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The Japanese Tradition of Izakaya in Singapore

By Asif R. Chowdhury

Singapore is one of the best cities in the world for experiencing and enjoying world cuisine and it does particularly well when it comes to fare from Asia. One of the highlights in international gastronomy on the island is from Japan, and it offers some of the best Japanese restaurants outside of the country. Among the many Japanese restaurants here, there is a sizeable number of izakaya-style restaurants. Izakaya are actually more than just restaurants - they are a Japanese tradition that dates back hundreds of years. Most of the locals and expatriates frequenting the izakaya here perhaps are unaware of their rich history.

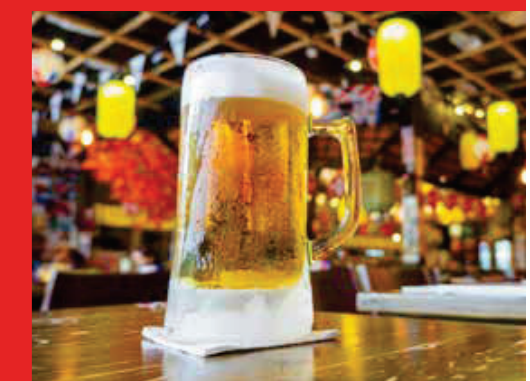
The heritage of the izakaya dates back to the Edo period from 1603 to 1868. Under the rule of Tokugawa Shogunate, devoid of hundreds of years of past feudalism, the Japanese economy began to flourish. During this period, the famous Tokaido route was established between the new capital Yedo (present Tokyo) and the old capital Kyoto. There were fifty-three stations or stopping points along the 514km of the Tokaido road, made famous by the paintings of Japanese artist, Utagawa Hiroshige (1797-1858), easily recognizable today from their overuse in many Japanese calendars and souvenirs.

As merchants would routinely travel this road, many business establishments, such as inns and sake shops, began to pop up in these stations to serve the weary and the tired travelers. These inns and sake shops came to be known as izakayas. The word izakaya stems from *ii* (pronounced as long e) meaning 'to stay' and *sake ya* (or *sakaya* for short) or sake shop. They have steadily gained popularity since then and have become intrinsic to Japanese tradition.

An exact English translation of izakaya is difficult to find; the Western equivalent would be a 'tavern' or 'gastropub', although with respect to the atmosphere, perhaps a German '*biergarten*' comes closest. Historically, and even today, most izakaya have red paper lanterns placed in front of the entrance making them relatively easy to identify. Because of this, izakaya are also known as *Akachochin* (red lantern).

Once inside, and contrary to what is quintessentially a very quiet and disciplined Japan, an izakaya has a boisterous atmosphere, where enjoying a variety of hearty culinary delights and drinks typical to Japan is a very social occasion. They are often the base for Japanese *sarariman* (or "salaryman", a term used for salaried white-collar Japanese workers) and office workers to mingle. The establishments are also an acceptable place to become uninhibited, so as the night rolls on and the drinking continues, the patrons' *honne* ('true self' or 'feeling') slowly emerges from their Japanese indomitable *tatemae* ('projected self-image' or 'feeling in public'). This state of 'uninhibition' for most Japanese is extremely atypical under most circumstances; but it is deemed to be very Japanese while inside an izakaya. In a country where hardly anyone speaks without a whisper, the noise level in an izakaya can be deafening - and it's absolutely fine! It is also not uncommon to strike up a conversation with the people in your next table, rarely done on other types of restaurants in Japan.

Like many things in Japan, izakaya also have a certain etiquette which is relatively simple to follow. Once guests get seated, they are handed *oshibori* (wet towels) to wipe their hands. The attendant will bring



some small snacks and appetizers known as *otoshi* - in some cases it is added to the bill in lieu of an entrance fee. The typical custom is to order beer first and start the drinking process with '*kampai*' ('cheers' in Japanese), before ordering food, then beer is typically followed by Japanese *sake* or *shochu*.

Ordering the food is continual throughout the evening. Typically, guests will order a first round of food items and then as the night unfolds, order additional rounds as the evening goes on. Food portions are usually not very large



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and servings are intended to be shared. It is customary to have a bowl of soba noodles or *ochazuke* (green tea poured over cooked rice with various Japanese pickles) at the end of the meal.

Some izakaya offer special services such as *tabehodai* (all you can eat) and/or *nomi-hodai* (all you can drink) early in the evening, especially during the weekdays. As with similar places, guests may pay a fixed price for ordering as much food and drink as they want. However, choices are typically limited to a set menu for both food and drink, and there is usually a two to three-hour time limit for this.



In the last decade or so, izakaya have gained international popularity and have cropped up in many big cities such as New York, San Francisco, Hong Kong and of course, Singapore. Many of them here are very authentic, sourcing many of their ingredients from Japan. **Hokkaido Izakaya**, located in Japan Food Town at Wisma Atria in Tanjong Pagar provides a good choice of Japanese food and sake along with a jovial atmosphere. For a wider food selection there is the **Shunjuu Izakaya**

located at Robertson Quay, as well as **Izakaya Niningashi** in Chinatown Complex. The look and feel of the Izakaya Niningashi menu is especially impressive as the menu is as close to a traditional Japanese Izakaya menu as you can get. **Shukuu Izakaya and Sake Bar**, located in Stanley Street, offers a great selection of Japanese sake, as well as an excellent izakaya experience. However, my favorite is **Tomo Izakaya** in Clarke Quay; not only is the food good, but the inside layout and décor is highly reminiscent of any izakaya in Japan.

While most of the izakaya in Singapore can provide an authentic atmosphere and certainly great food selection, there is still nothing quite like visiting an izakaya in Japan, especially in one of the more popular sarariman hang-out districts of Tokyo such as Shimbashi, Shinjuku or Shibuya. Make the experience a must as part of your next trip's itinerary.

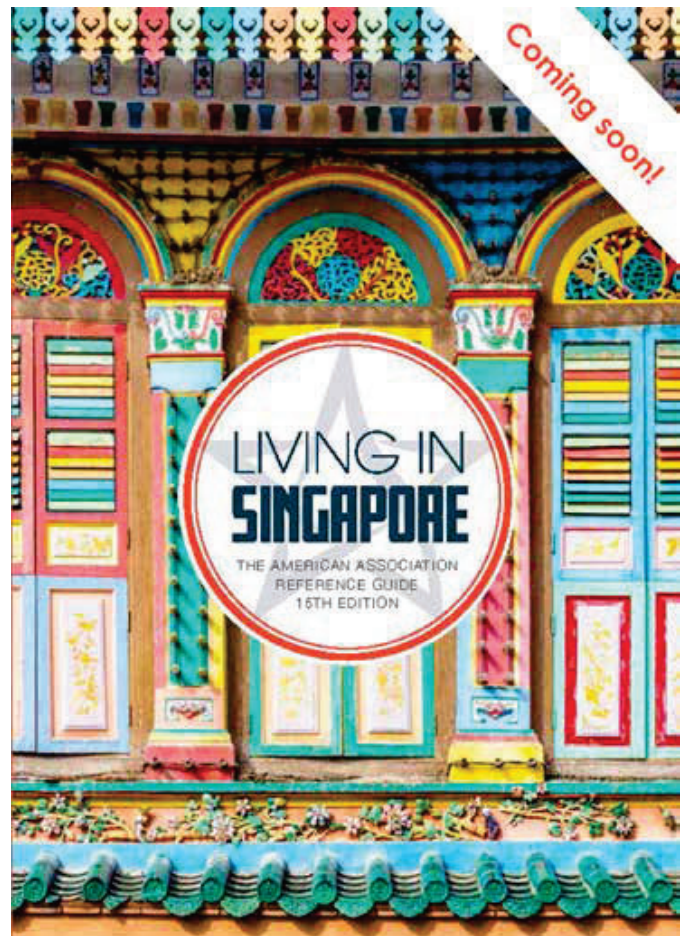
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