

Japanese Restaurants Get Creative to Ride Out the Pandemic

Covid-19 has not only been a devastating public-health crisis; it has also been the global restaurant industry's greatest challenge to date. Hordes of restaurants have been forced to cease operations, some have and may never reopen.



Truth be told, the pandemic's economic toll on the restaurant industry has not been evenly distributed. While certain pizza chains have maintained or increased their sales during the pandemic – casual-dining and fine-dining restaurants have seen their revenues decline.

In fact, according to the [Japan Food Service Association](#), restaurant sales in Japan in 2020 plunged 15.1% from the previous year on an all-store basis, the steepest fall since statistics began in 1994.

The better news is, restaurant sales had been on a recovering trend since bottoming out in April to May last year, when the government's first state of emergency was put in place. Many restaurant chains took the opportunity to plan ahead to adapt and refine their restaurant model, positioning themselves for the “new normal”, and to strive to bring sales back to pre-crisis levels.

More Than One Way to Survive and Strive

Restaurants around the world, including Japan, are changing the way patrons dine-in. In Tokyo, according to Japanese media reports, restaurant and bar owners are racking their brains for new ideas for survival. One way in which neighbourhood eateries are riding out the pandemic is to simply stay open for regular business, albeit with earlier and shortened hours.

Such a pattern was allowed by the emergency decree in Tokyo. For example, a couple of small *izakayas* (pubs) in the urban neighbourhood continued operating throughout this period. Most followed Tokyo government recommendations for restaurants, opening earlier in the afternoon and closing at the required time of 8pm (10 am after June 1).

Reports indicate that roughly one-half of the small *izakayas* in the area around the station followed this pattern, while the other half have switched to take-out only, and a few closed their doors for a period of two to three weeks.



For instance, at [Bar Zikkai](#), a café and bar in the posh Ginza district where some 3,000 books are displayed, solo customers were seen silently reading while enjoying alcohol and other beverages. Since the new state of emergency took effect on January 8, the store has been focusing more on solo customers and rejecting entry of groups of three or more people in principle.

Pairs of visitors are asked to sit separately and are requested to refrain from talking, except when making orders. Meanwhile, a ramen restaurant in the city of Musashino in Tokyo, Dokutsuya, has moved up its opening time to 6am to make up for the loss of revenue from closing early under the state of emergency.

Another unique approach is a grilled food restaurant in Shinjuku Ward, offering a one-hour five-course meal during the emergency period as a way for it to comply with the authorities' request for closing by 8pm. All while responding to customers' wishes to have their dinner at the restaurant from 7pm. Shinjuku Ward usually offers a nine-course meal that lasts for two hours.

Efforts can be seen throughout Japan's foodservice industry in trying to stay afloat amid the coronavirus pandemic. While the impact of a lockdown is felt across the board in the F&B sector, restaurants have been forced to get creative!

Images source: AFP

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