

# A Magnet for Gourmets

## Tokyo Offers Foods from Many Countries

By Tadahisa Hagiwara

**W**asshoi! Wasshoi! The sound of groups of people encouraging one another with shouts as they shoulder portable shrines is a common sound at Japanese traditional events, such as Asakusa's Sanja Festival or the Kanda Festival, both held in Tokyo. Events such as these continue to bedazzle visitors from all over the world.

Another essential part of Japanese festivals is the traditional *yatai* food stalls. No festival would be complete without the seasonal street food served at these makeshift eateries, including Japanese soul food, such as *okonomiyaki* (savory pancakes topped with a flavorful sauce) and *takoyaki* (small savory balls of dough containing pieces of octopus). A recent addition to these street foods that has become popular is a non-Japanese food—kebabs.

Kebabs, which originated in the Middle East and Turkey, are skewers of meat—usually lamb or beef. They started to appear on Ueno's Ameya Yokocho Shopping Street several years ago and now seem to be everywhere. Japanese people have fallen in love with the flavor of this highly seasoned dish. But, like other popular foods with roots in other countries—curry from India and noodles from China come to mind—Japan has tweaked them just a little to suit the local palate.

Food from around the world can be found in Japan. Tokyo, in particular, is a microcosm of global food culture. Even a quick internet search reveals that restaurants in Tokyo serve food from at least 100 countries.

Zakuro is one such restaurant that exemplifies the diversity of Tokyo's food culture. Zakuro serves not only kebabs but also *mahicheh* (lamb shank) and other Turkish and Middle Eastern dishes. Mohamed Ali Sadatto-Reza, the proprietor, comes from Iran but is of Turkish heritage. His friendly personality, the generous portions of food, and reasonable prices have made the restaurant one of the most popular in the neighborhood. And, of course, Zakuro's food is halal, so it complies with Islamic law.

Zakuro now has fans throughout Asia and even in Europe. Some of its regular customers even spend tens of thousands of yen to take a taxi straight to the restaurant from Narita International Airport. Two days after the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011, a cousin of

the king of Saudi Arabia concerned about the disaster flew to Japan and stopped here on his way to visit the devastated Tohoku region.

Ali says, in fluent Japanese: "If you come to my restaurant, you can become friends with not only me but the Iranian customer who sits down next to you. Here you can get to know what the average person from the Middle East thinks, the kind of thing they never show on the TV news. I get to serve 100 customers a day and send them home having enjoyed a meal here. I have the best job in the world."

Many restaurants serving non-Japanese food adapt their recipes to Japanese tastes but not Zakuro. The food served here tastes just as it does back in the Middle East. Turkish food is said to be one of the three great cuisines of the world. It encompasses a wide variety

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of dishes. "I don't change the flavor to suit the Japanese. I just serve the things that Japanese people like," Ali says. That is why both Japanese and Middle Eastern customers are satisfied with the food they eat here.

So, where in Tokyo do you think Zakuro is located? In Roppongi—where many non-Japanese spend time? Shibuya? Shinjuku? All of those answers are incorrect. Zakuro is actually in Yanaka—a downtown area that, despite being located right in the center of Tokyo, retains a traditional atmosphere, with refined temples and unchanged narrow streets lined with tiny restaurants serving soba noodles and Japanese sweets. Charmed by the area, Ali decided to put his restaurant here. A Middle Eastern restaurant in a purely Japanese setting—this kind of mismatch is symbolic of the diverse foodie heaven that is Tokyo.

When you visit Tokyo, of course, we hope that you will try *washoku*, the traditional Japanese cuisine that has been recognized by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage. But we hope you don't stop there, because Tokyo has much more to offer. We hope that you will also visit restaurants such as Zakuro for a unique culinary experience!

Tadahisa Hagiwara has published numerous works on business and the economy.



A sample of dishes served at Zakuro



Ali welcoming his guests