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TRAVEL // CULTURE // ADVENTURE **ESCAPE**



Out of the frying pan: Noodle dishes on the menu at a shop in Tokyo

FROM A DELICIOUS ALTERNATIVE TO CHIPS TO PANCAKES THAT YOU WON'T BELIEVE, **LAURA MILLAR** PICKS THE INCREDIBLE DISHES AND AMAZING FLAVOURS COMING OUT OF THE LAND OF THE RISING FOODIE

GREAT BALLS OF... OCTOPUS

They might sound odd, but takoyaki (right) are actually delicious - little balls of minced octopus, pickled ginger and spring onion, covered in batter and grilled in a special pan consisting of semi-spherical moulds, which give



them their round shape. This tasty snack was made popular in Osaka, where you'll still find street vendors serving them finished with mayo and a sprinkle of bonito - a type of fish - flakes.

SOBA, SO GOOD

There's nothing more comforting than a big bowl of ramen in broth or a stir-fry with veggies, chicken and thick, springy udon. Soba noodles - made from buckwheat - hail from Japan, too, and are often enjoyed cold, dipped into sauces.

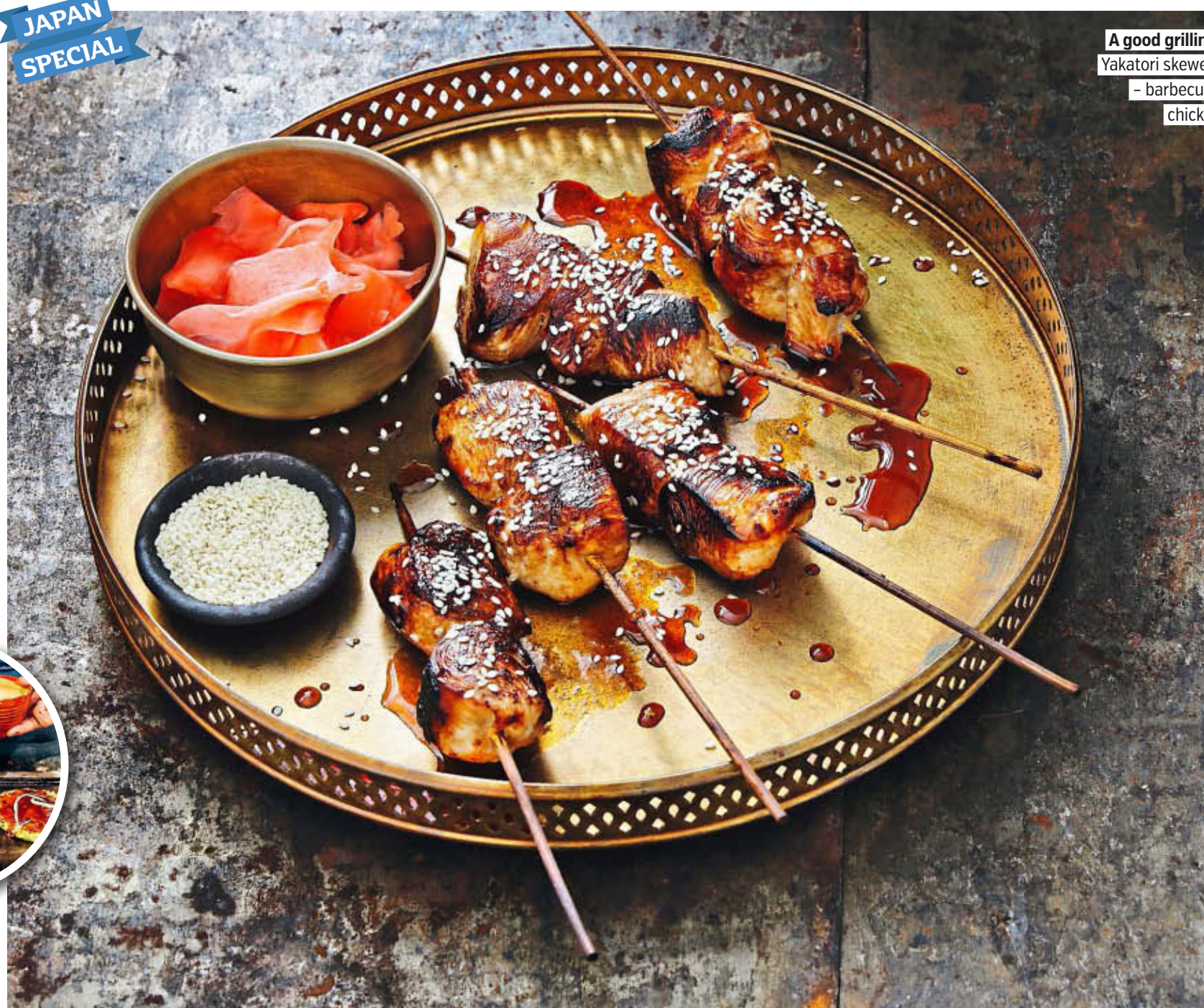
Soup-style ramen was first brought over to the country by Chinese immigrants and the first ramen shop was established in 1910 in Tokyo. Today, many noodle shops use a vending machine system where you punch in your preferences, then take the ticket to the staff to prepare. A creamy variety called tonkotsu, made with gelatin-rich pork bone broth, originates from Fukuoka, in south-west Japan.

AS YOU LIKE IT

Okonomiyaki (right) is a savoury pancake cooked on a teppan, or flat griddle. The name is derived from the word okonomi, meaning 'how you like' or 'what you like', and yaki, meaning 'grilled'. It starts with a wheat flour batter mixed with shredded cabbage, and you can include any amount of ingredients, such as meat, seafood, tofu or cheese. Then it's traditional to finish it off with



JAPAN SPECIAL



A good grilling: Yakitori skewers - barbecued chicken

THE STORY OF YO! SUSHI

Yo! Sushi was radical for its time when it first opened in the UK in 1997. The concept of little individually priced plates of sushi, tempura and gyoza dumplings going round on a conveyor belt so diners could help themselves was alien here. Not so in Japan, where the idea originated in Osaka from restaurateur Yoshiaki Shiraishi, who wanted to serve more customers quickly and efficiently while keeping his staffing costs down. He was inspired after watching beer bottles travel along a conveyor belt in an Asahi brewery. The first kaitenzushi ('rotation sushi') restaurant was opened in 1958.



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Ooodles more than noodles

toppings including bonito flakes, pickled ginger, dried seaweed and a fruity okonomi sauce.

NOT A TAMAGOTCHI

Definitely not to be confused with the '80s digital pet, tamagoyaki - meaning 'cooked egg' - is a crepe-like Japanese omelette made by cooking and rolling up layers of beaten egg. Afterwards it's sliced and eaten as it is - usually for breakfast - or used as a topping or filling for sushi. Sometimes it's made with sugar, lending itself to being eaten at the end of a meal.

I FEEL LIKE CHICKEN TONIGHT

As common a snack to the Japanese as a portion of chips is to us, yakitori - the word means 'barbecued chicken' - are small skewers of bite-sized chicken pieces seasoned with salt, or marinated in a sauce of mirin rice wine, soy, sake and sugar. Every part of the chicken is used, with the type of skewers available including thigh pieces, wings, heart or skin.



RICE, RICE, BABY

Donburi is a rice bowl dish almost as popular as ramen. Meat, fish or vegetables are simmered or fried in a stock and served in a large bowl (which is where the dish gets its name) over steamed rice. Popular varieties include oyakodon (simmered chicken, egg and green onion), gyudon (sliced beef and onion simmered in a soy sauce soup base), tendon (fried tempura pieces drizzled in tsuyu, which is made with rice wine and soy sauce) and katsudon (breaded and deep-fried pork cutlets (below), or tonkatsu, simmered in tsuyu with onion and egg).

SHARING IS CARING

A sociable way of dining, shabu-shabu consists of a pot filled with hot broth and dozens of small plates of sliced raw meat and vegetables. Each diner picks their own bits of meat and veggies (seafood and pork are also popular options) and swirls it around in the broth until it's cooked. Then it's dipped into a salty sauce before eating. The onomatopoeic name (ie it sounds like the

word it refers to) comes from the 'swish-swish' sound the ingredients make when being mixed in the pot.

DICE WITH DEATH

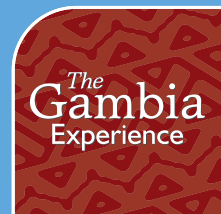

The Japanese treat the poisonous blowfish (right), known as fugu, as a delicacy. You can eat it only if it's been prepared by a trained, skilled and licensed chef. Only they know how to prepare fugu so that no traces of toxins are left in its flesh. Then you can enjoy its delicate flavour as sashimi - boiled in a hot pot - or served with vegetables.

EEL BE BACK

Unagi is a type of freshwater eel, seen as incredibly nutritious and served in a variety of ways. Unagi no kabayaki is made by brushing prepared eel fillets with a sweetened soy sauce-based sauce and grilled. Unadon is a donburi dish made up of sliced eel served on a bed of rice. Finally, unakayu is a type of sushi with eel and cucumber. You'll find specialist unagi restaurants across the country.




Slippery little thing: Chefs preparing the unagi freshwater eel in Narita

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