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'Non-Japanese only' Okinawa eatery turns tables

Jon Mitchell explores why one restaurateur has effectively banned Japanese patrons

Okinawa Prefecture is home to three-quarters of America's military bases in Japan. The vast majority of these, including Kadena Air Base, Torii Station and the contentious Marine Corps installation at Futenma, are located in the central part of the main island.

Proud owner: Yukio Okuhama stands in front of notices warning Japanese customers that entry to his restaurant in Chatan Town, central Okinawa, is restricted to members. JON MITCHELL PHOTO

Despite overwhelming Okinawan opposition to the presence of the United States military, open animosity towards American servicemen is remarkably rare here. One of the few places where it is experienced, though, is in central Okinawa's entertainment districts. Japanese-owned clubs and bars regularly turn away American customers, and some of them display English signs stating "members only" and "private club" in order to exclude unwanted foreign patrons. With Japan's laws on racial discrimination tending towards the ambiguous, transforming a business into a private club has become a common way to circumvent any potential complaints to the Bureau of Human Rights.

Under these circumstances, the notices on the door of Sushi Zen, a small restaurant located at the edge of Chatan Town's fishing port, are not unusual: "This store has a members-only policy. Entry is restricted to members." However, what is different is the fact that they're written in Japanese, and designed to keep away Japanese customers. Furthermore, Sushi Zen's owner is not a xenophobic foreign expatriate, but a soft-spoken Japanese man named Yukio Okuhama.

I meet Okuhama on a blustery afternoon in March. Sushi Zen isn't open for business yet, but it's still busy as its staff of four polish the blond wood tables and wipe the tatami mats in readiness for tonight's customers. Okuhama himself stands behind a frosty case of shrimp and tuna, peeling carrots into thin orange ribbons.

"I first opened Sushi Zen in 2007," explains Okuhama. "Back then, I wanted to welcome everyone. I wanted my restaurant to be a bridge between Japanese and American people."

If the signs on the door are anything to go by, then something obviously went wrong. But before Okuhama agrees to tell me what happened, first he says I need to know a little of his background.

Okuhama was born in the Shuri district of Okinawa's capital, Naha. In addition to being the former royal enclave of the island, Shuri was also its seat of culture and traditional arts. Okuhama's ancestors were of samurai stock, and even today his family is heavily involved in the politics of the island. When he was in his early 20s, they assumed that he'd follow in their footsteps — perhaps even take a shot at becoming governor of the prefecture. But Okuhama felt frustrated with the halls of power. "There's too much nonsense in politics. Especially Okinawan politics."

So Okuhama decided to see the world. His travels took him through Afghanistan and the Middle East, across Africa and Europe, before he finally settled in New York in the early 1980s. There he found work as a sushi chef and honed his language skills to perfection. Fluent and intense, Okuhama's English is punctuated by a Brooklyn-accented "You know?" which he uses less to gloss over any gaps in his powers of expression, more to test the knowledge of the listener.

"In the 1980s, New York was like the United Nations. It was a melting pot. It had people from all over the world. You know how many countries they came from?"

I shake my head and Okuhama gives me a disappointed tut as though anybody calling himself a writer should know information like that.

"Over 180. New York taught me a lot. It taught me that people need to understand each other. It taught me the need to be open-minded."

I ask Okuhama how he thinks New Yorkers would react if an American pizza parlor owner decided to turn away American customers. Okuhama looks defensive. He puts aside his peeling knife and wipes his hands on his starched apron.

"I didn't plan things this way. After returning to Okinawa in 2007, I had a dream of bringing New York-style sushi to the island for everybody to enjoy. At that time, I opened my doors to everyone — Okinawans, mainland Japanese, Americans. But the trouble started almost straight away.

"Locals would sit at the counter and stare at the Americans. Then, after they had a drink or two, they'd complain about them. The Americans couldn't understand what the Okinawans were saying, but they could understand their bad attitudes. Sometimes the Americans would get up and leave."

Okuhama endured three months of tensions from his local customers. They complained about the American-style sushi, the English menus, Sushi Zen's no-smoking policy. Okuhama's bridge reached its breaking point one night in the spring of 2008.

"One of my customers — an Okinawan woman — became so drunk and loud that I had to carry her outside and tell her never to come back. That was the last straw for me. The next day I printed up those signs and turned Sushi Zen into a members-only restaurant."

Okuhama guides me through the details of the policy.

"There's an initial ¥50,000 to join, plus an annual ¥100,000 membership fee. Also you have to be sponsored by two current members."

I ask him if everybody who wants to eat in Sushi Zen needs to join. Okuhama shakes his head and points to the English fine print on the sign.

"Americans don't need to be members. They can come straight in."

When I ask him how many Japanese members there are, he shrugs. "None?" I ask.

"Since I put up those signs, they stopped trying to come in," Okuhama replies.

He must have seen the frown on my face, because he adds, "Please don't misunderstand. My policy isn't based on race. It's designed to keep out troublemakers."

I ask him whether he includes any Americans in his definition of "troublemaker." Okuhama smiles.

"Of course! For example, take the crew of the Sea Shepherd (antiwhaling organization). If any of them tried to come in, I'd turn them away."

I know it's meant as a joke, but I find it troubling. It's an attempt to avoid the fact that Sushi Zen's policy is a blanket ban on an entire race of people, and that is clearly discriminatory.

I'm not the only one who shares this feeling. Chris Willson is a travel photographer based in nearby Uruma. In January, unaware of Sushi Zen's membership policy, he staged an exhibition of his work in the restaurant. When some of his Japanese friends arrived and saw the signs on the door, they turned around and contacted Willson. After clarifying Okuhama's policy on Japanese customers, he removed his photographs from the restaurant.

"I felt really embarrassed that I'd sent my friends along there," says Willson. "More than that, I felt disappointed. Excluding a group of people based on their nationality is unwarranted."

Willson's photographs are no longer hanging on the walls of Sushi Zen, but there are plenty of other pictures. Okuhama gives me a short tour of the 57-seat restaurant. There are signed photographs of U.S. Navy generals thanking Okuhama for his hospitality, and fighter jet prints donated by their crews. All of the pictures are set in expensive frames — a far cry from the Polaroid snaps and combat patches stapled to the walls of Amazons, Paddy Mac's and other off-base bars.

"My customers are all upper-rank," explains Okuhama. "Officers. Lieutenants and higher."

Behind the counter, there are bottles of expensive liquor and two porcelain jars. "You know what that is? *Koshu awamori*. It's aged over 10 years. We don't serve any cheap liquor here."

As I follow Okuhama back to my seat, I brush against a plaque. He stops to read me its complicated ink strokes.

"This one's from Takeo Fukuda, the former prime minister." He points across the room. "And that one over there is from Yasuhiro Nakasone. He led Japan in the 1980s."

While Okuhama proudly straightens the frame, it dawns on me that perhaps there is some truth to his claim that his entrance policy isn't based upon race — at least not entirely. The top-shelf alcohol, his Shuri heritage, the high-ranking photographs — perhaps his exclusion policy is infused with a variety of class bias, too. My suspicions seem to be confirmed when he tells me how the locals react to being refused entry.

"They don't care. All they want is cheap drinks and cheap food. Traditionally, the people around here are very lazy. They don't work hard."

I suggest to him that if he wants to exclude those types of patrons, then he should consider doing the same as upmarket clubs in America or Europe. "Why don't you introduce a dress code? Or ban misbehaving customers on a case-by-case basis?"

"I don't want to bring trouble here," Okuhama replies. "I want to create an atmosphere where Americans can feel at home. I want to make a place where Americans can be themselves and not always need to worry about who's at the other tables."

Race or class? A combination of the two? No matter what the reason for his policy, Okuhama's formula appears to be successful. When Sushi Zen opens at 5:30, there are already a dozen American customers waiting to come in. As he explained earlier, they're a different breed from the teenage soldiers who strut the nearby shopping malls in oversize jeans and full-sleeve tattoos. Sushi Zen's patrons are in their 30s and 40s, and they wouldn't look out of place at a Manhattan cocktail bar. They greet Okuhama by name and settle back in their seats with relaxed smiles on their faces.

I'd like to draw Okuhama again on his reasons for turning away Japanese people, but by 6 o'clock Sushi Zen is jam-packed. Okuhama is busy folding sunflower rolls, seaweed wraps and other concoctions unheard of in the neighboring sushi restaurants. It's time for me to leave.

As I stand up, Okuhama calls me back. He washes his hands, dries them, then puts one out for me to shake.

For a moment, I pause. When I first heard about Sushi Zen, I'd expected any restaurant owner who excluded customers by race to be misguided at best, at worst a bigot. However, during the three hours I talked to Okuhama, I found him personable and reasoned, undoubtedly intelligent. It's not easy being a restaurant owner in recession-hit Japan, and Okuhama in particular is attempting to make a go of a notoriously difficult business in a difficult part of the country.

I take Okuhama's outstretched hand and shake it. Then I make my way through the busy restaurant. Two Americans are showing each other pictures of their children, while another is calling his wife in Florida to wish her a good morning. Okuhama has created a safe environment for these people, but I can't help feeling sad. He came back to Okinawa, planning to build a bridge, but what he's created is a compound.

Certainly, Sushi Zen serves as a refuge from the "nonsense of Okinawan politics," but at the same time it closters Okuhama from the very real problems that made him leave this island in the first place, and it prevents his customers from having to ask themselves the complex question of what drives them here, night after night, to this isolated corner of central Okinawa.

You can read more of Jon Mitchell's articles on Okinawan issues at www.jonmitchelljnjapan.com. Send comments on this issue and story ideas to community@japantimes.co.jp

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