

WEEKEND JOURNAL; Food & Drink – The dish: Tempura; That Japanese classic – by way of Portugal?

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Full text: In this fusion-food era, with East and West mixing readily on almost every plate, one of Asia's original fusion forays can go overlooked. Tempura, often regarded as typical Japanese fare, actually comes by way of Portugal.

European missionaries washed up on Japanese shores in the mid-16th century, bringing European goods and customs with them. In the resultant muddle of trade, religion and new ways to fry, it is the last category that the world's diners are perhaps most thankful for today.

Tempura consists of slices of seafood and vegetables, batter-coated and deep-fried in vegetable oil. A wide range of foods can get the tempura treatment, including shrimp, squid, crab, scallops, certain fish, eggplant, potato, sweet potato, mushrooms, lotus root, squash and carrots. In a nod to its origins as a food for Lent, a season of fasting and penitence, tempura never features red meat. Sixteenth-century Japanese weren't accustomed to eating red meat anyway, so the Portuguese creation hit the spot.

The History

For the missionaries and traders, says Paula Cant, cultural attache at the Portuguese embassy in Tokyo, this method of cooking may have been a way to sidestep unfamiliar Japanese approaches -- such as eating fish raw -- in favor of their tried and true fryers.

"Fried food was perhaps more pleasant to them, more to their taste," says Ms. Cant. In time, as their creation caught on with the locals and picked up local characteristics with a range of Japanese dips and sauces -- becoming a staple of Japanese cuisine -- its Portuguese roots were all but obliterated.

But those roots live on in the name, though its exact origin is uncertain. One theory is that it derives from *tempero*, a Portuguese word for seasoning. Ms. Cant notes another -- that those early Portuguese in Japan, frying up their vegetables and fish, referred to the food eaten during Lent by the archaic Portuguese word *tempura* or *tempuras*.

The Setting

There are as many ways to eat tempura in Tokyo as there are places to do it, from the greasy fryers of corner stores to the inner sanctuaries of high-end restaurants. Dedicated tempura spots can be hard for outsiders to find; many skip the plastic rendering of food other Japanese restaurants feature and keep their signs simple. At most establishments, customers are provided with a selection of condiments and then shown the food to be fried. "I will always present my customers with the tempura items before frying," says chef Yukanawi of Tsunahachi tempura restaurant. "The cooking process and batter can obscure the real color and freshness of the food. It is important that customers see the quality of what they will eat before they receive it," he says.

The Judgment

Tempura is usually eaten as a simple lunch or afternoon snack. Prepared correctly, it's fluffy and crunchy, and has the absorbent capacity to take on the many flavors of its accompanying sauces and dips. These separate little dishes usually include a bowl of *tentsuyu*, a sauce based on *dashi* (seaweed and fish stock), soy sauce and rice wine; grated *daikon* (white radish); salt and pepper; and powdered green tea with wasabi.

Tempura should be fried fast and served steaming hot. An experienced tempura chef will not remove his hand from the fryer, keeping the contents moving for just a moment or two of bubbling-oil submersion.

The Sources

Teiyande

An izakaya, or informal pub, it has outlets in Nishi-Azabu, Shibuya and Omotesando. Tempura here comes

casual, fresh and coupled with imported draft beers. There are also some more-innovative dishes worth trying, such as tempura-fried scallops with a zesty anchovy sauce.

2-20-1 Nishi-Azabu, Minato-ku.

5:30 p.m. to midnight.

81-3-3407-8127.

Set tempura menus \$13 to \$16.

Tsunahachi

This outlet of the Tsunahachi chain is a more formal and upscale tempura restaurant. The batter is light, the dipping sauces numerous and the fried clam particularly worth trying. Get a seat at one of the two long counters to watch the chefs at work.

3-31-8 Shinjuku, Shinjuku-ku.

11 a.m. to 10 p.m.

81-3-3352-1012.

Set tempura menus \$17 to \$23.

Funabashiya

One of Tokyo's leading tempura spots, this is an austere, serious place for connoisseurs of the dish, specializing in the freshest of prawns and creative vegetable choices. Perfectly turned-out platters and side dishes elevate the presentation of tempura to new levels.

3-28-14 Shinjuku, Shinjuku-ku.

11:40 a.m. to 10 p.m.

81-3-3354-2751.

Set tempura menus \$21 to \$26.

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