

bon appétit

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Kyoto's Tofu Obsession

Adam Sachs

MITSUYOSHI KOIZUMI SQUEEZES A SOYBEAN BETWEEN his fingers and looks pleased.

"*Unyuu*," he says—a Japanese onomatopoeia that means (more or less) the sound of something firm but pliant being squished. This, according to Koizumi, is what a perfect soybean sounds like when it's ready to become tofu.

"Like gummy candy," he says, handing me the wet soybean.

It is 5:30 a.m. on my first full day in Kyoto. I am wearing a hairnet, standing in a narrow, steamy kitchen overlooking the Kamogawa River, pinching a soaked bean. Why am I here? The reason is bean curd.

Koizumi-san is a tofu maker at Kinki, an artisanal shop where I have come to witness the daily predawn alchemy by which raw soybeans are transformed into squares of the firm-but-creamy building blocks of *kyo-ryori*, the cuisine of Kyoto. Ancient land of culture, temples, and gardens, once the imperial capital of Japan for 1,000 years, Kyoto is a city with a healthy obsession for tofu.

But stay, carnivorous reader. Don't turn the page. It's not what you're thinking. Believe me—I'm not a morning person, and before coming here, I was never an avid tofu-seeker. The fresh Japanese version is a far more noble creature than the often bland loaves sold in American supermarkets. The difference in taste? Chalk and cheese, I'd say, though that would be unfair to chalk.

Here, tofu is a delicate handmade food, produced every morning in small shops and large industrial kitchens throughout the country. Each region makes its own styles of tofu, but Kyoto is to tofu what Naples is to pizza, New York to bagels. The Kyoto variety—perfected over centuries by Buddhist monks, in imperial kitchens, and in neighborhood shops like this one—is the accepted standard; it is regarded as the best in Japan and thus the world.

While tofu has become a mass-produced staple stateside, only now are we waking up to the allure of nonindustrial tofu. Japanese restaurants like EN Japanese Brasserie in New York feature fresh tofu on their menus. Reika Yo, the proprietor of EN, told me it took her a while to educate people about how tofu was eaten in Japan. I'd had great tofu dishes in the formal *kaiseki* restaurants and raucous *izakayas* of Tokyo. But Tokyo is so overwhelming; the discreet pleasures of humble tofu are easily lost in the culinary cacophony. I knew that in quieter Kyoto I'd find (and be able to focus on) the real thing.