

# The 100-year-old restaurant

What makes a century-old institution move to a different continent? That's exactly what legendary restaurant Edomasa did late last year – including shipping the original counter from Tokyo, Japan, to Japantown, San Francisco. **Kris Griffiths** dropped in during its (re)opening week. ©

TORI EDOMASA

## 5,000 miles

Photography: Dan Tom

# restaurant

## that moved

Chicken shop  
The popular \$30 set menu.  
Left: Edomasa's new home  
in San Francisco

**M**any restaurant proprietors, whether they admit to it or not, harbour ambitions of expansion — perhaps opening a new branch in another town or city. For one beloved long-standing *yakitori* in Tokyo, however, its third-generation owner decided to uproot the entire venue and reopen it in another country on another continent. This is the story of Edomasa and its epic journey from the capital of Japan to Japantown in San Francisco, as well as its new community's remarkable reversal from one of the city's worst Covid-hit areas to one that's spearheading its recovery.

In 1924, a small street food wagon began trading close to the 17th-century Ryōgoku bridge in Tokyo's Chuo ward — an area that remains a Sumo wrestling hub, with a 10,000-seat Sumo Hall present since 1909. A combination of that footfall and the singular quality of the street cart's wares soon led to long queues forming before it, and its reputation spread throughout central Tokyo.

The wagon that would become Edomasa restaurant, serving only one traditional cuisine: *yakitori*, literally 'grilled bird', more specifically marinated chicken skewers of bite-sized pieces of meat from all parts of the chicken — including thighs, breasts, skin and liver — roasted over hot charcoal.

Before long, the cart had expanded into a compact and unpretentious standing-room-only venue, named after Tokyo's former name, 'Edo', with walls decorated with framed signatures of famous Sumo wrestlers. It cemented its local legend status as one of the oldest and best *yakitori* spots in the capital.

"Despite its reputation, it was only ever a small place, enough for about 14 people standing," explains 34-year-old restaurant director Yuki Sakakibara, who has lived in San Francisco for ten years and

led the team behind Edomasa's rebirth there. "There was no server or waiter, only the grill chef and his wife, and a long line of customers waiting patiently for their *yakitori*."

Sumo celebrities would join the queues, which could often last more than an hour, just to sample Edomasa's famous skewers distinguished by a salty-sweet *tare* marinating sauce, whose ingredients remain a guarded secret, passed down through the generations to today's successor. "That recipe is literally 100 years old," says Sakakibara. "Only the head chef knows what's in the sauce, and he's the only one who makes it — it's everything. It may sound fairy-tale-ish, but it would take another 100 years for someone to create one that comes close! Like a fine wine or whisky, no one can really, truly copy it."

In 2021, just shy of its centenary, things started to go wrong for Edomasa. Until then, only major crises shared by the rest of the city had stalled its trade, not least the 1940s wartime bombing of Tokyo and Covid. It was a single menu item, which had become one of Edomasa's signature dishes (a chicken meatball made with raw minced chicken) that triggered its downfall. The popular dish was always prepared with stringent procedures, and was enjoyed for several years without a single reported case of food poisoning.

"The dish suddenly went viral on social media, and cheaper local restaurants began copying it, but without Edomasa's super-clean practices and technique," Sakakibara continues. "Of course, this led to food-poisoning outbreaks, but it all came back to Edomasa, who'd 'started it'. Social media users started to debate: is this raw chicken dish safe? And the controversy led to people associating Edomasa with raw chicken, food poisoning and lack of safety."

Dismayed by the negative publicity and fearing copycat cases could spread even further, eventually, its reticent chef-owner Hisatoshi Hamana, the third generation of the family to own and run Edomasa and the son-in-law of the previous owner, decided to close his establishment in 2022: its 98th year of business.

It was only after this news reached a US Japanese restaurant group, which runs ramen restaurants around northern California, that the idea was floated to Hamana of relocating Edomasa wholesale to San Francisco, and opening a replica of the restaurant in Japantown: one of only three Japantowns remaining in America, but its oldest and largest.

"The idea appealed," explains Sakakibara. "Hamana was still ambitious, knew his *yakitori* was a great product, and fancied a fresh start somewhere else in the world. And, as San Francisco is so diverse, its Asian community

including Chinese, Filipino and Koreans alongside Japanese, he knew there was a market here. It's the perfect city for it."

The truth of this was plain to see when I struggled, literally, to get into the restaurant on its busy launch weekend, with word of its opening having spread rapidly through the community and people clustering outside, hoping for a table or a seat at the counter.

"It was crazy," laughs Sakakibara, who diligently served front of house throughout it all. "There are no reservations, it's in-person only, so we were expecting that. Our target is another 100 years of Edomasa, so it's a good start." ●

## SUMO CELEBRITIES WOULD JOIN THE QUEUES, WHICH COULD OFTEN LAST MORE THAN AN HOUR, JUST

## TO SAMPLE EDMASAS FAMOUS SKEWERS



Pick-up sticks  
Edomasa chef  
Takumi Noda  
heads for the grill.  
Left: yakitori  
negima skewers



**Worth the journey**

From top: expectant Japantown customers; the original street food wagon in Tokyo; SF waiting staff. Right: tucking into skewers and *takikomi gohan* rice



**EDOMASA IS THE POSTER CHILD FOR JAPANTOWN, LEADING THE CHARGE IN SAN FRANCISCO'S RECOVERY FROM THE PANDEMIC**

So what are the main differences between the original Tokyo restaurant and its stateside iteration, and the main challenges of moving a century-old restaurant 5,000 miles? "Firstly, size," says Sakakibara. "The SF restaurant is bigger, seating 36, and servers now bring the food. Secondly, the people are different. In Tokyo it was mostly local Japanese customers, but here it's all different races and languages. Our biggest challenge wasn't logistical – we simply transported the original wagon and counter, which sit proudly at the restaurant entrance, by container ship. It was, at first, finding the best chicken for our menu, which we eventually did, and then deciding how to keep Edomasa original for a more diverse crowd." Needless to say, raw chicken is no longer on the menu.

During my visit, the roomier venue was alive with a constant turnaround of customers, mainly Japanese and Japanese-American, grouped at tables or in curtain-divided booths, excited to be experiencing – or re-experiencing – the reborn Tokyo institution. The dozen or so waiting outside were asked their names and then called back when space materialised. Inside, the aroma of roasting yakitori chicken pervaded, as well the sound of it sizzling as fresh skewers were added to the grills.

Having been fortunate enough to bag a rare seat at the counter in front of Hamana and his co-chefs tenaciously working the grills, I saw first-hand what exceptional value the menu offers vis-a-vis prices commanded elsewhere throughout the city – particularly the \$30 set menu comprising a range of skewers of different chicken cuts, plus a portion of seasoned rice, chicken *paitan* soup and a chicken meatball, which most customers choose.

As of right now, it's definitely a spot for meat-eaters. "We're working on vegetarian options!" says Sakakibara. "Like grilled veggie skewers with a special different sauce, as we can't use the same as the chicken one! As for price, everything's pricier in San Francisco. The food may look simple, but there's a lot of skilled preparation: expertly cutting the chicken, skewering, saucing, cooking. And Edomasa is the only yakitori joint here."

Edomasa is also the poster child for a district of San Francisco leading the charge when it comes to the city's recovery from the pandemic. Japantown is one of only three neighbourhoods reporting higher sales tax revenue today than before Covid, throughout which it suffered badly. At least 24 businesses permanently closed or relocated, commerce with Japan was ruined by quarantine rules, community arts and cultural organisations lost both momentum and revenue that can never be recouped. It was feared that America's oldest Japanese community might disappear completely.

"It was a huge shock to be told to close," reflects local Linda Mihara, owner of Paper Tree origami shop, which her grandparents opened in the centre of Japantown in 1968. "I had to lay off employees and figure out the next steps. Then something magical happened: people started taking up origami in lockdown, giving my online business a real boost. The following year was the best in our history, as folk returned to Japantown in numbers."

At Uji Time, a nearby Japanese ice-cream shop, a similar dramatic reversal played out. "With a business model centred on soft-serve ice-cream – a product unsuitable for delivery – our sales plummeted to zero per cent," recalls

senior manager Ambrose Leung. "Despite this adversity, we successfully pivoted: expanding our products' presence from zero to 33 supermarkets and 18 restaurants and cafés in the Bay Area. From a modest ice-cream shop, we've evolved into a prominent regional distributor, with further expansion plans underway."

Added to this resolute adaptability behind Japantown's bounceback was a local push for more community events, such as the Cherry Blossom Festival that took place in April for the first time since the pandemic in Japantown's Peace Plaza, dominated by a giant pagoda. On a smaller scale, the Kimpton Hotel Enso, one of two Japantown hotels, has hosted events from sake tastings to R&B yoga.

"It's 'micro-hoods' like this that make San Francisco thrive," says Jeanne Hizon, sales director at Hotel Enso. "And as Japantown is more residential, locals stopped our neighbourhood restaurants closing – one reason we recovered quicker than the other areas closer to Downtown. On any given day here it's buzzing."

It seems the future looks truly bright for a community that has suffered harder times than most in America over the past decade and century. It's hard to tell if the resurrected Edomasa is simply riding the crest of Japantown's wave, or is part of the wave, ready for other businesses to join its burgeoning progress. Either way, the first of its targeted next 100 years has begun with a bang, and what is Tokyo's loss has very much become San Francisco's gain.

If you have to queue for a while outside, it's definitely just as worth the wait today as it was for those who waited patiently outside Edomasa in Tokyo a century ago. ■  
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**MORE SAN FRAN NIPPON TUCK**

**Sasa**

This sleek, mellow venue is a haven from the hubbub of its Japan Centre mall location, tucked away on the top floor. One of the best sushi spots in Japantown, its menu standout is a nine-piece 'mystery box' of the chef's choice of assorted sashimi, served in a very Instagrammable wooden box. [sasasf.com](http://sasasf.com)

**Udon Mugizo**

One of the few udon restaurants whose noodles are not only handmade in house, but made in full view of passers-by in a front window, which makes potential queueing a bit more interesting. Of myriad different udon dishes to choose from once inside, its most popular is its signature udon special, topped with cod roe, *kaiware* sprouts and nori seaweed. [mugizo-us.com/sanfrancisco](http://mugizo-us.com/sanfrancisco)

**On the Bridge**

A quirky and informal family-run restaurant that's as well known for its bookshelf manga collection as it is for its idiosyncratic menu of East-West fusion foods such as *sansai* spaghetti and *katsuobushi* pizza. Randomly also a favourite stop-off for punk rock icon Patti Smith whenever she's in town. [onthebridgesf.com](http://onthebridgesf.com)

