

EAT THE STREET

For a real taste of Japan, head to Osaka, the foodie capital that's not for the faint of heart. Cherry Casey spent a day eating the city

Walking past stalls of spiky sea urchins, steaming vats of vegetables, grilled, skewered meat, and everything else in between, it's easy to see why it's claimed that Osaka's Kuromon Market earned the city its status as 'the kitchen of Japan'. It's busy without being chaotic, down-to-earth and very cool. Representative, you might say, of Osaka at large.

'Osakans are really friendly,' tour guide Jennifer Jenni explains. 'And happy that people take an interest in their country.' They also take their food very seriously – 'people will easily wait two hours to get into their chosen restaurant'.

A real battering

Our aim for the day is to squeeze in as much as possible, so we can't afford such waiting time. While it's not easy to choose where to start, we decide on one of Osaka's many specialities, kushikatsu.

The story goes that when flour was newly-introduced to Japan after WWII, chefs had just the right idea about how to use it – in batter. It was used to coat all kinds of ingredients, yielding items like kushikatsu – battered skewers of deep-fried meat, fish and vegetables. And at the many speciality eateries around the Shinsekai district, you'll see signs strictly forbidding 'double-dipping' your kushikatsu in the shared pots of dipping sauce.

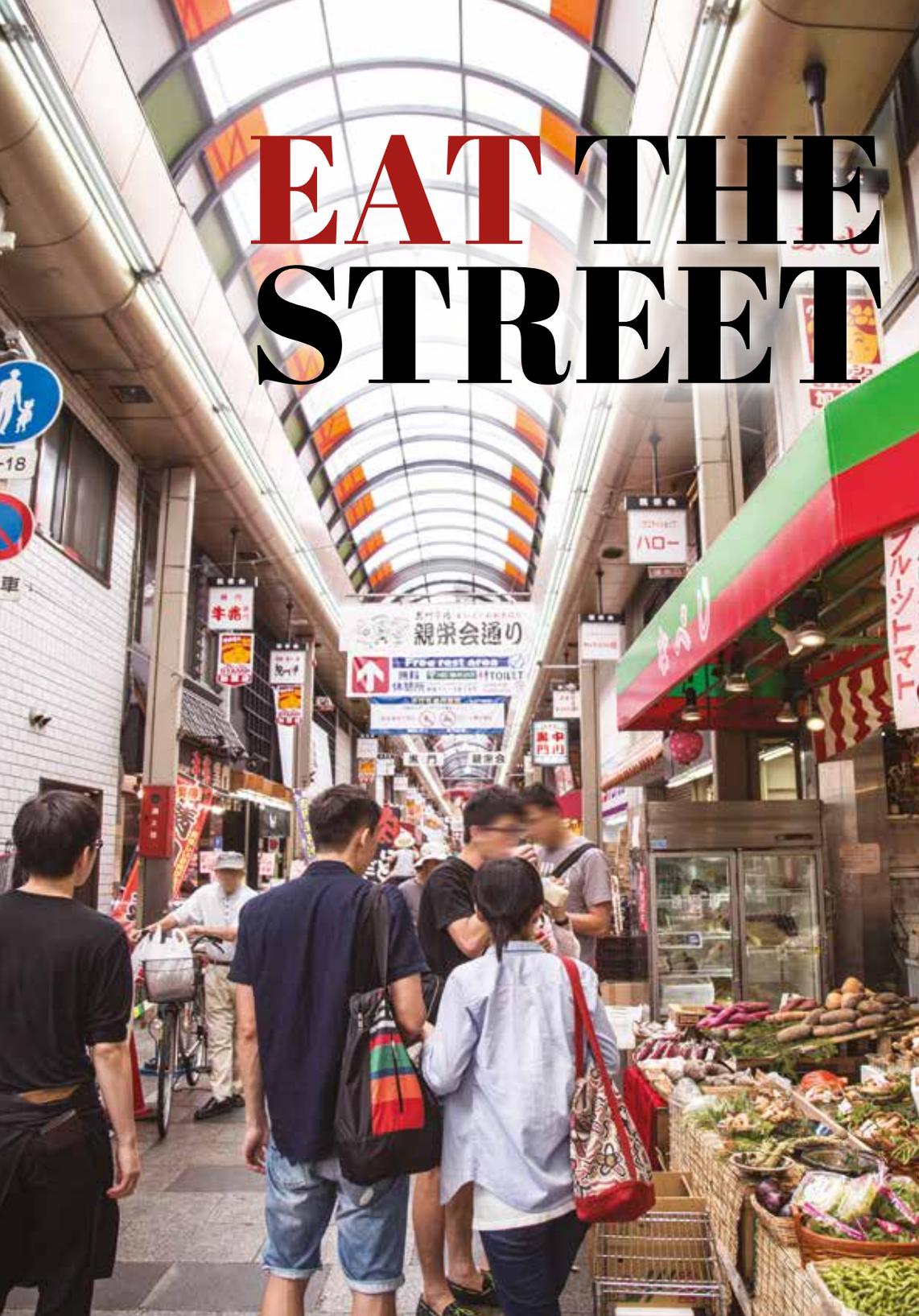
Next, we head to a stall piled high with plates of what look like huge joints of meat drizzled with a dark brown sauce. 'As a pescatarian, I shouldn't admit this,' I confess to Jennifer, 'but that meat smells amazing.'

'That's tuna!' she exclaims, as my boyfriend and I gawp in surprise.

Seafood and eat it

We're quickly distracted by the neighbouring aquarium filled with what looks like fairly innocuous black and white fish. Jennifer reveals it's fugu – the fish renowned for a highly poisonous toxin more deadly than cyanide. Toxic parts removed however, it's also a delicacy, with a reported 70% of the country's fugu consumption taking place in Osaka. Zuboraya restaurant in the Dotonbori district is a good starting point, easily spotted by the giant fugu lantern outside.

Not in the mood for danger-dining, we >>



Unmissable morsels

Kushikatsu Breaded skewers of meat, fish and vegetables served with a dipping sauce

Fugu Also known as blow- or pufferfish, this delicacy can prove fatal if it's not prepared correctly

Takoyaki Spherical fried octopus dumplings ('tako')

meaning octopus, 'yaki' meaning to fry)

Okonomiyaki Thick pancakes with various fillings, drizzled with fruity sauce and mayo

Taiyaki Sweet batter cooked in fish-shaped moulds, traditionally filled with red bean paste



opt for vegetable fritters from a nearby seller, before moving on to our next stop – Tenjinbashi-suji Shotengai, the longest straight shopping street in Japan.

Here, Jennifer explains two of Osaka’s most renowned street foods to us – takoyaki and okonomiyaki. ‘The batter base is pretty much the same for both,’ says Jennifer, ‘but takoyaki comes in round dumpling form, filled with shredded octopus, vegetables and ginger.’

Okonomiyaki, meanwhile, is a pimped-up pancake, with an array of fillings including pork belly, cabbage and squid, drizzled with a sweet-tart, fruity sauce and mayo. Jennifer recommends the best of both worlds: okonomitaiyaki – a hybrid of the two snacks.

Hero hybrids

We head to Kogasin to try it and are immediately greeted with rows of fish-shaped waffles. ‘Taiyaki is a fish-shaped sweet traditionally filled with red bean paste,’ Jennifer explains. Here, though, the chefs are mixing things up, stuffing theirs with savoury okonomiyaki fillings.

The chef is more than happy to meet my pescatarian needs and, soon enough, we’re all merrily chowing down on both tayaki and custard-filled battered ducks.

It’s nearing dusk, but we have one more food stop, Dotonbori. Arguably Osaka’s ultimate ‘must-see’ spot, the neon-lit market is often equated with *Blade Runner* and huge animal-shaped lanterns decorate many shops.

Then there’s the food. Stalls abound with classics like takoyaki and world-class ramen, as well as more unusual dishes such as tako tamago – whole baby octopus with a quail egg stuffed into its head.

While trying to eat the whole of Osaka in one day probably wouldn’t be recommended by a GP, I know that I, for one, will definitely be coming back for seconds.



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 Stay at the centrally-located Hotel Monterey Grasmere Osaka. hotelmonterey.co.jp