

Cherry Blossoms in Big Apple Part 2—Today and Beyond

John Tedford

In modern times, Japanese often occupy an unusual niche in New York—the non-immigrants. New York is now roughly 10% people of Asian background, mostly immigrants. Each nationality seems to find its own niche in the economic fabric. South Asians (Indians and Pakistanis) are predominant in running newsstands and driving taxis. Koreans are the prime operators of overnight groceries (replacing the old Italian markets), nail salons and dry cleaners (often taking over Jewish family businesses). Chinese are still best known for running laundries and restaurants, but Chinatown has spilled far out of its traditional boundaries with all kinds of import businesses. Interesting permutations occur—in the ‘Little India’ section of Lexington Avenue, vegetarian Indian restaurants have kosher certification so that they can attract orthodox Jewish customers who follow strict religious dietary laws. All these groups are immigrant groups, although some dream that they will return to live in their native countries, most are determined to stay and raise their children here.

But most of the Japanese in New York are here temporarily on business. They tend not to form the strong neighborhood bonds that characterize other immigrants. They do however continue to support the many Japanese institutions such as the Nippon Club or Japan Society that promote better Japanese–American relations. Perhaps the most distinctly Japanese neighborhood in Manhattan is the East Village. The streets there are full of young Japanese people, probably ranging from starving artists to well-subsidized students. Once I went with friends to a Tibetan restaurant in this area only to be surprised to find some Japanese dishes on the menu—a courtesy to the many *Nihonjin* in the neighborhood. Another time, one of my Japanese colleagues and two of us natives went to inspect a new Internet café in the East

Village. On the way back to the office, we stopped in an old Jewish bakery on Second Avenue. The proprietor was an elderly lady with rather startling dyed blond hair. While we bought our pastries, she asked our Japanese colleague where he was from. In return he inquired about herself and she answered without a moment’s hesitation and in a heavy New York accent, ‘I’m a geisha.’ It took him more than a little time to recover from his surprise and realize she was joking. Apparently she was used to amusing her numerous Japanese customers. The East Village is full of interesting small restaurants and *izakaya* bars that offer a casual alternative to the more expensive Midtown establishments.

Throughout the city one finds a large number of young, single Japanese women living and working on their own. In my very small apartment building (only 20 units) there are at least two such women, one working as a fabric designer and the other for Japanese TV. Even back in the 1970s, I received two marriage proposals from Japanese women friends who wanted to remain in New York and were willing to pay for a marriage in order to get a coveted green card for permanent residency. (I declined both offers.) I have come across a rather large number of such women studying art or dance in New York—only after a little conversation does it become apparent that they attend a minimal number of classes just to be able to live in the city of their choice.

Although there is no Japan Town in New York, Japanese food is ubiquitous. Every neighborhood and suburb has several restaurants (though they may be operated by Chinese or Korean owners). Teriyaki, sukiyaki and tempura became popular back in the 60s and 70s, but since the 80s, New York has been inundated with sushi. For decades, many Americans—especially those in the vast inland heart of the country—shied away from any fish except for frozen fish sticks or maybe an

occasional shrimp cocktail. If fish itself was suspect, raw fish was beyond the pale. But Americans, especially New Yorkers, do enjoy a challenge and at some point people overcame their squeamishness and took to sushi with a passion. Now it is everywhere—Ruby Foo’s is a popular restaurant with several locations in the city and calls itself a Dim Sum Sushi Palace, which sums up the demand for sushi in Chinese restaurants. Friends of mine recently witnessed a scene in a Chinese restaurant where an out-of-town couple complained vociferously that their fish was not cooked. They did not realize that *chirashi-zushi* (a raw fish, egg and rice dish served in a bowl) was neither Chinese nor stir-fried! I’m sure the rest of clientele looked at them askance as ignorant *inakappe* (yokels).

Two of the latest food fads would be considered hopelessly mundane in Japan—green tea and *edamame* green soybeans boiled in the pod. Americans, and New Yorkers in particular, are health obsessed, and both green tea and green soybeans are now touted as good for health. I keep thinking that someone is getting very rich from these products because they are both basically inexpensive but often cost quite a lot in food stores or restaurants. Plus, a restaurant in Rockefeller Center near my office actually serves a dish of edamame in place of the traditional basket of bread and rolls when you first sit down. Of course, some Americans find green tea a little weak (i.e. too subtle) for their palates, so it is now sold in many versions mixed with ginger, lemon, and other flavorings. What will be next? There are always the baby bee grubs (*hachinoko*) and *mamushi* snake powder that I remember well from Nagano...

Of course one of the ‘oldest’ Japanese institutions in New York is the office of the Japan Railways Group where I have worked since 1979. A JNR (latterly JR) office has been located in the Rockefeller



Grand Central Terminal: The hub for Japanese business people in Midtown (Author)



Kinokuniya Bookstore in Rockfeller Center

(Author)

Center since the 1964 Tokyo Olympics and the inauguration of the shinkansen. Many generations of JNR and latterly JR staff members from Japan have worked hard in New York to research the American railroad system and other aspects of American business and culture. I and other local employees have endeavored to provide American travelers with useful information about rail travel in Japan. Our Japanese staff all return to Japan having become at least a little 'Nyoo-Yawkified.'

I myself rather modestly trace my connection with the New York office back to the first Emperor Jimmu himself. In 1968, when I first went to Japan for junior year abroad from college, I was supposed to homestay with a family who had had several Americans live with them. However, the family was faced by the prospect of the marriage of one of their daughters to a member of the Imperial family. Either they could not endure another burden during that hectic time, or perhaps the Imperial Household Agency just said 'No,' but I was shifted to a different family called Makita. Through

them I eventually made contact with the JR (then JNR) office and began working on the railroad. One might say that *amaterasu-omikami* (the legendary founding Goddess Amaterasu) moves in mysterious ways! Japan's ownership of the Rockefeller Center may have ended in the 1990s but our New York JR Office is still thriving in 2004.

As New York begins the 21st Century, the links between the city and Japan will only become stronger. No one forgets that many Japanese people were victims of the World Trade Center attack—their ashes rest mingled with the many generations of New Yorkers who have lived in lower Manhattan since the days of New Amsterdam. Many Japanese continue to make New York their permanent home,

and many more have worked and lived here before taking their 'Nyu-Yoku' experience back to Japan. All the while other New Yorkers of all races and backgrounds are exposed every day to more and more of the culture of Japan, whether it be *sashimi*, martial arts or Pokémon—there's a big Pokémon store right across the street from our office. Every spring, the cherry blossoms bloom in the Brooklyn Botanic Garden and thousands of Big Apple residents throng to the annual Japanese Festival. Perry and Harris should be very pleased to see how Japan, once so isolated and distant, has come to live in and change their city. ■



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