

THE ZEIT GIST

Veggies of the world unite

Site offers solace for Japan's rare, beleaguered breed of steak-shunners

By THOMASINA LARKIN
Staff Writer

Yakitori, "donburi," "shabu shabu." Pig feet, cow tongue, whale bacon. Even salads in Japan are usually topped with chicken, wee fishies or eggs.

Despite Japan's long and rich history of following a healthy and largely vegetarian diet, one can be hard-pressed these days to find nonmeat-laden dishes on many menus across the nation.



Hunting down an eatery that bears no blade to our feathered and furry friends can be a difficult mission. And it can be just as tough finding like-minded friends who face the same feat for a feast.

A newcomer to Japan tucks into vegetarian fare at a restaurant in Tokyo. THOMASINA LARKIN PHOTO

"You know how hard it is to bump into vegetarians or vegans in real life in Japan?" says Aya Kitagawa, who moved to Vancouver, Canada, a year ago. "Veg people, especially in Japan, have lots of difficulties because of nonveg-dominant and antiveg societies."

The Japanese followed a vegetarian diet, influenced by Buddhism and Shinto, until the Meiji Restoration in 1867, after which Europeans introduced meat-based dishes.

A comparison by the ministry of agriculture of the changes in food culture over the past 60 years shows a huge shift toward a meatier diet.

Meat consumption soared from 0.5 percent in 1946 to 16.5 percent in 1997. Younger generations eat more than double the amount of meat their grandparents do. People aged 20 to 29 have a daily intake of 107.4 grams of meat while those over 70 years of age consume 44.6 grams.

"The Japanese diet has dramatically changed, becoming more Westernized," says Hiroko Kato, founder of Tokyo Vegetarian, a comprehensive Web site aimed at helping vegetarian foreigners. "People have been eating much more meat since World War II, and especially over the past 20 years the younger generations go for convenient or fast food.

"Currently, people think vegetarians are weird here," Kato says.

Restaurants in Japan reflect this newfound taste for flesh.

Any vegetarian -- or anyone with a veggie friend -- probably has had more than a handful of trying experiences pounding pavement in search of something edible.

When vegetarians ask waiters or waitresses to bring a meat-free meal, dishes can turn up including chicken, fish or ham, which are often not considered "meat" in Japan.

"When my parents came to visit, we went to eat in Odaiba and we tried three restaurants and each time stood up and walked out because the chefs were not happy with having to prepare something special for vegetarians," says Australian Trevor Clarke, 28, who has lived here about five years and has been vegetarian for nine. "Completely animal-free meals are very rare in Japan.

"I had a number of friends who told me I was coming to the wrong country before I came, so I was prepared for it, but I was still surprised when I got here at the amount of fish seasoning that's in everything," he says. "That's the hard part."

Osaka native Kitagawa, all too aware of the dire situation, decided to take matters into her own hands a year ago by starting VegNet.info, a Web site aimed at uniting vegetarians of the world in friendship, romance or maybe even marriage.

"People can try to find veg friends nearby, veg companies can hang out together when they go traveling to different cities, people can meet a veg boyfriend or girlfriend, a husband or wife, make veg friends everywhere in the world, learn about veg

situations in different countries, go for a veg tour, or do whatever they like!" said Kitagawa, 32, whose site has attracted hundreds of members and receives an average of 100 hits a day.

Like most friend or date sites, VegNet requires filling out a questionnaire to help match profiles as accurately as possible.

After new users fill out the usual routine info, the fun stuff begins -- whoever said tofu-heads can't have a little spice in their life?

The site asks users to choose from options like: Figure -- Superfluous; Hair -- Cut; Religion -- Animalist; and Drinking habits -- I love drinking.

And then under personality: They say that I'm -- Jen, But I think that in fact that I'm -- Annoying.

Next, fill in the gaps: If I were a . . . , I would be a . . . Hmm, maybe a flamingo rose for animal, white for color and XXX for film.

From there, users check if they "like/maybe/don't like" from a list of 18 interests including cars, cooking and spectacles.

And then finally the process must be pretty much repeated in order to fill out the Partner Criteria Information.

After that, perfect or close matches automatically pop up and the rest, as they say, is destiny.

"Members have sent me thank you e-mails saying they are so glad to find many veg friends through VegNet because they had absolutely none before," said Kitagawa.

"Some of them said they have found and started seeing someone, though I haven't received a wedding invitation yet!" she added with a laugh.

Herwin, a blond-haired, blue-eyed Scorpio from Holland who travels to Japan twice a year, says VegNet has helped get him out of a pickle.

"It's just great because now, finally, I can find vegan friends in Japan," he said. "Before, I tried to find veggie friends on various other usual pen-friend forums, but no success.

"Right now I'm in Japan and met some Japanese friends that I met on VegNet for the first time," said Herwin, 41, in an e-mail. "It's great to meet other vegans here in Japan, talk and exchange thoughts."

While there are many types of vegetarians, four of the most common are lacto-ovo (no meat or fish but eggs and dairy products are OK), lacto (no meat, fish or eggs, but dairy products are fine), ovo (hold the meat, fish and dairy, but eggs pass muster) and vegan, the most strict (no meat, fish, dairy, eggs or honey). "Pescetarians" eat fish and seafood, "pollotarians" eat fowl and "flexitarians" are vegetarians that sometimes stray.

"The vegetarian-friendly trend has also grown gradually these past five years," says Kato, who is also a board member the the Japan Vegetarian Society. "But if you eschew fish, it is hard to be vegetarian in Japan."

Aussie Clarke used to be a vegan but, like many who move here, he relaxed his own rules and became lacto-ovo.

As a seasoned veggie and fluent Japanese speaker, he has learned to cope in this overwhelmingly carnivorous country.

But while he agrees that the VegNet site is a step in the right direction, he says Japan still has a long way to go before it's truly vegetarian-friendly.

"The movement isn't strong enough in Japan. I've never met a Japanese vegetarian in Japan," Clarke says. "For me, it's more just a matter of trying to find somewhere to eat."

But for those who are eager to make a move, a site like VegNet may lead to mouth-watering munchies -- and possibly even marriage, too.

Meat-free domains

GENERAL INFORMATION

Tokyo Vegetarian guide

www.vegietokyo.com

Provides links to a restaurant guide, Japanese phrases for vegetarians, articles, info and recipes, online shopping sites, supermarket recommendations, blogs and more.

ORGANIZATIONS

Japan Vegetarian Society

www.jpvs.org/index.htm

This NPO offers members a Japan Vegetarian Journal twice a year, lectures, meetings, cooking classes, social gatherings in restaurants and an information exchange forum for an annual fee of 3,000 yen. The site also offers a nationwide restaurant guide and other useful links and info.

SHOPS

Alishan Organic Center

www.alishan-organic-center.com/en/tengu

Saitama-based cafe, weekend organic product retail shop and event and gallery space. Alishan's offshoot, Tengu Natural Foods, provides a nationwide home delivery service.

Natural House

www.naturalhouse.co.jp (Japanese only)

A chain of more than 40 health food stores that sell organic fruits and veggies.

Chikyu Club Natural Foods Market

www.chikyu-jin.com (Japanese only)

Plenty of yummy healthy grub can be found at Chikyu-jin Club Natural Foods Market, located near Roppongi Hills.

HOME DELIVERY

Warabe Mura Wholefoods

www.warabe.co.jp

Imported organic natural and macrobiotic whole foods, personal care products, house cleaners and stationary made from recycled materials delivered to your door from their Gifu location.

Natural Healing Center

www.naturalhealingcenter.com/vegetarian.htm

In addition to an online order service for oils, deodorants, supplements and other organic and natural products, the site hosts all sorts of useful and interesting information.

RESTAURANT GUIDES

Happy Cow's Vegetarian Guide to Restaurants & Health Food Stores

www.happycow.net/asia/japan

Search by city (Hiroshima, Kobe, Kyoto, Nagoya, Narita, Osaka, Takayama, Tokyo) for 100% vegetarian or vegetarian-friendly restaurants. The site gives details of tasty treats and prices.

Healthy and Vegetarian Restaurants

www.tokyoessentials.com/healthy-vegetarian-restaurants.html

A list of restaurants around Shibuya, Tokyo.

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