

# Portland: A taste of Japan — without the long flight

By Samantha Bakall | March 7, 2018

✉ f t p e g

🖨️ 💬 0



Photo: Samantha Bakall, Special To The Chronicle

IMAGE 1 OF 3

Behind the Museum Cafe is an airy, tawny wood-lined space offering Japanese tea and snacks, crafts and antiques.

Tear your eyes, if you can, from the cloud-stippled skyline and the towering, snow-peaked Mount Hood, and gaze upon the sliding shoji doors of the Pavilion Gallery.

You might forget you're standing in Portland.

Perched high above the city, on the terraced mountainside of the West Hills, lies the tranquil, 12 1/2-acre Japanese Garden, a mossy labyrinth of placid ponds, concentric, raked gravel circles and lush-yet-meticulously-clipped shrubbery. Since its opening in 1967 as a place of serenity for Portlanders and a healing connection with the Japanese, the jasmine-scented gardens have been considered among the most authentic outside of Japan.

It's here where Portland — and, perhaps, America — most noticeably intertwines with Japan, a continually budding trans-Pacific partnership, where towering Douglas firs share landscape with blushing cherry blossoms.

Home to four big-name Japanese ramen chains — two of which have their lone stateside locations in Portland — and growing numbers of restaurants specializing in homestyle cooking and high-end sushi, the sake-drinking capital of the United States continues to develop as Japan's home away from home. Add an upcoming hotel from a major Japanese hotelier into the equation, and it's never been easier to experience the culture without enduring an 11-hour flight.

(Oddly, the ties go both ways: At least a dozen Portland brands or Portland-themed restaurants, bars — serving Portland-brewed beers — and stores also call Tokyo home. Tourist trap Voodoo Doughnuts is expected to open locations there, and even the Original Pancake House, the landmark, Portland-born breakfast chain beloved by Stumptown local James Beard, has a restaurant in Japan.)

Start your day at Behind the Museum Cafe, an airy, tawny wood-lined tea and coffee shop specializing in Japanese tea, antiques and crafts. The cafe side, run by Tomoe Horibuchi — who ran a cafe and taught Shojin Ryori, or the traditional Buddhist monk dining style, in San Francisco — offers precision cups of Extracto coffee and an expansive menu of Japanese drinks, sandwiches, onigiri and pastries.

The south wall of the calm space is lined with ceramics, kimono, scrolls and antiques sourced from Japan's Ryokusuido shop. The shop's owner, Kihachiro Nishiura, a celebrated artist and descendent of Nishiura Enji — the founder of the Nishiura-yaki school of ceramics — is another owner of the Portland cafe.

After coffee, head westward up the hills to experience the newly renovated Japanese Garden. The area recently underwent a \$33.5 million expansion from architect Kengo Kuma, who designed the \$1.5 billion National Stadium for the 2020 Olympics. A brand-new tea house made possible by Japanese food company Ajinomoto (you might recognize their name from frozen dumpling or MSG packets), Kabuki theater and art space, and members-only library greet visitors before they enter the eight garden spaces that feel a world away.

But it's in Portland's culinary sphere where Japan's influence is most felt.

Since 2015, three Tokyo-based ramen chains have opened in the city, making Portland a contender in the Pacific Northwest ramen arena, so you have plenty of choices.

Shigezo was already well established in the city, but it wasn't until Kizuki Ramen & Izakaya landed in a suburban shopping center that Portlanders took notice. The shop, with nearly 30 locations across the United States, Japan, Taiwan and Australia, is known for its flawless and inexpensive noodle soups, dusty-crisp chicken karaage and squishy takoyaki, the popular fried octopus dumpling.

Less than a year after Kizuki arrived, Marukin Ramen made its stateside debut with a pair of Portland restaurants centered around Hakata-style tonkotsu (pork-bone broth) ramen. Just seven months after Marukin, the iconic Afuri chose Portland as its inaugural American city because of the high-quality water. The ramen-ya, whose signature is a bowl of springy yuzu-shio ramen, has already expanded to two locations.

Elsewhere, Portland's surprisingly adolescent sushi scene has started to come of age. Among the oldest is Restaurant Murata, now likely the only in town with traditional tatami rooms and servers in kimono. It's a lunch haven for downtown office workers plowing through cozy donburi (rice bowls), bento sets and fat sushi rolls. But at dinner with advanced notice, you can reserve a prix-fixe kaiseki menu or sit at the counter bursting with fresh fish and let the sushi chefs decide your fate.

Less than a mile away lies Naoko Tamura's Shizuku by Chef Naoko, also designed by Kengo Kuma. Initially known for bento boxes with a fierce dedication to organic ingredients, Shizuku has transformed into a more formal dining space, serving \$50 omakase (chef's choice) dinners featuring ingredients sourced from local farmers. However, soothing noodle soups and lunch trays are still available at lunchtime.

If your heart truly lies in high-end omakase though, Southeast Portland's Nodoguro is a can't-miss reservation — if you can get in. Tickets are released monthly to Ryan Roadhouse's zen-like sushi den. Most are for 13-course tasting menus featuring a mix of composed dishes and sushi. But at least a few times a month, Roadhouse offers his "Supahardcore" menu, a boundary-pushing 21 courses filled out with A5 Kyushu Wagyu, Ossetra caviar and fish straight from Japan's Tsukiji and Fukuoka markets.

Finish the evening at Zilla Sake, home to one of the West Coast's largest collections of sake — nearly 100 bottles available by the glass. Or, head directly to the source at SakeOne, a massive, 25-year-old producer outside Portland. Both play a major role in a city that's believed to consume more sake per capita than anywhere else in the country.

Not to mention Portland is home to one of the most highly educated and fanatic communities surrounding sake. There isn't a better city in America to drink sake than here.

So while flights to Tokyo might be out of range, Portland is an accessible substitute.

Samantha Bakall is a freelance writer based in Portland. Email: [travel@sfchronicle.com](mailto:travel@sfchronicle.com). Twitter and Instagram: @sambakall.

## MOST POPULAR

Tim Lincecum joins Rangers with new contract, heavy heart

Giants' Dave Righetti discusses losing coaching job and...

BART's plans for Civic Center Station worries patrons of the...

SF car break-ins: with no verbal warning, renters are unaware...

Apple Park: Transcript of 911 calls about injuries from...

SF to charge vacant-lot owners for rainwater that runs down...

House of pane: Apple was warned of glass danger