

In search of okonomiyaki, the addictive Japanese pancake

I was in Japan 14 years ago when a friend from Hiroshima wanted to introduce me to a beloved local food. It had a funny name, a funny taste and a funny appearance. It wasn't for me.

It's called okonomiyaki, informally referred to as the Japanese pancake. But it's unlike any pancake you've had before.

The dish has cabbage, egg, fish flakes, scallions, sometimes pork. In Hiroshima they use noodles as a base. Then it's topped with a type of Worcestershire sauce and Japanese mayonnaise.

[Merry White](#), an expert on Japanese culture with Boston University, had a similar experience to mine.

"I didn't like it the first time I had it," says White. "It's a very goopy dish, it doesn't look pretty. The Japanese have an expression: me de taberu, we eat with our eyes. And I don't eat with my eyes, I close my eyes when I eat okonomiyaki because it's kind of a mess."

And, okonomiyaki moves right before your eyes.

"What is has on top are bits of shaved bonito, dried bonito flakes, fish flakes, which are dancing because of the heat of the egg mixture that has been cooked. So you've got this visual thing going on," says White.

Okonomiyaki means "as you like it," and Japanese people throw anything and everything in there. White says she even tried it with uncooked oysters on top. She described it as "slimy," which, she adds, can actually be a positive with Japanese food. Needless to say, okonomiyaki can be a tough sell for a Westerner.

The dish is centuries old, but became popular in Japan after a devastating earthquake in 1923, then after World War II.

“Food was short,” says White. “Cabbages were brought in, because cabbage is a very cheap, easily grown, extender of food. People had to be very flexible about what they ate. If they could get eggs, they could have okonomiyaki. Anything went with it.”

It's most well known today in Hiroshima and Osaka, both places offer up their own competing styles.

I gave okonomiyaki a second try in Japan and bought some from a street vendor in Tokyo; it's often a street food in Japan. And something clicked. Not only did I like it, I became somewhat obsessed with it. I craved it. I sought it out. (Merry White had a similar transformation, by the way.)

But I've only found it once in the United States, at a hole-in-the wall in San Francisco. Then recently I was out to dinner in Boston, near Fenway Park, at a hip new restaurant called [Hojoko](#). And there it was.

“And you'll notice with okonomiyaki, it's essentially vegetables that are held together by pancake batter,” said Hart Lowry, Hojoko's executive chef, talking as he cooked up some okonomiyaki. He adds mountain yam and bacon to his okonomiyaki, to make it unique, and more palatable for Americans.

Whatever he's doing, it's working: it's phenomenal.

It's partly the place. Lowry explains that Hojoko isn't like most Japanese restaurants Americans know — it's an izakaya, an informal Japanese tavern where small plates are served tapas-style.

“It's a place where people go to have fun with their friends and relax and get weird,” says Lowry. “The music is loud, the food is loud, the drinks are loud. In most restaurants, alcohol supports the meal. We're kind of the reverse of that.”

Back in Japan, okonomiyaki is a drinking food. Lowry says in Boston, it's also fun way to push people out of their comfort zones with Japanese cuisine. I asked why more Japanese restaurants in the US aren't offering it.

“Yeah, I don't know why it's not popular, it should be,” says Lowry.

Merry White believes it hasn't caught on with Japanese restaurants because it's an informal food.

"You go into a Japanese restaurant and say 'okonomiyaki,' they're going to look weird at you," says White.

But today could be a big chance for the dish to catch on and go international.

"Perhaps if President Obama were to taste okonomiyaki in Hiroshima, it might become a trend food," says White. "I think it could be a wonderful street food here."

There are perhaps 2,000 places serving okonomiyaki in Hiroshima. So far, there are no reports of the president trying any.