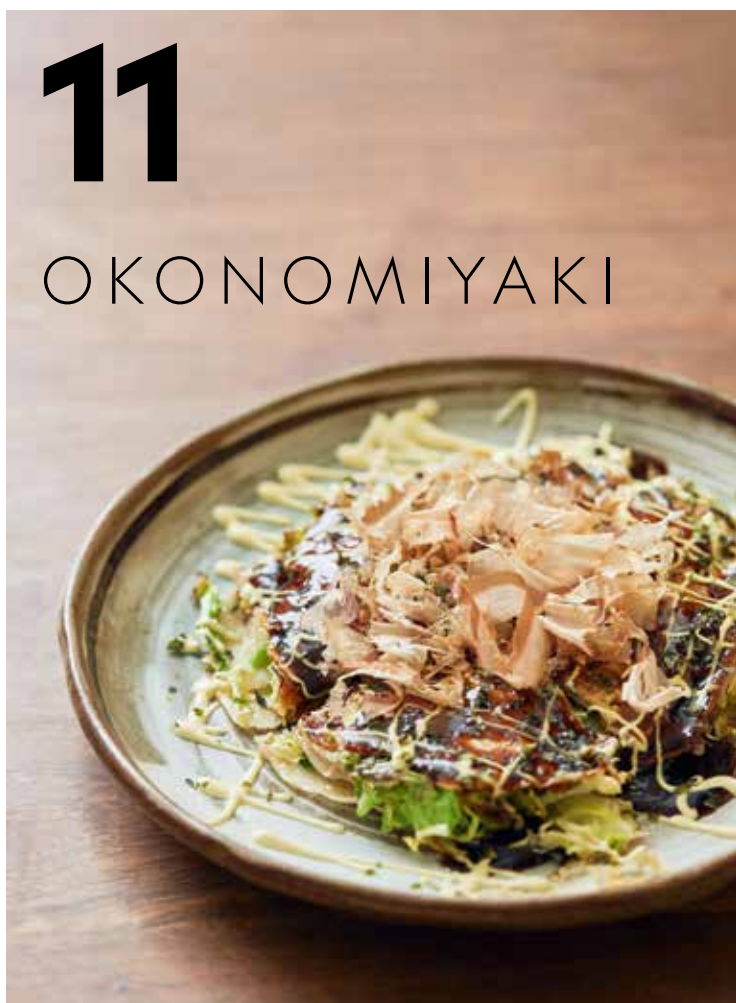
A cheap, simple snack of grilled chicken skewers, yakitori is one of Japan's most straightforward yet best-loved dishes. A typical yakitori menu will have skewers made from all parts of the chicken, including liver and skin, alongside tsukune (meatballs). Most places will also offer vegetarian options such as tofu or mushroom. Cooked to order on a robata (charcoal grill), the juicy, lightly charred skewers are typically seasoned with either salt or a sweet yakitori sauce (tare) and eaten hot, straight off the stick.

WHERE TO START: Found all over the country, any izakaya worth its salt will offer yakitori — and they're always best paired with a cold beer. In Tokyo, Michelin-starred yakitori-ya Bird Land uses chicken of such high quality they even serve it raw. *JP*



11

OKONOMIYAKI



Okonomiyaki is a jazzed-up savoury pancake that's found all over Japan but is especially popular in the cities of Osaka and Hiroshima. Ingredients and recipes can vary, but a typical version will include a simple batter (usually flour, nagaimo yam or dashi and eggs) combined with cabbage, noodles, seafood and pork. The mixture is then fried on a teppanyaki grill and topped with mayonnaise and bonito flakes. It's gooey, greasy and not particularly healthy but it's delicious and makes for a great late-night meal with a couple of beers.

WHERE TO START: Head for a specialist restaurant, such as Fukutaro in Osaka, to get the quintessential okonomiyaki experience. Here, stools are arranged around the cook's counter, allowing guests to eat their pancakes hot off the grill. *JP* ●

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE

British Airways, Japan Airlines and ANA all fly from Heathrow to Tokyo Haneda. ba.com jal.co.jp ana.co.jp

HOW TO DO IT

In Osaka, Ninja Food Tours offers the Namba Food Crawl Tour for 9,500 yen (£69) per person. Includes tasters of dishes such as kushikatsu, okonomiyaki and takoyaki. ninjafoodtours.com Oishii Food Tours' Izakaya Tour hits the pubs in Tokyo's Ebisu area, with the chance to sample yakitori, sashimi, tempura and plenty of beer en route. 15,000 yen (£109) per person oishiitours.com

MORE INFO

seejapan.co.uk