

NYC bar snacks, via Japan

CONTINUED FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

But there's also a whole world of lesser-known treats for the sampling, and that's another part of izakaya's appeal.

Classics include agedashi tofu, or deep bowls of delicately fried tofu floating in a silky broth. There are little plates of perfectly grilled fish and marinated baby squid, succulent pork belly slow-cooked with soy sauce, spinach salad with sesame seed dressing, and tiny pots of chawanmushi, savory egg custards baked with mushrooms and herbs.

Traditionally, says Nishide, who makes some of these dishes in her next class on Sunday, a meal begins with a tiny little bite free from the kitchen, and ends with a soupy bowl of ramen or the grilled rice balls called onigiri.

But just as bar fare varies from dive-y to delicious, an izakaya can mean many things, says Robb Satterwhite, a New York native and food writer who spends most of his time in Japan.

"Both in New York City and even in Tokyo," he says, "the concept of an izakaya covers a wide range, from cheap joints for getting drunk to upscale places with excellent sake and creative, original cuisine."

Here in New York, for example, we have Ise Japanese Restaurant and Izakaya Riki in midtown, where the clientele is out-of-town businessmen and the specials are in Japanese.

Some izakayas, like Sakagura, are really well-stocked sake bars with food, while others focus on skewers (Yakitori Taisho) or grilled meats (Aburiya KinnoSuke).

There are the trendy new spots in cooler neighborhoods: Izakaya 10 in West Chelsea, which replaced the upscale D'Or Ahn, and Ariyoshi, which replaced the sushi spot Takayama on Broadway. There's also Tribeca's En Japanese Brasserie, the first New York outpost from the owner of some of Japan's own izakaya chains.

And last, but certainly not least, are the loud, party-friendly places like Kenka on St. Marks Place, one of several izakaya on its East Village block. (Cheap pitchers and shochu, a vodka-like spirit, are a crucial part of the scene.)

But if izakayas are all over the map, that's just another piece of the appeal.

With focus on sharing and sampling, these have long been a place to "try modern things," says Keika Kan, a co-owner and manager of Kasadela, a hip little spot near Avenue C.

While her restaurant cooks a changing roster of cutting-edge specials for celebs like Sonic Youth, other spots highlight Vietnamese egg rolls or American-style deep-fried cheese.

Even as izakayas morph, says Satterwhite, one thing stays the same.

"An izakaya is a drinking spot with food," he says, "not the other way around."



STEVEN SUNSHINE

IZAKAYAS ARE ALL AROUND THE TOWN

Aburiya KinnoSuke: 213 E. 45th St., near Third Ave., (212) 867-5454.

Ariyoshi: 806 Broadway, near 12th St., (212) 388-1884.

En Japanese Brasserie: 435 Hudson St., at Leroy St., (212) 647-9196.

Izakaya 10: 207 10th Ave., near 22nd St., (212) 627-7777.

Izakaya Riki: 141 E. 45th St., near Lexington Ave., (212) 986-5604.

Ise Japanese Restaurant: 151 E. 49th St., (212) 319-1494; plus locations at 56 Pine St. and 58 W. 56th St.

Kasadela: 647 E. 11th St., near Avenue C, (212) 777-1582.

Kenka: 25 St. Marks Place, near Second Ave., (212) 254-6363.

Sakagura: 211 E. 43rd St., downstairs, near Third Ave., (212) 953-7253.

Yakitori Taisho: 5 St. Marks Place, near Third Ave.; (212) 228-5086.



En Japanese Brasserie (above) in Tribeca was launched by the owner of an izakaya chain in Japan; left, the bar scene at Ise Japanese Restaurant on 49th St., where the specials are listed in Japanese.

HORENSO NO GOMAAE (SPINACH WITH SESAME DRESSING)

Serves 4, as an appetizer

Adapted from Mamie Nishide, www.JapaneseCookingStudio.com

4 tablespoons white sesame seeds

1 tablespoon soy sauce

1 tablespoon dashi (dehydrated Japanese fish and seaweed stock, commonly found in packets)

1 bunch spinach, cleaned

Toast sesame seeds and grind them halfway in a spice grinder (most are broken down, but none are yet paste). Add soy sauce and dashi to sesame seeds, and mix well. Blanch spinach and squeeze out the water. Cut into 2-inch-long pieces and toss with sesame seed dressing.