

WEEK 3

Roll up! Roll up!

By DANIEL ROBSON

Special to The Japan Times

London, where there are tens of thousands of Japanese people living at any one time, is awash with world cuisine. But most Japanese food available in eateries there would hardly pass muster in its homeland.

That is where Hideyuki Uno scores big, because — as founder-proprietor of the *takoyaki* (fried octopus) business Juzu — he's wowing passersby with the real fast-food deal from Japan.



On a roll: Hideyuki Uno (center) at one of his London *takoyaki* stalls
DANIEL ROBSON PHOTO

Originally an Osaka delicacy, takoyaki are small doughy balls of batter, mixed with tempura scraps, fish or kelp powder, pickled ginger and spring onion. That tasty dollop is then stuffed with a piece of octopus and cooked on a griddle before being served piping hot and topped with a sweet brown sauce, mayonnaise and powdered seaweed or *katsuboshi* (fish flakes).

Osaka-born Uno, 33, now has a small but successful business serving these spherical morsels in their most authentic incarnation from his sidewalk stalls.

"Almost 11 years ago, I went to Camden Market in north London, which is teeming at weekends with locals and visitors. There, I met a guy called Yumi," explains Uno. "He had a takoyaki stall, but his stuff was (evil)! And (restaurant chain) YO! Sushi also does takoyaki, but it's frozen.

"So I realized there was no real takoyaki in this country, and I thought, 'Why don't I make it?' "

When he was 15, Uno and his older sister moved to England ("somewhere near Cambridge") to attend a Buddhist boarding school associated with Osaka's ancient Shitenoji temple. After 10 years' study in England, including a postgraduate thesis on the cultural impact of language study, his command of English had improved dramatically, he'd acquired resident status and started working.

"I was doing full-time jobs in an office or as a driver, but it didn't feel right," he says.

"I couldn't see myself in five years still working in those jobs. My father runs his own builders' merchant business, so maybe subconsciously I wanted to run my own business too."

Uno got himself fully licensed with the intention of opening an *izakaya* (Japanese-style pub). But London's outrageous property prices sent him back to the chopping board.

At that juncture, inspired by Yumi's evil takoyaki, he decided to introduce Londoners to the snack's true delights. So, early in 2007, he set up his first stall at the popular Sunday UpMarket on gentrified Brick Lane in East London.

Having imported a cast-iron takoyaki griddle set from Japan, sourced a fresh-octopus supplier and enlisted the help of an old school friend, his opening menu included *yakisoba pan* (noodles in a bun) and baby castella (a sweet sponge cake). Pretty soon, though, he realized that it was the takoyaki that was hitting the passing public's spot.

"It's so different from what you can get in this country, shapewise and tastewise," he says. "It looks funny, you know what I mean? And it's fun to watch it being made."

Uno's menu now focuses only on takoyaki and, for vegetarians, cheese yaki — essentially the same, but with cheese instead of octopus, and made with kelp powder instead of fish stock.

"In Japan, no one cares about vegetarians," he jokes. "But in England it's really different. I think half my customers are vegetarians."

Within a few months of opening, and working only on Sundays, Uno says he'd recouped his initial outlay; and after just six months he hired some part-time staff and opened a second stall in the Saturday market at the Brunswick Centre in Bloomsbury, close by the British Museum. He says that the paperwork required for keeping his business away from the long tentacles of the law is no big deal, despite it being in his second language.

"I love studying, so I had no problem getting those licenses," he says. "I've done a postgraduate thesis at Oxford Brookes, so this was easy-peasy."

He also shrugs off any question of yakuza interference. "I've heard about the Chinese gangsters (in London), but Japanese people don't really integrate in foreign countries like other Asians. London has Chinatown and Korean Town, but there's no Japanese Town. No one's ever asked me for money except the market authorities!"

Selling takoyaki and cheese yaki at £3.80 (¥580) per dish of eight, as well as green tea for £1 and miso soup for £1.50, Uno's stalls rake in a modest £500 (¥77,000) a day — though his takings largely depend on how London's fickle weather behaves. When selling at music festivals, Japanese culture festivals and street festivals, though, he says this can skyrocket to as much as £7,000 (¥1.1 million) over a weekend.

"Half of my sales come from repeat customers and half is passing trade," Uno says. "In Bloomsbury there's a Chinese guy who comes every week and buys two or three portions in one day!"

Since authentic takoyaki is so rare in London, Juzu has already been featured in TimeOut magazine and on various foodie blogs. One such missive bigs up the friendly staff and authentic flavor, while another describes watching the preparation of the rotund recipe as "exciting!"

"Upon tasting the takoyaki, my first impression was 'Owwwwwww!'," remarks Mei Li at "food porn" blog Family Styles. "The inside is like a molten hot earth center of boiling lava that quickly sears your taste buds into submission. Once my tongue finally recovered, it could appreciate the crazy mix of flavors in the octopus balls — the sweet teriyaki gooeyness of the sauce, the warm, mushy, buttery pancake taste, the vaguely fishy chewy bits of octopus — it's a huge party in your mouth and everyone you can possibly think of is invited."

Uno puts a large part of his success down to his staff, most of whom are students. "I think I'm lucky to have them around me," he reflects. "I think I'm a shit boss. I'm really selfish and I don't explain well, but my staff are kind and warmhearted and they're still with me, so I'm really grateful. And my wife is very understanding. I quit my job straight after we got married to start the takoyaki stall, and she was OK with it."

Nowadays, Uno and his wife, Rie, take advantage of the spare time Juzu affords to play music together in their folk band Dobby (Uno also plays drums in three other bands). He plans to keep expanding his business — perhaps by opening stalls selling noodles, *okonomiyaki* (cabbage-based pancakes), *donburi* (rice-based dishes) and Japanese confectionary.

"I'm glad I started with a smaller project, or I think I would have screwed it up," Uno says. "I think most Osaka people can make takoyaki easily. We know what it tastes like, because we eat it from being young.

"I think my takoyaki is the best in London," he adds with a totally straight face. "Really!"

The Japan Times: Sunday, Oct. 18, 2009
(C) All rights reserved