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GURUME

THE NEW AMBASSADOR FOR JAPANESE CUISINE

JAPANESE CUISINE IS CHANGING. HERE IN CANADA, LONG GONE ARE THE DAYS WHEN "JAPANESE CUISINE" WAS JUST A SYNONYM FOR SUSHI. And in Japan, the culinary scene seems to have finally escaped the looming shadow of Michelin stars and traditional, multi-course "kaiseki" dinners. But that doesn't mean a country renowned for its cuisine has taken a gastronomic nosedive – quite the contrary, in fact.

The last several years have seen the rise of "B-kyu gurume" – literally, "B-grade gourmet."

The translation is a bit of a misnomer as B-kyu does not denote low quality. However, it certainly renounces fancy mood lighting and stuck-up waiters. Furthermore, a large part of the appeal of B-kyu gurume is how it counters the pretentious notions of the high-end A-kyu cuisine, liberating food lovers from the golden shackles that Japan essentially built its dining reputation on. Its popularity has grown to include dedicated magazine guides and TV shows. There are even major food festivals surrounding the movement.

So what is it, exactly?

WORDS
NELSON
TAM

PHOTOS
BOWLS
FILMS

TASTING B-KYU

THE JAPAN TIMES DEFINES B-KYU AS "INEXPENSIVE, down-home cooking that reflects local culinary traditions."

"Everyone describes it differently, but for me B-kyu is a soulful food. It has to be delicious, cheap and made with quality ingredients," says Koji Yamamoto, owner of Yakko Izakaya in Osaka. Ramen Adventures' Bryan MacDuckston sums it up nicely with perhaps B-kyu's most popular qualifier: that it's inexpensive. "When it comes down to it, it's stuff that anyone can afford. Food that's about (ten bucks) is B-kyu. And then 'gourmet' means they've put enough in to make it rise to another level."

At its heart, B-kyu looks a lot like the same food craze that has swept Canada in recent years: slightly elevated, blessedly cheap, and cheerful comfort food. But it would be remiss to draw such a simple comparison, for there is more to B-kyu than that. For one, most restaurateurs loathe the name – being called "b-grade" isn't a review they take pride in, even if it's applied lovingly. For a generation of chefs who aspire to any respectability, the B-kyu craze is to be obliged grudgingly, if at all.

But tastes are changing. For Shinji Yamaguchi, who spent years eating his way through Japan and now runs Toronto's Gushi street food stall, it's about fun and sheer enjoyment: "B-kyu gurume is not fancy, you can eat it aggressively, and it looks good and tastes good – like junk food."

"Junk food," indeed – if B-kyu had a philosophy, it would be decidedly low-brow, almost a reaction against the high-concept, breathless dining that once held the Japanese restaurant world in its grip. B-kyu is not: whatever you want is welcome.

Though he's unlikely referring to this extreme sort of novelty, Yamamoto appreciates the idea of blending. "My favourite thing about B-kyu is how we mix in other cultural foods with our traditional cuisine to create something new. It's a dish made up of different countries."

Still, even the gimmicky side of B-kyu has ties with traditional Japanese street food. Variations of *yakisoba*, a fried buckwheat noodle dish, have claimed the title at many a B-1 Grand Prix – sometimes even topped with *okonomiyaki*, a savoury pancake hailing from Osaka. Also popular from the region are small, battered, ball-shaped snacks containing minced octopus called *takoyaki*.

But of all Japanese street food that falls into the B-kyu category, none are as popular as ramen, the noodle dish regarded as the poster child for B-kyu gurume.

Originally from China, ramen first arrived in Japan in Yokohama around the early 1900s. The Japanese slurped it up, immediately making the dish their own with countless variations. For evidence of its place in Japanese history, visit the three-floor Shin-Yokohama Ramen Museum, which includes a ramen "mall" that replicates the streets of 1958 Japan.

1958 also happens to be the year Momofuku Ando launched instant ramen. The Instant Noodle Museum in Osaka tells of the story of Ando's legacy, including the notable moment when his company Nissin Food first imported their product to North America in 1971.

Many of us grew up with instant noodles but it's hard to say when proper, B-kyu ramen officially swept into Canada. Vancouver's Kintaro and Toronto's Kenzo

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Some restaurants have concocted such gleefully gauche dishes as ramen in coffee topped with a scoop of ice cream, or, if you ain't scared of no dish, "The Ghostbuster," in which a flaming marshmallow gets dropped into steaming broth.

have both been around for over a decade. Superstar chef David Chang has been causing a stir since 2004 with Momofuku Noodle Bar in New York's East Village, which he expanded to Toronto eight years later to great fanfare, heralding a spike



▲ OKONOMIYAKI



KUSHIKATSU ▼



▲ TAKOYAKI



ODEN ▼



▲ RAMEN



TEBASAKI ▼



▲ YAKITORI



MENTAIKO UDON ▼



▲ YAKINIKU



CURRY RICE ▼



RAMEN MUSEUM

We dropped by the Shin-Yokohama Ramen museum while we were in Japan. It's the world's first food-themed amusement park and houses nine regional ramen shops showcased in a Japan streetscape replication from 1958, the same year Momofuku Ando invented the first instant ramen.



RAMEN ADVENTURES

We shared a bowl of noodles with ramen blogger Brian MacDuckston who explained, "the best part of b-kyu is its accessibility." His blog Ramen Adventures provides a hefty serving of visual deliciousness for those interested in learning more about ramen and offers reviews on local restaurants for locals and visitors alike. ramenadventures.com



TSUKAMIDAMU while clasping your hands together, it's similar to *iesi* or *bon appétit* and translates to "I humbly receive." Upon finishing, the Japanese use the phrase **GOCHISOSAMA**, which gives respect to the person for making the meal.



search to discover Canada's food trucks and at local fairs and night markets like the Thanksgiving Waffle by Fran's Restaurant at the Canadian National Exhibition (CNE).

in the city's ramen shop population. But the biggest splash ramen made in North America was likely when the Japanese chain Ippudo landed in Manhattan in 2008.

The dish has made it – the great Canadian ramen explosion continues unabated. "It's crazy these days. Especially in Toronto, the winter's so cold, so everybody likes the hot soup dishes," says Masaru Ogasawara, the hands-on Vice President of Kinka Family (the group behind Toronto restaurants

kushiyaki (grilled skewers), which Masaru also ventured into himself earlier this year with Yakitori Kintori.

Outside of Toronto's trendy Japanese food scene, Okonomi House has been quietly pressing their *okonomiyaki* pancakes to returning customers since 1978. The unassuming spot is bustling every day despite not even having a website, let alone Twitter. And their bacon *okonomiyaki* proves the city has been enjoying B-kyu for

While some Japanese B-kyu foods have been well received, others need a little more convincing. Takoyaki Montreal has been doling out the Japanese street food snack to Quebecers at festivals but they've had to extend beyond the classic version of octopus.

"In places like Gatineau, they're not used to octopus. So we decided to offer different flavours. The main one we offer is shiitake mushroom, but garlic shrimp is very popular," says owner Ken Futamura.

Adjusting the menu to suit customers' preferences is something Gushi's Shinji Yamaguchi is familiar with. Primarily a food stall at Market 707 in Toronto, Gushi opened two years ago specializing in *kushikatsu* (panko-fried items on skewers).

"I started doing *karaage* [Japanese fried chicken] at festivals, after which the customers came to the stall, asking: 'can I have *karaage*, can I have *karaage*,' he says. "People kept saying that, so I began to do it at the stall, not just at festivals." The stall now offers *karaage* almost exclusively (he kept the panko-fried hot dog wieners on the menu), including one option where you get *karaage* on top of poutine.

"I hope that it brings more attention to Japanese street food and B-kyu gurume. Then, I can hopefully start *kushikatsu* again and maybe *yakisoba* – there are so many options!"



REALLY CANADIAN B-KYU

We recently discovered a new spot in Toronto called Patois that serves up a mash-up of cultural cuisines. From their Jamaican jerk chicken prepared on a Portuguese-style rotisserie, Japanese wakama Waldorf Salad, to the double-stacked beef burger on Chinese pineapple buns.

patoistoronto.com

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Guu, Kinton Ramen, Ja Bistro and Yakitori Kintori).

Masaru helped build the Guu empire in Vancouver and has seen the growth of izakayas – the one-stop-shop for B-kyu gourmet – from west to east. "A lot of my Japanese friends in Vancouver saw our success in Toronto, so they moved, and started places like Kingyo Izakaya and Zakkushi." The latter specializes in

a while – few things 'reflect local culinary traditions' more than a bacon dish in Hogtown.

Where Vancouver and Toronto may have paved the way, Montreal is starting to catch up. Popular izakayas Kazu and Imeduke have gained a loyal fanbase. And they'll be joined at some point in the foreseeable future by a Kinka Family operation, Masaru tells us.

SCAN WITH LAYER



FINDING B-KYU IN CANADA

TORONTO VANCOUVER
MONTREAL

YAKITORI KINTORI

Yakitori
yakitorikintori.com

The latest from the team behind Toronto's Guu Izakayas, Kinton Ramen and Ja Bistro, this house of skewers serves more than just delicious chicken ('tori' = 'bird') but also pork and seafood options, along with other tasty tapas.

GUSHI

Karaage
gushisushi.com

Part of Market 707, Shinji Yamaguchi's brand of boneless Japanese fried chicken is made for the masses – you can have it on top of rice or fries, with various options ranging from traditional Japanese curry to a version with tomato sauce and mozzarella.

OKONOMI HOUSE

Okonomiyaki
facebook.com/pages/okonomi-house-restaurant/137262332953626

Charming and unassuming, Okonomi House is tucked away on Charles Street, just off Yonge. Since 1978, they've been turning over their Japanese-style pancakes for many happy returning customers.

SANTOUKA

Ramen
santouka.co.jp/en

This Japanese chain hailing from the northern island of Hokkaido already had a Vancouver location before arriving in Toronto during the city's noodle explosion. With a pork broth that simmers for two days, it's no surprise Santouka sits amongst the city's best.

HAPA IZAKAYA

Izakaya
hapaizakaya.com

Having received multiple accolades from various Vancouver publications, this popular chain now has two Toronto locations as well. Beyond the quality of food, Hapa's menu reflects sustainable seafood practices as part of the Vancouver Aquarium's Ocean Wise program.

KINTARO

Ramen
facebook.com/pages/kintaro-ramen/1044663182929320

Easily one of the oldest ramen joints in the city, Kintaro served its first bowl of thick pork broth noodles in 1999. There have been many ramen shops that have sprouted up nearby since then, but Kintaro still draws lineups.

ZAKKUSHI

Kushiyaki
zakkushi.com

Priding itself on the use of Japanese bincho-tan charcoal (93-95% pure carbon) that remains virtually odorless while cooking at a high-temperature, flameless heat, the grilled skewers at Zakkushi seal in the natural flavours of the meat.

MOGU

Karaage & Japanese-style Sandwiches
a2tmogu.com

Yujiro Aoki has been serving up his Japanese-style sandwiches and karaage at festivals and out of his food truck since 2012. Though the sandwiches – including a pork katsu option (fried pork cutlet) – are the mainstays, his karaage has gotten fans just as excited.

JAPADOG

Hot Dogs with Japanese toppings
japadog.com

It would be remiss to talk about B-kyu gurume in Canada and not mention Vancouver's beloved Japadog. First a single food stand in 2005, it now has four stands, a food truck, a brick-and-mortar location in the heart of downtown, and a thumbs-up from food star Anthony Bourdain.

GUU IZAKAYA

Izakaya
guu-izakaya.com

The original Guu on Thurlow opened just over 20 years ago last year, meaning it was around long before izakayas (and even small plates) were popular. There are now eight outposts (with two in Toronto) and food lovers can't get enough of the flavourful food and high-energy environments.

SAKABAI

Ramen
facebook.com/sakabaramen

With its classic anime aesthetic and red hues, reputed JUNI Chef Junichi Ikematsu's ramen bar in the Plateau reflects the chef's upbringing in Kyoto. The menu reaches beyond tradition, however, including a lobster broth ramen and curry beignets.

KAZU IZAKAYA

Izakaya
kazumontreal.com

Without a doubt, Kazu reigns as king of izakayas in Montreal. Regular lineups, artful presentations, and a much-loved shrimp burger that screams B-kyu are all part of what you can expect here.

IMADAKE

Izakaya
imadake.ca

Imadake is the rowdy brother to the quieter Kazu, but that doesn't mean it's not to be reckoned with. Expect all the full arsenal of ramen, yakitori, okonomiyaki, takoyaki, karaage and more – all made with a focus on sustainable, organic and Ocean Wise-approved products.

TAKOYAKI MONTREAL

Takoyaki
facebook.com/takoyakimontreal

Making excellent use of an industrial-grade takoyaki-making machine, Ken Futamura and crew have been churning out their fried dumpling balls at festivals in and around Quebec. For those wanting something a little more refreshing, they also offer kagigori, a Japanese shaved ice dessert with fruit syrup.