

JAPAN LITE

Barely squeezing by in Japan

By AMY CHAVEZ

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I walked into a restaurant to get a quick bite for lunch. After I squeezed myself through the narrow door, I noticed the restaurant's first floor was completely full. "Packed" would be a more appropriate word: All four seats were taken.

The waitress indicated I could go up the staircase, which was similar to an attic stairway — enough for one person to climb up. Upstairs had six small two-person tables that altogether could hold a total of 12 people.

Two waitresses, skinny ones, were moving around with elbows tucked in, serving drinks and saying, "Excuse me, excuse me," while coming perilously close to dumping hot tea into customers laps every time they brushed past. They must have strict metabolic-syndrome guidelines here when hiring waitresses. You really could not hire a waitress with a beer belly here. If these waitresses ever decide to break off on their own and start their own restaurants, perhaps they could start by serving breakfast on rush hour trains in Tokyo.

At any rate, I was glad I came by myself. My *gaijin* friends would never fit in here. I wouldn't recommend coming here on a first date either. I'd think you'd want a little more space between you and your date at the beginning of a relationship.

Not surprisingly, most of the clientele were women. Small women with small waists who don't eat very much. I mean, with the size of the tables, you couldn't fit very much food on them, especially if

there were two people sharing each table. Maybe they just bring you one big plate and you both share your entree.

And small portions is a good idea because the last thing you want is for your regular customers to get any bigger. And such a small room must have the effect of making the portions look bigger. Who knows, maybe I had stumbled upon Japan's first diet restaurant: We promise you'll lose weight by the time you leave here!

After finishing my entree, I was still hungry so I went to a cafe down the street to get some dessert. The tables in this place were bigger, each designed to hold four people. Around each table were four tiny chairs, the kind you perch on, balancing yourself and keeping your body upright. Another good idea — good posture saves space in places so small they are measured in finger widths. The chairs were placed exactly three finger widths apart from each other.

Just as your bathroom scale tells you how much you weigh, these chairs are designed to tell you how big your hips are. You certainly wouldn't want your hips to spill over your chair into the other person's lap. Again, the pleasures of eating alone!

Fearless, I ordered the "cake set," which made me wonder: How many cakes do you think make a set? In the United States, a set of plates is 6, and in Japan a set is 5. So you'd think you'd get at least five cakes in a cake set — marvelous. This is a great deal!

Dream on. One sliver of cheesecake was served with an equally minuscule fork as big as my pinkie finger. It's certainly a contrast to the U.S. where they bring you a huge piece of cake and a pitchfork to eat it with. I thought of asking the Japanese waitress for four more servings of cake, but how do you say "pitchfork" in Japanese?

Many people describe Japan as being small, but I think *petit* is more appropriate, or, as the Japanese would say *puchi*. *Puchi Nihon!* And although the Japanese are petite people, they're getting taller and rounder every year. Which makes you wonder what

they are going to do with all these tiny cafes and restaurants when there are no more petite people. Perhaps they'll start one-person *kashikiri* restaurants where you rent out the restaurant for just yourself. Invite yourself out to dinner or to a *bonenkai* end-of-the-year party! The true meaning of "treat yourself!"

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