

News from under the Southern Cross – Edition 17

Go to Australia for great food

7 June

“Go to Guangzhou for great food”. This is phrase that was often heard when setting out on a journey to China. For the Chinese, who are gourmets themselves, Cantonese (Guangzhou) cuisine represented the pinnacle in food culture.

1. Quality of food that surpasses expectations

Frankly speaking, for someone such as myself who spent time working in the food capital of Hong Kong adjacent to Guangzhou, I didn't hold high expectations regarding the cuisine that would be on offer while on assignment to Australia. After living in the US for five years and 3 years spent in the UK, I thought it would be an extension of these experiences and so did my best to temper my expectations.

But boy, what a revelation!

Following my presentation of credentials ceremony, I was treated to a meal at the official residence of Governor-General and Madam Hurley. To the surprise of many guests, it started with kangaroo meat. This signaled the start of my uniquely Australian gourmet life.

What I discovered was that here in Canberra, while naturally there are high-class restaurants that cater to politicians and lobbyists, even the most ordinary, unassuming cuisine is delicious. I was surprised by the quality level of the fish and chips that your average singlet and shorts-wearing Aussie chows down on, which is in no way inferior to that served at my favourite London social club.

2. Why is it delicious?

In the more than five months that have passed since I assumed my position, every time I am asked by an Aussie “Are you enjoying your life here?”, I reply “of course” and then proceed to point out the high quality of the food available. Whenever I do this, an expression crosses their face which says “that's just what I thought”. Their explanations for why this is the case can be summarized under two general points.



A supermarket in Canberra (left) and cattle often seen grazing here and there (right)

(1) High Quality Ingredients

Precisely because Australia is a major agricultural power, I have been impressed by the variety and high quality of the foodstuffs, such as beef, lamb, flour, vegetables, fruits and dairy products etc., that are obtainable in supermarkets. Incidentally, Australian beef continues to hold the largest imported beef market share (43%) in the Japanese market.

Some time ago, while on a business trip to Sydney, I found the salmon nigiri-sushi of a sushi restaurant I had ducked into on a whim to be so exquisite. When I asked its origins, they told me it was from Tasmania.

Being a giant island surrounded on all four sides by the sea, Australia is a treasury for seafood such as salmon, lobster and so forth.



Fresh ingredients are easily obtainable

(2) “Multiculturalism”

Long-term Japanese residents of Australia often say that “In contrast to the ethnic cuisines found in Europe and the US, which have been processed to suit the tastes of the people of those countries, in Australia you can enjoy the real, original flavour.” That describes it perfectly. This is because many first and second generation immigrants haven’t resided in Australia all that long, and so they retain the “authenticity” of their native cuisines.

Speaking in the context of the Indo-Pacific region, another reason may be close distances (between Australia and the region) which allows for the free flow in cooking styles and chefs.

When I was appointed to Canberra, a senior of Australian intelligence officer in Tokyo chose a Greek restaurant located in Ginza to host my farewell party. When I look back on it now, this was symbolic. The reason is because Australia has many immigrants of Greek descent who operate popular venues. This is the unique story of Australian multiculturalism.

3. Wine

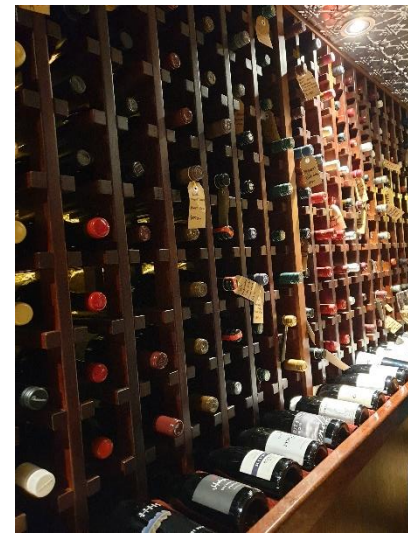
One thing that is absolutely indispensable to enjoy a rich gourmet life is ‘aqua vitae’. The abundance in the types of wines served to me and their high quality have certainly left a strong impression on me.

However, there is irony in this. When you mention to Australians the types of Australian wines that are available in the Japanese market, not a few people adopt a bit perplexed expression. In truth, there are many varieties of regions and brands, and the fact that the high class wines that Australians themselves are proud of aren’t found in Japan strikes Aussies as odd and disappointing.

Some examples of Australia’s high-class wine districts include the Barossa Valley in South Australia, Margaret River in Western Australia, and the Hunter Valley in New South Wales.

The Japanese market is already replete with wines from many countries such as France, Italy, and Chile. Yet with some added sales effort on behalf of Australian representatives and a change in Japanese awareness towards Australian wines, surely things will turn for the better. Moreover,

at present, in an era in which Australia is seeking to diversify its export markets as a result of trade friction with China, expectations are that it won't be long until quality Aussie wines will be more easily obtainable in Japan as well.



Broad vineyards that you often see in many places across Australia (left)
One can enjoy a wide variety of Australian wines, from affordable table wines costing ten or so dollars each to wines costing hundreds of dollars (right)

4. A high degree of interest in Japanese cuisine

Over the course of my everyday life, I have come to feel that there is a high degree of interest among Australians in Japanese cuisine. Whenever I invite guests to meals at my Residence, a great many of them happily come along. Even in Canberra, the era of Australians lining up to wait outside of popular ramen shops has arrived.

The two weeks of self-isolation in designated hotels that Japanese visitors to Australia have to undergo in response to COVID-19 is really tough to endure. The other day an acquaintance of mine who was holed up in a hotel in Sydney was helped by me to receive the delivery of a sushi bento box and soba bento box made by a nearby Japanese restaurant. There probably aren't too many cities across the world where this is possible.

Chef Ogata, whom I previously introduced in 'News from under the Southern Cross' (No.2), has been busily rushing about to perform his duties. In response to the degree of interest that Aussies

have in Japanese cuisine, he is planning to start conducting cooking lessons on the Embassy website soon, so keep an eye out for that.

5. In closing

And so the above information is my attempt to write about the cuisine found in Australia. Right now, wouldn't you like to experience "Go (ing) to Australia for great food"?

Once the COVID pandemic quietens down, by all means come to Australia and let me know your impressions.

YAMAGAMI Shingo



Chef Ogata