

food

On Japan's top restaurant review site, imperfection is gold

Middling ratings on Tabelog may indicate gems in disguise

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A baritone voice boomed across the dark ballroom of the Imperial Hotel, Tokyo near Hibiya Station. It belonged to actor Ken Ishiguro.

Dressed in an old-fashioned sailor coat, he emerged from the rear of the room and walked theatrically toward the stage, narrating a story of Japan's bountiful produce and how it has shaped the country's food culture. Dreamy visuals of various ingredients played on a large screen behind him.

This wasn't a prelude to a musical but the opening of The Tabelog Award 2025, the annual prize-giving ceremony of the crowd-sourced restaurant review site.

Held in late January 2025, the stylish event hinted that no expense was spared by Tabelog to demonstrate its clout as a leading authority in recognizing Japan's top restaurants. It was attended by chefs and restaurant owners nominated for special recognition based on the previous year's performance.

To nominate the restaurants, Kakaku.com, the internet media company that operates Tabelog, selects establishments that have maintained an overall score of over four stars for at least one cumulative month in the past year. The overall score, which appears at the top of each restaurant's page, is a value calculated based on ratings from Tabelog users.

Tabelog users then vote for the nominated restaurants based on the quality of their food instead of other criteria such as service and ambience.

At the 2025 ceremony, 35 eateries out of 652 nominees snagged the

Gold award; their scores hovered around four and a half stars. None of them came within a whisker of five stars — as of March 6, the highest-rated eatery on the site, Shimabashi Hoshino, a *kaiseki* (Japanese haute cuisine) restaurant in Tokyo's Minato Ward, scored 4.68 stars.

Actor Ken Ishiguro (left) and announcer Yuri Sasagawa served as hosts for The Tabelog Award 2025 ceremony, which saw 652 restaurants recognized as the country's top eateries. KAKAKU



feelings about it might seem arrogant," Farrer says. "People also like to keep their favorite places to themselves."

It's also worth noting that the score for each restaurant is not just an average of the Tabelog users' ratings. Users who post regularly in a certain dining category wield a higher degree of influence on the ratings over those who post less frequently in that group. Each user's influence is not fixed, though: It may increase or decrease, affecting the ratings in a category even without any new reviews posted.

Kakaku has declined to reveal how this is calculated, partly to prevent others from understanding its algorithm and thus manipulate scores, such as posting an excessive number of fake reviews. The algorithm has had its share of critics, though. In 2022, Kakaku was ordered by a court to pay damages to a Tokyo-based Korean barbecue chain after it was judged that the algorithm unfairly lowered the scores of chain restaurants.

An Asian behavior

How do reviewers on platforms in other dining capitals in the region compare with their Japanese counterparts?

Noelle Tan, director of Sixth Sense, a Singapore-based public relations consultancy specializing in the food and beverage industry, notes that Singaporean diners usually give more moderate scores like four out of five stars on platforms like Google.

"I wouldn't say we are picky but perhaps more mindful of where our dollar goes," she says. "We are more particular about an all-round excellent (dining) experience that may not be easy to come by. Food quality is still key to getting (Singaporean) customers to return. Great service might not save a meal if the food disappoints, but fantastic food can often make up for (average) service."

Paul Hicks, CEO of GHC Asia, a lifestyle public relations agency headquartered in Hong Kong, says reviewers in Hong Kong "tend to be harsher than most."

"I'd say people do place a stronger emphasis on the food than the overall experience," he says.

"An average score on Google, such as three stars, may mean a place is actually quite good and (a similar establishment) would have been scored higher elsewhere, especially in Western cities."

Farrer notes that the similar reviewing patterns in Singapore and Hong Kong might imply that central tendency bias is an Asian proclivity.

"But I suspect that the tendency towards middling reviews is stronger in Japan than in other Asian countries or cities, especially Hong Kong, which is rather individualistic in comparison," he says.

And if a middle-of-the-road rating is a way for average Japanese diners to keep the crowds away from their favorite eateries, then the next restaurant with less than three stars you scroll past on Tabelog might just turn out to be a hidden gem.

Tabelog's approach to restaurant reviews can bewilder first-time readers. It is common to see glowing individual reviews accompanied by three-star ratings.

It is also fiercely local: Its users are predominantly Japanese, and reviews are written in Japanese. With more than 870,000 listed restaurants and almost 75 million reviews, it is the largest and most popular restaurant database in Japan.

The website has autotranslated pages in English, Chinese and Korean, but only the Japanese version allows users to register and post reviews. Still, Tabelog's popularity as a trove of local foodie knowledge has attracted readers of every stripe seeking opinions on what's authentic and delicious instead of reading another Google review from a tourist waxing lyrical on a sushi breakfast at *Tsukiji*.

Meredith Woo, a Singaporean and Tabelog user who visits Japan at least once a year, says the scoring on Tabelog "can sometimes be quite harsh." For example, some users who gave less than three stars would mention that they enjoyed the food but were unhappy because the staff did not smile at them. Otherwise, she says the ratings are well-matched to the reviews "from a stringent point of view."

"I usually look past the rating to (read) why the score is lower," she says. "My benchmark is at least three stars because a lot of the top restaurants receive around that score." She isn't far off the mark. Currently, about

97% of restaurants on Tabelog's website hold an overall score of under three and a half stars; a score higher than that means the restaurant is "likely to satisfy the diner," according to Tabelog's website. There are five-star user reviews on Tabelog, but they remain very rare.

Toshihiko Kozai, head of product and marketing at Kakaku, says the strict ratings can be attributed to the "strong commitment to food culture in Japan."

"Tabelog users tend to not give high ratings just because they find a (restaurant's food) delicious but rather... they tend to rate restaurants carefully, considering them in relation to other renowned establishments," he says.

Beyond the stars

Relative comparisons to other dining establishments aside, could Japanese cultural traits explain the moderate scoring behavior of Tabelog users?

Kyoko Nakayama, a Tokyo-based food journalist and Japan Times contributor, says the reason why Tabelog users tend not to give five-star ratings is likely due to an encouragement of *kaizen* (improvement). "Giving it a perfect score would mean the end of *kaizen*," she says.

James Farrer, a professor of sociology specializing in food and nightlife research at Tokyo's Sophia University, says Japanese survey respondents in general exhibit a



Top: While Google may be the restaurant review medium of choice in other countries, Japan largely prefers Tabelog, where five-star reviews are rare and three-star reviews aren't what they seem. Left: James Farrer, a sociology professor at Tokyo's Sophia University, believes that the tendency towards middling reviews is stronger in Japan than in other Asian countries. AFP-JJL; COURTESY OF SOPHIA UNIVERSITY

"central tendency bias" — an inclination to choose a middle category and avoid extreme opinions. He believes this tendency applies to restaurant reviews.

"(It could) also be an ability to want to see things both ways or to not stand out too much from others," says Farrer. "This means Japanese people are somewhat more likely to choose a three rather than a one or a five."

This leaves open the possibility of three-star reviews as softened critiques, but Farrer speculates that there could be a greater cultural tendency to suppress positive reviews than negative ones.

"It is OK to give a disapproving review of a place one finds truly disappointing, but if one loves a restaurant, it becomes one's (special) place, and expressing too many positive

Osaka is emerging from Kyoto's fine-dining shadow

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A single clam and lotus croquette crowned with a halo of crisp lotus root sits poised in a pool of delicate cream. A drizzle of emerald parsley sauce harmonizes the dish with its freshness and earthiness.

Both visual and textural perfection, the dish is part of a course at *Liaison*, a Michelin-starred establishment in Osaka, and served up by chef Yuji Tsuji, who was working his second to last night on the job in late October. After joining the high-end restaurant in 2021, he helped it earn its one Michelin star three years in a row, a distinction reflected in his creative dishes such as a pillowy soft steamed rabbit — a bold choice in Japan — with spaghetti squash and carrot sauce, which makes distinctive use of cumin foam, and a pan-fried foie gras and *anago* (conger eel) married with the deep umami of matsutake and richly spiced wagyu consommé.

It's a setting that stands very much in contrast with the stereotypical image of Osaka's food scene dominated by *okonomiyaki* (savory pancake), *kushikatsu* (breaded skewers), *takoyaki* (octopus dumplings) and other examples of so-called *B-kyū* (B-grade) cuisine, the Japanese term for cheap yet delicious comfort foods. An exit survey of visitors at Kansai airport in December 2024 showed

that 80.5% reported B-grade cuisine as one of the activities they enjoyed when staying in Osaka, far outstripping what they pursued when staying in other towns and regions.

Yet Osaka is seeking to break out of its soul food mold and highlight its higher-end offerings — with no shortage of talent to drive this goal.

Apart from being a playground for intrepid chefs like Tsuji, Osaka is also home to the Tsuji Culinary Institute (not related to the former who also happens to be an alumnus), which was established in the city in 1960 and is considered one of the most prestigious cooking schools in the country. Also growing the city's global reputation is the Michelin Guide for Kyoto and Osaka, which first launched in 2010. Although Osaka still lives somewhat in the shadow of its history-rich neighbor, in the 2024 guide, the city increased its listings to 214, up from 193 the previous year, and a trio of establishments with three Michelin stars kept their designations.

The guide is helping to shine a spotlight on Osaka that many in the food and beverage industry feel is needed. Demand for dining is not being supported by the domestic market with consumption yet to recover to pre-pandemic levels. Even before 2020, the city's restaurant scene was considered a daunting battleground, as restaurants per capita are far higher than in the capital of Tokyo, resulting in a fiercely competitive environment.

As a high-end restaurant chef, Tsuji has felt the sluggishness over the past five years.

"This might not just be in Osaka, but the pandemic really changed Japanese people's approach to eating out. People who used to only eat out now eat at home more often, and people who like trendy restaurants that are hard to book tend to only go to those kinds of places, so I think the range of customers who go to restaurants has shrunk significantly."

On the plus side, Tsuji feels the Michelin-rated establishments have been a draw for overseas visitors. As visitor numbers hit a new record of 36.9 million in 2024, tourism represents an increasingly lucrative opportunity. Like many areas across Japan, Osaka's plan for the future of tourism targets quality over quantity. A flood of luxury hotels are simultaneously bringing big spenders to the city and adding to the high-end culinary offerings.

The Four Seasons Osaka, which opened in August 2024, has added several new upscale options, including *Sushi L'Abyesse* Osaka Yannick Alleno, the third *L'Abyesse* restaurant following the two-Michelin-starred *L'Abyesse Paris*, as well as its signature Cantonese restaurant *Jiang Nan Chun*.

"The Four Seasons in Osaka is bringing a new level of sophistication to the city's renowned culinary scene, building on Osaka's reputation as the nation's kitchen," Ai Kaneko, the hotel's food and beverage marketing assistant manager, says via email. The

hotel's Bar Bota, which overlooks the glittering city lights from the 37th floor, is taking things up a notch, too. Bartender Andrei Marcu and his team have now begun hosting guest bartenders, strengthening the bar's reputation on the domestic and international circuit. After all, it's an opportune time — Japanese bars have been building an international following for their sophisticated cocktails, with five bars making the cut on Asia's 50 Best Bars 2024's list.

Marcu, who has worked at acclaimed bars, including managing the *Couquette* Group in London, has dedicated himself to making full use of high quality Japanese ingredients in creative ways. Concoctions include the *Fast Forward*, a negroni made with *shiso* (Perilla) gin and red sake, and the *Miso & Coffee* incorporates Japanese *Agricole* Rum, miso and maple with artichoke wine, topped with Earl Grey soft foam.

Beyond luxury hotels drawing in wealthier clientele, the Osaka Expo that kicks off in April also represents huge potential. Although ticket sales have been tepid so far, organizers are still expecting millions to flock to the city.

The event is inspiring local businesses to up their offerings. One example is *Senryu*, an Osaka-based restaurant management company, which has been operating budget-friendly *izakaya* (Japanese pub) in the city for decades. Deviating from one of its



Left: Bar Bota, the 37th-floor watering hole at the Four Seasons Osaka, looks out on a glittering cityscape better known for its cheap eats and drinks. Right: Opened in December 2024, Shinon Washoku Senryu crabs traditions from Shinto by having its ingredients blessed at a local shrine before sending them to the kitchen. PHOEBE AMOROSO



corporate philosophies of providing "cheap and delicious food," the company launched *Shinon Washoku Senryu*, a high-end Japanese restaurant in December 2024. Its concept takes inspiration from Shinto beliefs, conducting a special blessing on the ingredients at a shrine before transporting them to the kitchen for preparation. The top dinner course is priced at ¥30,000.

"With the World Expo coming up in Osaka, we would like to be able to cater to a lot of overseas customers," says Naotaka Anshita, a representative from *Senryu*.

Meanwhile, chef Tsuji is working on his next venture, which will open in Osaka this spring: *Empathie*, an intimate French restaurant with just 10 counter seats, so he can serve and communicate with each guest directly. Courses are set to be priced around ¥18,000 and wine pairings an additional ¥10,000, placing it firmly in the special occasion category for most diners. Its launch will add yet another upscale establishment to Osaka's culinary scene.

And with Tsuji's talent, the city might add yet another Michelin star.