

LIFE

Gastronomy becomes key draw for high-end travelers to Japan

International interest in fine dining is soaring, but capacity is limited



Satoru Araki prepares sushi at his restaurant, Sushi Satoru, which has attracted attention from foreign visitors thanks to a mention in the latest Michelin Guide for Tokyo. (Photo by Phoebe Amoroso)

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TOKYO-- Satoru Araki is meticulously slicing a prime cut of *chutoro* (medium fatty tuna) into morsels as he serves up a course of *nigirizushi* (hand-pressed sushi) in the backstreets of the upmarket Tokyo suburb of Hiroo.

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A former professional boxer, Araki opened Sushi Satoru in July 2022 -- a simple counter of six seats that has already generated a buzz in Tokyo's sushi scene. On the counter is a copy of The Michelin Guide Tokyo 2024, in which Sushi Satoru is mentioned for the first time. It has yet to win a Michelin star, but the reference has attracted interest from foreign visitors to Japan, which Araki wants to encourage.

"In a couple of months, we're thinking of opening online reservations on Omakase, a booking site for overseas visitors," he says. "At our store, we don't have a lot of guests from overseas. We want to open up more seats for them. But, that said, it's already hard for Japanese people to get in here. Reservations are really on the rise."

Sushi Satoru typifies the tensions within Tokyo's fine dining scene. International accolades have pushed interest in the city's gastronomy to a fever pitch -- it boasts 183 Michelin-starred restaurants, including 12 three-star establishments, and is the leading destination in the 2023 Asia's 50 Best Restaurants list, another annual guide watched by gourmands.

Yet many of these establishments remain frustratingly out of reach to all but the wealthiest of patrons because demand for luxury dining is outpacing supply. The number of overseas visitors to Japan collapsed during the COVID-19 pandemic, but it has since recovered strongly, reaching 25 million in 2023 -- 79% of the record set in 2019.



Araki says that while he is keen to see more foreign customers, reservations are becoming difficult to secure even for Japanese people as the restaurant's popularity grows. (Photo by Phoebe Amoroso)

With the upward trend expected to continue, the Japanese government is seeking to shift the country's tourism focus to quality, rather than quantity, in a bid to alleviate the pressures of overtourism. In February 2023, it announced that it would aim to achieve a spend of 200,000 yen (\$129,300) per visitor by 2025 -- a target that was exceeded just seven months later. The government also eased the rules for landing permission for private jets in June, while the Japan Tourism Agency has recently selected 11 regional locations to support in developing products and services for the wealthy.

Japan's world-class gastronomy is a major element in this shift toward better-off, higher-spending visitors, says Naomi Mano, CEO of Luxurique, a hospitality and events management company based in Tokyo and Kyoto that specializes in luxury travel itineraries.

"Our clients will have a list of restaurants that they want to go to in a year's time, and they give us the list, and they say, 'tell me when we can go when you're able to secure the seat; we want to aim for spring 2025,' for example. And they fly in. We get this especially with our high-end clients because these clients have the luxuries of flexibility and time to be able to do this."



The Michelin-starred Lurra in Kyoto: Demand for luxury dining is outpacing supply in Japan. (Photo by Phoebe Amoroso)

For clients who fall into the wealthy -- as opposed to the ultrawealthy -- category, however, getting reservations that coincide with their vacation dates can seem like a lottery. Some Michelin-starred restaurants are booked up for months -- if not years -- in advance, and they see little need to court overseas markets.

Kabi, a Tokyo restaurant known for its innovative cuisine, was awarded its first Michelin star in the 2024 Tokyo guide, but co-owner and sommelier Kentaro Emoto does not foresee an impact on the business. "Our customers are almost all repeaters, over 50%," Emoto says. "Even if the Japanese economy is struggling, the majority of our customers are Japanese.

"We are just keeping going, providing the best food and best service, regardless of where our customers are from. We aren't considering the economy. But the cost of ingredients is going up, so our prices are going up. When we started [in 2017], our menu was 10,000 yen, and now it's 18,000 yen. It's almost double. ... [But] our customers don't change; they keep coming."

While top-ranked restaurants need not worry about filling seats, there are signs of reluctance to respond to inbound customers among all levels of establishments. An October 2023 survey of 1,000 people in the restaurant industry by the online reservation service TableCheck found that 22.6% did not want the proportion of overseas customers to increase, citing communication as the biggest concern.



A steady stream of repeat Japanese customers means Kabi, a Michelin-starred Tokyo restaurant known for its innovative cuisine, has no big incentive to woo overseas visitors. (Courtesy of Kabi)

Mikako Mochizuki, a manager at TableCheck, says many restaurants prefer to focus on building long-term relationships with local customers.

"Overseas visitors can only stop by restaurants once -- they can't become repeat customers," says Mochizuki. "The reality is that there are still a certain number of restaurants that are thinking of attracting more Japanese customers and getting them to become regulars."

Yet the survey also indicated that this approach could be about to change. Data from 7,000 restaurants across all levels of the dining scene showed that reservations by Japanese customers have rebounded to 70% of pre-pandemic levels, and the rate of increase has tapered off. By contrast, reservations by overseas customers are up sharply, with December 2022 bookings nearly 280% higher than the comparable month in 2019. Just over a third of restaurants indicated that they wanted to see an increase in overseas customers.

High-end restaurants are also jumping on board. TableCheck began collaborating with the Michelin Guide last year, with more than 200 restaurants mentioned in the guide now allowing online bookings via the service -- a move that makes them significantly more accessible to overseas visitors. This is a far cry from the launch of the Guide in Tokyo and Kyoto in 2007 and 2008, which generated mixed reactions, including a debate about whether foreign inspectors could judge Japanese food.



A visitor enjoys a sake-tasting session at Tuzyun Brewery in Kumamoto, on the southwestern island of Kyushu. (Courtesy of the Japan Travel and Tourism Association)

Mano says that when she started her business in 2007, many chefs at high-end establishments were wary of communication issues and feared sudden cancellations of bookings by inbound clients who might not understand local etiquette. These complications meant it made little sense for these restaurants to entertain overseas customers when they already had a solid customer base.

Now, she says, they are more open to the idea. "They've realized that inbound is important, and it is the national strategy to bring in more inbound clients to Japan. So I wouldn't say they are playing along, but they're working along. They are trying to find what is right for their restaurants in terms of the ratio between inbound and local clients."

Yet the relatively small number of high-end restaurants, even including those without Michelin stars, limits their potential contribution to the economy, let alone to the government's objective of relieving the burden of overtourism. The government and the luxury tour operators are turning their attention to regions beyond Tokyo and Kyoto, but getting tourists to venture further afield remains a challenge.

"The government doesn't have enough budget," says Mano. "Our budget compared to [South] Korea's is miniscule. And how they spend it -- it doesn't build impact; it doesn't give a showcase of what Japan should be perceived as. Everything is just word of mouth or TripAdvisor. We're not taking the initiative in presenting great parts of Japan, whereas a lot of countries, including Thailand and even Malaysia, are working hard on how they want their country to be perceived."



Tourists flock to a photo opportunity in Kyoto. The crowds -- and the number of high-end restaurants -- fall off significantly beyond Japan's traditional travel hot spots. (Photo by Phoebe Amoroso)

Mac Salman, founder of Maction Planet, a Tokyo-based travel company that creates bespoke tours of Japan, says it is difficult to entice first-time visitors to Japan away from the "golden route" -- Tokyo, Kyoto and Osaka -- however good the experience is. "If the point is to diversify revenue across the country through gastrotourism, then the quality of the experiences has to be unbelievably high and absolutely not available closer to somewhere that's more convenient."

Recognizing that gastrotourism alone will not be enough to achieve Japan's quality-tourism objectives, the government and the tourism industry are also pushing wellness and adventure tourism as additional avenues for attracting inbound visitors. This need for a more holistic approach has led to a flurry of new hotels designed as attractions rather than simply as temporary bases for travelers.

One is Shiroiya Hotel, which opened in 2020 in the relatively small city of Maebashi, in Gunma prefecture. Designed by architect Sou Fujimoto, each room is decorated with different works by international artists, and the hotel restaurant is a collaboration with Hiroyasu Kawate of Florilege, a Tokyo restaurant with two Michelin stars.



Shiroiya Hotel, in Maebashi, Gunma prefecture, stands out for its unique design and restaurant created in collaboration with the chef behind Florilege, a Tokyo restaurant with two Michelin stars.

Similarly, Shishi-Iwa House, a collection of architecturally designed rooms in Karuizawa, a small town in Nagano prefecture, promises a retreat in nature. The hotel launched its own restaurant, Shola, in June last year, and has recently begun offering free farm tours with the chef to guests, responding to growing international interest in farm-to-table and sustainability issues.

Opening and broadening Japan's gastronomy scene could impact its image, however. Salman says the elusiveness of some restaurant reservations remains part of the attraction for clients, some of whom are desperate to get into sought-after restaurants. Some already spurn restaurants offering online reservations because they are regarded as too accessible.

"Once the scarcity goes, the appeal of [the high-end dining scene] will alter," says Salman, adding that a retreat from exclusivity need not be negative for top-end restaurants. "[It] might be a positive, because you can have a small handful of ultra-high net worth clients, or you can have a large number of mid-wealth and high net worth clients doing many things," he says. "I suspect that the net impact for the country will be better."

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