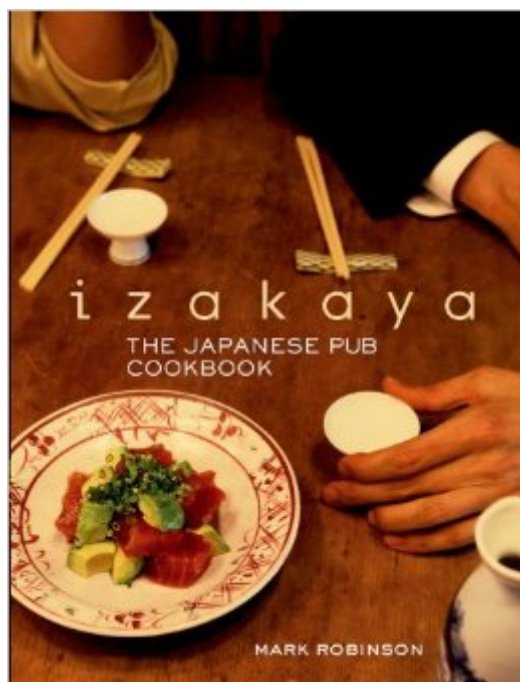


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Izakaya: The Japanese Pub Cookbook



Synopsis

Japanese pubs, called izakaya, are attracting growing attention in Japan and overseas. As a matter of fact, a recent article in The New York Times claimed that the izakaya is starting to shove the sushi bar off its pedestal. While Japan has many guidebooks and cookbooks, this is the first publication in English to delve into every aspect of a unique and vital cornerstone of Japanese food culture. A venue for socializing and an increasingly innovative culinary influence, the izakaya serves mouth-watering and inexpensive small-plate cooking, along with free-flowing drinks. Readers of this essential book will be guided through the different styles of establishments and recipes that make izakaya such relaxing and appealing destinations. At the same time, they will learn to cook many delicious standards and specialties, and discover how to design a meal as the evening progresses. Eight Tokyo pubs are introduced, ranging from those that serve the traditional Japanese comfort foods such as yakitori (barbequed chicken), to those offering highly innovative creations. Some of them have long histories; some are more recent players on the scene. All are quite familiar to the author, who has chosen them for the variety they represent: from the most venerated downtown pub to the new-style standing bar with French-influenced menu. Mark Robinson includes knowledgeable text on the social and cultural etiquette of visiting izakaya, so the book can be used as a guide to entering the potentially daunting world of the pub. Besides the 60 detailed recipes, he also offers descriptions of Japanese ingredients and spices, a guide to the wide varieties of sake and other alcoholic drinks that are served, how-to advice on menu ordering, and much more. For the home chef, the hungry gourmet, the food professional, this is more than a cookbook. It is a unique peek at an important and exciting dining and cultural phenomenon.

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Customer Reviews

Some of my favorite memories of Japan are from cooking in an izakaya. I apprenticed under the local master, learning traditional izakaya cooking and bringing some of my Northwest sensibilities to the menu. It was a fantastic experience, and I often wish I was there still, standing behind the charcoal grill, taking orders and cooking directly for the customer, reaching inside the tanks to pull out a live octopus and quickly dice it up and serve it raw and wriggling. Good times. There really is no restaurant I love more than an izakaya, and no matter how many trendy American restaurants like to put that on their website they never get it right. There should be a hundred more cookbooks like "Izakaya: The Japanese Pub Cookbook". This is the real stuff, what Japanese cooking really is, not intricately rolled sushi or fancy designs on square plates. Delicious, cheap food served up fresh and fast, with a menu changing by the hour depending on what ingredients are available, often hand written by the master and pasted on the walls. Mark Robinson shares my love for izakayas, and has put together a brilliant cookbook and guide based on some fabulous establishments. Along with the recipes, there are short essays on izakaya culture, their history and what they mean to the Japanese people. It is a splendid ritual, the ordering of drinks and paired food, the requesting of today's specialties, the casual atmosphere of an ongoing party where anyone can feel free to jump into conversation with anyone else. I cooked at an izakaya in Osaka, whereas Robinson calls Tokyo his stomping grounds, so a lot of these recipes are unfamiliar to me, but they are all 100% authentic and delicious.

The book features eight different izakayas, each with its own section that begins with an essay that reads very much like a newspaper write-up: Robinson may describe the experience walking in the pub, the reputation of the pub, a brief history of the pub and the chef, the chef's philosophy about food and drink, the flow of the kitchen, and descriptions of the food, followed by about 9 recipes from the izakaya itself, written by the chef and each accompanied by a full-color photograph. The dust jacket front flap says that Izakaya is the first publication in English to delve into every aspect of the izakaya, a unique and vital cornerstone of Japanese food culture. However, after reading the book, a second book would have difficulty providing insight additional to Robinson's- he paints such a vivid picture that the only way to better get an idea of what the izakaya experience is like is probably to go to one. From the physical description of the pub, to the demeanor of the chefs, and even the kind of company one can expect in each izakaya, Robinson captures all the details.

Robinson chose the eight izakayas featured for their quality, ambience, and variety, and the unique charms of each izakaya shines through in the text. The recipes are for the most part no-fuss recipes (no need to train for decades) with few ingredients, but the emphasis is on quality and creativity. The range from the familiar (sweet corn kakiage tempura, soy-flavored spare ribs, simmered kamo eggplant with pork loin, sliced duck breast with ponzu sauce, fried udon, summer scallop salad) to more exotic offerings (scrambled eggs with sea urchin, "motsu" beef intestine stew, shark fin aspic).

Everyone who's ever been to Japan could tell you anecdotes about their best meal there in a tiny, off-the-beaten-track traditional inn. Obviously, closed-minded people who think that Indians eat curry, Americans eat burgers, and Japanese eat sushi, will have carefully avoided eating in such "not in NY times reviews" places, and that's the whole point of this book. Having lived for a year there (and been there another dozen times), I had the chance to discover these fantastic traditional eateries, with original, uncommon, and incredible house recipes: the Izakaya. Obviously, most of them have no English menu nor does anyone there speak a single word of English - which is why they are hard to access for tourists, and this book recreates the atmosphere of such places: nice locals that will start talking to you (in Japanese), the sake pouring wild, fresh beer with crunchy bits of fried never-heard-of parts of even-less-heard-of animals (or is it?) that taste incredibly good. These recipes are simple and mostly quick, none of the fancy/schmoozy elaborations of Nobu or Morimoto. Everyday items that you can cook at home (obviously Japanese stores nearby and access to fresh seafood will help). The book itself is gorgeous, with great photos that recreate the ambience and mood in the various "favorites" of the author, this is much more than a cookbook. It's almost an ethnographic study about these gems that make the Japanese food scene so varied, so colorful, so alive. This book was born out of the passion of his author, and you can feel his enthusiasm on every page, which makes it grasping.

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