

ORDER AT AN IZAKAYA

LEARN THE RULES OF THE HOUSE WHEN ENTERING A COMMON IZAKAYA

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Eating at an izakaya is one of the most immediate, most accessible pleasures of living in this country. Tapas-like plates of superb food, eaten between sips of cool sake. Friends, acquaintances, or lovers pulled close by the intimate gesture of pouring drinks – leaning in, nearly touching.... Conversations warming, words turning passionate over the course of an indulgent evening. For the uninitiated, however, the unspoken etiquette, scrawled menus, and sudden unexpected sources of protein can also be quite challenging. Yet, it's worth making the leap into unfamiliar and exciting territory. I've had some breathtaking food in the most unlikely looking places: superb handmade pasta, giant platters of fresh oysters, crunchy bamboo shoot dipped in wasabi and soy sauce, and perfectly fried flying fish in a piquant dressing.

If I could take you out, we'd walk past the chain izakayas, obvious with their lit plastic signs and predictable food. Come on! We're looking for somewhere smaller, somewhere better. See? Down the street a little, there's a battered red lantern with the characters 居酒屋: *izakaya*. And there, a little further on, with the little sign? That looks like a good one, too. See through the window, the flushed faces, hear the conversation running high? Let's try in there.

Sliding the door open, we're met with a hearty *irasshai*. It's a mid-sized place, with a handful of wooden tables around a well stocked bar. Let's take a table – we can leave the counter seats for latecomers and people stopping in alone. When the waiter brings over the hot *oshibori* towels for our hands, we'll order beer, in that grand Japanese tradition that calls for beer first. You don't feel like beer? That's okay, try a mixed *chuhai*. Then we can move on to sake when the food comes.

Here comes the *ot shi* (also called *tsukidashi*). Different every time, these little dishes are included in the table charge, and arrive without being ordered. Now we can figure out the menu.

Or would you rather leave things up to the chef? We can set a budget



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of say ¥3,000 or ¥5,000 per person before drinks – and ask for an *omakase* course. I know it's a bit more than you usually spend, but really, it's worth it. Not tonight? Try it next time, when you come with other friends. It's a sneaky way of getting the best on the menu without actually reading the menu, and you'll often get things that aren't on the menu at all. If there's something you can't eat, it's a little bit more difficult, but you can always ask. If you don't eat red meat, just say *niku wa taberarenai ga, 4,000 en no omakase kosu ga dekimasuka?* It's best to be open minded, though – you may find the chef preparing something you usually hate in a way you've never tried before. You never know, you might like it!

So let's order off the menu then. See how it's divided into sections? These run approximately parallel to the rules that keep Japanese home and restaurant meals so varied. Traditions can come in handy at the *izakaya*. For example, it's customary to start with sashimi, which is a huge relief if you're as indecisive as I am. The *morawase* (selection) is almost always a good bet. Shall we try that one? We could get the avocado sashimi instead if you don't want so much fish. Okay, *sashimi no morawase* it is, then.

I see you're almost done your beer. Shall we get some sake? Something dry and local? Even if you don't know the brands on the menu, it's easy enough to order – go on, you can do it. Lift your glass a little as I tilt the bottle.

More food? Let's try something off the specials menu – it's over there, on that board with *osusume* (おすすめ) written at the top. What about the eggplant, and maybe something else off the grilled menu? Yakitori sounds good – watch out, though, that's *kawa*, chicken skin. Perhaps some *negima* instead – those are the ones with green onions and chicken meat. Or shiitake mushrooms?

Another sake? And some more food. Watch out for *tororo* in the name unless

you like grated yam. Sliced tomatoes sound safer. And let's get a fried dish. It's hard to go wrong with *kara-age* chicken.

One last sake? Let's get a tea-rice *ochazuke* and call it a night. You can always come back, now you know how easy it is.