



Japanese wagyu— The art of combining aroma, texture and taste

Wagyu cattle breeds have long been world renowned. Aside from being unique to Japan, part of their appeal comes from the sashi (marbled fat) that melts in your mouth, the juicy texture and the wagyuko (aroma) that adds a subtle charm and taste unlike any other types of beef. To further understand the essential allure of Japanese wagyu, we spoke with chef Thierry Voisin from Les Saisons in the Imperial Hotel Tokyo, one of Japan's most prestigious French restaurants, and Toru Okuda, owner chef of Ginza Kojyu who is earning recognition worldwide.

Toru Okuda

Owner chef at Ginza Kojyu, Ginza Okuda and OKUDA, Paris

Toru Okuda. Born in 1969, in Shizuoka City, Shizuoka Prefecture. He opened Ginza Kojyu in 2003 and Ginza Okuda in 2007 (both in Ginza, Tokyo), and OKUDA in Paris in 2013. In 2016, all 3 restaurants won a star from the world's most authoritative restaurant guidebook in France. Okuda is one of Japan's most distinguished chefs and receives high praise worldwide.

Thierry Voisin

Chef at Les Saisons, Imperial Hotel Tokyo

Thierry Voisin. Born in 1964, in Tours, France. Studied under Gerard Boyer in the Champagne region at the renowned Les Crayeres restaurant where he later spent his career. He's been the chef at Les Saisons since 2005 and received the L'ORDRE DU MERITE AGRICOLE (Chevalier grade).

"Wagyu isn't just sirloins and filets," says chef Voisin. Since coming to Japan 11 years ago, he has had great experiences with Japanese ingredients, starting with wagyu.



"Japanese wagyu sirloin and Inca no Mezame with Comté cheese, roast vegetables and beef jus". The golden cubes are Inca no Mezame potatoes and Comté cheese mille-feuille. A perfect harmony of aroma, flavor and texture. ●Cut: Sirloin ●Grade: A5

The appeal of wagyu sirloin is its beautiful and delicate marbling. Crispy caramelized on the outside and juicy and rare in the middle. Only wagyu has sweet fat that spreads through your mouth, leaving you intoxicated.



《French》 Thierry Voisin's technique

“I poach the fat and butter together for roasts”

—Please tell us your impression of each other's food and culture.

Thierry Voisin (hereafter T.V.):

It's a long way from France to Japan and each has a very different culture, but it seems that we have some things in common. Diet and eating habits are rooted in our everyday lives and some people don't mind traveling 500km to enjoy their favorite dishes.

Toru Okuda (hereafter Okuda):

Mr. Voisin often drops by Ginza Kojyu.

T.V.:

I must have visited 3 or 4 times and it's wonderful every time. I now live in Japan, so I have a chance to enjoy Japanese dishes every week. I'm taken by the amazing variety of dishes from traditional kaiseki cuisine, ranging from sushi and yakiniku to ramen. You can't help but be drawn by their unique taste, elegance and diversity.

Okuda:

I also have a chance to enjoy French cuisine when traveling between Tokyo and Paris every month. I feel Japanese dishes belong to Japan, while French cuisine has a global taste or essence. The big difference is that French chefs know their ingredients well and their methods are meticulous, so the chef's imagination really counts. It's much more than nationality. French dishes are truly works of art. That's why they are so well accepted and popular here in Japan.

T.V.:

From my point of view, I'm amazed that so many Japanese chefs

become adept at French cuisine after long, hard training in France. But where do we find French chefs creating Japanese dishes? Is there anybody? Or do I simply not know...

Okuda:

Well, you find French chefs studying Japanese cuisine, but rarely do you see them running a Japanese restaurant. Because Japan is an island nation and the majority of citizens only speak Japanese, there wasn't much of a chance for the cuisine to be exported overseas. Japanese are proud of their culture and traditional cuisine, but have been limiting their target to the domestic market, and haven't given much thought to sending their message abroad. On the other hand, Europe is a continent that requires communication and sharing of one's culture with one another to make a living. French people tried hard to help others understand their unique cuisine and this made a big difference.

T.V.:

I also feel that Japanese people are more open minded than French these days. French chef apprentices should take on the challenge to study other countries' dishes while living abroad, like Japanese do. I mean it.

Japanese wagyu terroir

—Both of you work overseas and that gives you perspectives on the advantages and shortcomings of one's own culture and cuisine. Let's now move on to the story of truly unique Japanese wagyu.



"Chilled Japanese wagyu chuck roll shabushabu with chili vinegar jelly". Lightly passed through 60°C boiling water and then quickly chilled in cold water, the meat is soft and moist. The wagyu's delicate sweetness and umami marries perfectly with the chili vinegar's refreshing and bold acidity. "It's delicious and not overly chilled." (Chef Okuda)
 ●Cut: Chuck roll ●Grade: A5

《 Japanese 》 Toru Okuda's technique

“Blanch the fat and meat to integrate its taste in 60°C hot water”

Chef Okuda and chef Voisin. Both of these old friends create mesmerizing cuisine using a wealth of ingredients and building on tradition. They say they are inspired by each other's knowledge, ideas, and techniques.



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Okuda:

Wagyu is an especially appealing ingredient to Japanese. It has distinct properties unlike any other beef.

T.V.:

I view Japanese wagyu as something similar to wine. Romanee Conti, for instance, is one of the most prestigious wines recognized worldwide; this is because it is grown in small, select vineyards with unique winemaking technologies and traditions that contribute to it being a value-added product. The vineyards feature a particular terroir (natural environment, regional difference) that produces original, distinct wines only available there. Japanese wagyu must have this trait in common.

I had the opportunity to try wagyu bred outside of Japan, but it did not taste at all like wagyu bred in Japan, which has a characteristic aroma and flavor, just as wine does.

Okuda:

I think one of the strongest characteristics and charms of Japanese wagyu is the sashi fat. Unlike breeders in other countries, breeders here purposefully increase fat in Japanese wagyu by refining methods from fertilization to fattening. We have the know-how. And we make effective use of sashi in dishes.

T.V.:

That's what is so fascinating and ingenious about Japanese wagyu! Some people in France may have negative feelings about fat, in general, but their understanding of Japanese wagyu should be corrected. Japanese wagyu consists mostly of healthy unsaturated

fatty acids with a unique flavor that comes from sashi. It's important to communicate this message through the cuisine.

For example, "Japanese wagyu sirloin and Inca no Mezame with Comté cheese, roast vegetables and beef jus" is prepared by our traditional method of grilling meat. But using Japanese wagyu instead makes a big difference in terms of appearance, texture and taste. You get delicious fat that matches butter well when you grill it on a frypan. The surface becomes like crunchy caramel after gently simmering the fat over the meat. The result is a unique flavor with a marvelous taste that is moist inside and stays tender!

Okuda:

I see. This is a dish that comes from Mr. Voisin's experience and imagination. The dishes I prepared this time take advantage of traditional techniques to maximize wagyu's sweet, high-quality fat.

"Chilled Japanese wagyu chuck roll shabushabu with chili vinegar jelly" is an interesting example of how to enhance sashi. First, you blanch the thinly sliced chuck roll A5 grade kuroge (black cattle) wagyu in hot water at approximately 60°C to remove the excess fat and unify the fat and meat in terms of texture and taste. Do not use higher temperatures, which may overcook the lean tissue supporting the fat and spoil the taste. Here we can add extra seasoning such as sesame or ponzu (citrus seasoned soy sauce), but I prefer chili vinegar jelly with Ichimi togarashi chili pepper flakes. Just like you add lemon to tonkatsu, I add contrast to a sweet or tasty ingredient to neutralize it.

This strikes a great balance with marbled Japanese wagyu.

T.V.:

That's a nice pink color. I absolutely agree with combining the

sweetness of Japanese wagyu and a sour taste.

Also, Mr. Okuda boils the meat for shabushabu, whereas I grill the meat for roast beef, but our goals are similar. I prepare my Japanese wagyu roast by making the outside crispy to keep the flavor inside and poached in butter. In doing so, the inside is rare with a nice pink color and seldom could you see any blood outside. This isn't possible with French beef.

Okuda:

The fat in Japanese wagyu doesn't contain any artificial ingredients and the marbled beef has a natural, rich sweetness, aroma and delicate texture. We have charcoal-grilled dishes and sukiyaki (see discussion on following page), in addition to shabushabu, so people overseas can also enjoy these recipes if they emphasize the characteristics of Japanese wagyu.

T.V.:

I agree. Its fine aroma, light texture and sweet, rich taste will surely attract many around the world.

Expressing the allure of Japanese wagyu through traditional dishes

— The dishes you both prepared for us were made in traditional styles. Are there any specific points you want to make?

Okuda:

Whether Japanese, French, Chinese or Italian, there are reasons why traditional dishes have been supported for so long. There are

clues to techniques that transcend nationality...

Having said that, I feel there is a difference between France and Japan in terms of being meat-loving versus fish-loving countries. Although we have western dishes as well as yakiniku in Japan, traditional Japanese chefs typically use sirloin and fillet, unlike Mr. Voisin, who might prefer to use shank or cheek.

T.V.:

I've been in Japan now for 11 years and am becoming familiar with Japanese ingredients, including kombu kelp, bonito and locally produced vegetables. At Les Saisons, we charcoal-grill Japanese horse mackerel, sometimes with ponzu on the side for freshness.

Many people are gaining a deeper understanding of Japanese wagyu and we chose to use cheek and shank meat this time, as well as sirloin and fillet (see discussion on following page). The former has a unique taste found only in Japanese wagyu. How do you use cheek, chuck and tail, Mr. Okuda?

Okuda:

Aren't those parts mainly saved for French cuisine? I suppose foreigners may have a chance to express the allure of Japanese wagyu in a wider range.

T. V.:

Japanese wagyu is a superb ingredient that can be adapted anywhere in the world. I'll drop by your restaurant in Ginza next time for your delicious wagyu, OK?

Okuda:

I would love to have you come any time.