



# Shiso talented!

In Japan's gastronomic heartland of Osaka, two mothers share their culinary wizardry with a class of eager learners – with tips that include dancing on noodles, warming dough in unexpected places and using the right knife to enhance flavor

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Photography **Nico Perez**





**CLOCKWISE FROM  
ABOVE**  
Vegetable  
*okonomiyaki*, wrapped  
in shiso leaves, on the  
hotplate; brushing  
glaze on yakitori sticks;  
a knife from the local  
shop; cooking *sensei*  
perfecting the grilled  
chicken; flat *udon*  
noodles





# I am jumping up and down in my socks on a small plastic bag.

I feel a little anxious, not just because I'm aware of how silly I look – I'm surrounded by three other people doing the same thing – but because I know exactly what I'm stamping on: my dinner. More precisely, the bag contains a soft white dough made minutes earlier, and, if I follow my teacher's instructions – which include the bag stamping – will apparently be transformed into deliciously slurpable Japanese *udon* noodles.

"This is the traditional way to make noodles," smiles my lively cookery *sensei* Aya. "It's the best way to get rid of all the air in the dough. Dance, dance, dance! Use all your weight until it's completely flat! No mountains!" I hadn't anticipated a dough-stamping session when signing up for my Japanese cookery class, having predicted something a little more Zen, with minimal participation from my feet.

Things, however, often unfold a little differently in Osaka. Japan's second-largest city has long been celebrated for its lively take on life, from its famously hyperactive nightlife to the down-to-earth humor of its friendly residents. Osaka moves to a different tempo from the rest of Japan, and in particular Tokyo: Osakans even queue on the right side of escalators, compared to the left side preferred by Tokyoites.

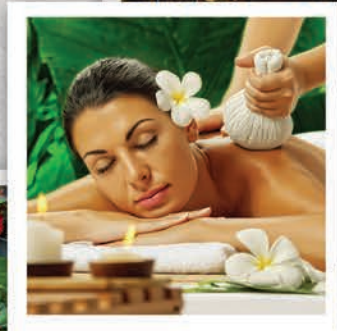
Not to mention the food. From gingery grilled octopus balls and skewers of charcoal grilled chicken to thick, soupy *udon* and pancake-like *okonomiyaki* dishes, the city's famed cuisine is as hearty as it is seductive. One company tapping into its culinary appeal is Eat Osaka, a school set up by Aya Lopez and Arisa Yamada, two thirty-something Osaka mothers born and raised in the city.

After renovating a small traditional house on a tiny lane in the bustling old-school Shinsekai district, they started to conduct cookery classes in English, sharing Osakan



**ABOVE**  
Aya-san shares her family secrets to preparing an authentic and delicious Osakan meal





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## EAT OSAKA'S RECIPE FOR UDON NOODLES

### Noodles:

50ml of water  
5g of salt  
120g flour

### Soup:

600ml water  
5g dashi powder  
2 tbsp soy sauce  
1 tbsp mirin  
1 tsp salt

### Directions:

- 1 Mix noodle ingredients in a bowl. Mix together into a ball and place in two plastic bags.
- 2 Take off your shoes and step on the dough for five minutes, making sure not to break the bag.
- 3 Put it in your pocket and leave for at least 30 minutes to rise.
- 4 Place on a well-floured table and roll out until the dough is 1-2mm thick.
- 5 Fold the dough lengthways and cut into 3mm strips.
- 6 Place in a pan of boiling water and cook for 12 minutes.
- 7 Place into a sieve and rinse well with cold water before serving.
- 8 Put the soup ingredients in a pot and boil before pouring onto the noodles.



culinary gems. Arisa explains: "All the recipes we teach come from our moms' kitchens. They are typically Osakan. The cuisine here is different from elsewhere in Japan – it uses a lot of flour and sauces. Actually, Osaka food is a bit like Osaka people: lively and a little boisterous."

Keen to put this to the test, I sign up for an Osaka Street Food class and on a rainy Monday afternoon, make my way to the house, just a few minutes' walk from the city's vintage-looking, neon-lit Tsutenkaku Tower. I'm greeted warmly by Aya, and it instantly feels more like a family home than cookery school: after swapping my shoes for slippers, I enter a cozy room with wood and plaster walls, a cherry blossom split curtain leading to the kitchen and paper screens opening onto a small garden.

Center stage is a square formation of wooden tables, around which my fellow students gather. There's a trio of slightly hungover airline staff stopping over from Europe – Tom, the pilot, and Agi and Mirja, two air stewards. With the gentle strains of traditional Japanese music playing in the background, we wash our hands, introduce ourselves – and get down to work.

First dish of the day? *Kitsune udon*, flat udon noodles in a sweet, light soup broth, with a sliver of deep-fried tofu floating on the surface. Using images on a school-like

**BELOW**  
A lesson is given on how to prepare perfectly slurpable udon



“Osaka food is a bit like Osaka people: lively and a little boisterous”



**ABOVE**  
The glaze prepared for the chicken yakitori includes rice wine, soy sauce, sugar, sake and whiskey



board, Aya explains *kitsune* means “fox” in Japanese – animals that apparently love tofu – before declaring brightly: “And now we are going to make noodles from scratch.”

We dutifully mix flour, water and salt in a bowl and knead it into a dough before things take a surreal twist. Aya hands each of us two small plastic bags, telling us to enclose the dough, place it on the floor and step on it – the double bagging is used in case of breakages. And so our unlikely noodle dance begins, laughing as we awkwardly knead with our feet, and trying not to think about the fact that it will soon be dinner. Stamping completed, Aya tells us to place the dough somewhere warm. Copying her example, we tuck it inside the back of our trousers.

Next, we tackle chicken *yakitori* – skewers of charcoal-grilled chicken, a favorite among beer-sipping Osakan salarymen. “The Japanese say the only part of a chicken we don’t eat is its voice,” smiles Aya. “We eat everything. Today, we’re cooking chicken thighs in a teriyaki-style soy sauce and sugar glaze.”

We mix the glaze – a fusion of *mirin* rice wine, soy sauce, sugar, sake and whiskey – with Aya giving tips for non-Japanese substitutes (honey works instead of mirin, apparently), before melting it on a tabletop grill. Next, we weave chicken and leek onto wooden skewers that are neatly color-coded for each guest, brush them with glaze and place them on the grill.

Finally, it’s time to make the *okonomiyaki*, perhaps the city’s most famous and popular culinary export. “*Okonomi* means ‘whatever you want’ and *yaki* means ‘grilled’, so we can put anything we like in this,” says Aya. “Today, we’re using vegetables and we’re cooking them festival-style – wrapped around chopsticks, so you can eat while walking around.”

The dish’s foundation is an egg batter, so we mix a simple batter – eggs, flour, fish broth and water – before Aya ceremoniously hands us each a long, shiny knife. Osaka’s status as a foodie’s nirvana goes hand in hand with its reputation for quality knife-making, in particular by craftsmen from the Sakai district. Today’s Sakai-



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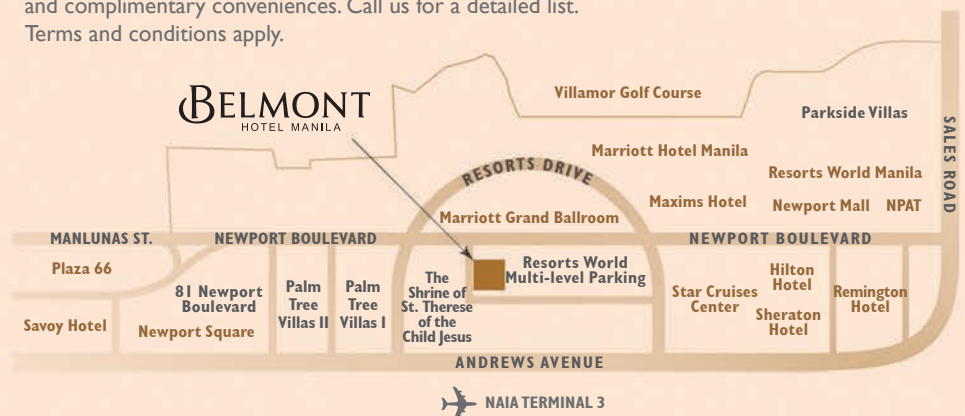
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## “All the recipes we teach come from our moms’ kitchens”

produced knives were provided by Tower Knives Osaka, a small knife shop just around the corner run by a charismatic Canadian-Danish knife expert named Björn Heiberg, whose customers range from tourists to Michelin-starred chefs – including the Noma team from Denmark.

Long, thick and shiny, with the craftsman's name engraved elegantly on the blade, my own knife would not look out of place in a ninja's sheath. “The knife you use makes a big difference to the taste,” explains Aya before demonstrating by slicing a carrot firstly with a cheap knife and then using a professional Tower Knives creation. Nibbling on the two pieces, the differences are instantly clear: the first tastes like a typical carrot, but the second

feels as smooth as a mirror, with a slighter sweeter taste.

As the 6 o'clock chimes ring out from Tsutenkaku Tower, we thinly slice carrots and cabbages (with tips from Aya to avoid accidental finger slicing). Then, as the climax to the meal approaches, we slip into multi-tasking Osaka mother mode. Cool, calm and collected, Aya smoothly directs us to reglaze and turn our chicken skewers; retrieve our noodles from our trousers; carefully slice the dough into 3mm pieces; and place it into saucepans of boiling water in the kitchen.

As the noodles cook for a precise 12 minutes (timed by Aya on her iPhone), we return to a large hot plate at the end of the table – and prepare to make okonomiyaki.



**ABOVE**  
Tower Knives Osaka supplies Michelin-starred chefs, as well as the teachers at Eat Osaka, who point out the difference they can make in flavor





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**ABOVE**  
Okonomiyaki is prepared festival-style – wrapped on chopsticks – so that they can be enjoyed on the move



“And so our unlikely noodle dance begins, laughing as we awkwardly knead with our feet while trying not to think about the fact that it will soon be dinner”

#### Eat Osaka

At their house in the Shinsekai district, Aya and Arisa offer classes twice a day, each lasting two to three hours and costing ¥6,500 (PHP 2,777) per person.

The goal of Eat Osaka is to offer international visitors to the city an insight into how to prepare authentic Osakan cuisine – as passed down to the teachers from their own mothers.

[eatosaka.com](http://eatosaka.com)

#### Tower Knives Osaka

Just around the corner, Tower Knives Osaka is open daily from 10am to 6pm. Björn Heiberg's small space showcases a carefully curated selection of the nation's best knives, the majority hand-crafted by the craftsmen of nearby Sakai, while others are sourced from across Japan. The store is staffed by a team of international knife experts, with customers able to try out knives by slicing fruits and vegetables before buying. An on-site engraving service is also available.

[towerknives.com](http://towerknives.com)

Aya demonstrates first: she brushes the plate with oil, lays down a pretty, zig-zag-edged *shiso* herb leaf, pours out the batter and vegetables, pats it down – and then, with dextrous ease, clips a pair of wooden chopsticks on one end and rolls it over to make a lollipop-like pancake, prompting a spontaneous round of applause from the students.

Then it's our turn. One by one we follow Aya's instructions, remembering her advice that chopstick clipping is the trickiest part. Aside from one broken edge and one slightly burned finger between us, we somehow create a successful row of pancakes on sticks.

Finally, it's dinner. We drain the noodles, pour on pre-prepared stock, add tofu, spring onions and pink fish cakes; remove our browned chicken skewers from the grill; and decorate our pancakes with a barbecue-style sauce, mayonnaise, dried seaweed sprinkles and fish flakes.

Then we eat. The meal, washed down with green tea and mini green-tea KitKats, – is as delicious as it was fun to make. Not to mention the standout noodles – surprisingly light with the perfect bite. Perhaps there's something to be said for jumping up and down on my dinner before eating it after all.

