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# When Food Is Art

Where to find the traditional *kyo-ryori* cuisine Kyoto is known for, plus more refined takes on Japanese staples BY MELINDA JOE

**W**hat distinguishes dining in Japan's cultural capital from dining in Tokyo is *kyo-ryori*, or Kyoto cuisine. Synonymous with *kyo-kaiseki*, *kyo-ryori* is all about local, seasonal ingredients (especially vegetables and tofu) and beautiful, delicate presentation, right down to the serving pieces used across several courses. *Kyo-ryori*'s roots date back more than a thousand years to when the city was the seat of Japan's imperial court. This stateliness still permeates the culinary world today, which jibes with the city's ambience. It also explains why Kyoto has been slow to embrace trends or outside influences in its food. But that resistance hardly matters, because it's artful tradition that travelers come here to taste. DEPARTURES thinks these ten restaurants dish up the best of it.

At Miyamasou, chef Hisato Nakahigashi sources food from nearby forests.



## Hyotei

Michelin three-star chef Yoshihiro Takahashi is known for his precision in dishes such as salt-grilled ayu cut to reveal a glimpse of roe. Meals are plated on vintage ceramics in 400-year-old teahouses surrounded by gardens. One of the world's only three-star breakfasts is available in the annex most seasons.

35 Nanzenji-Kusagawa-cho, Sakyo-ku; [hyotei.co.jp](http://hyotei.co.jp)

## Junsei

For centuries, Kyoto's Buddhist monks perfected tofu's silky consistency. Today, no better restaurant highlights the bean curd than Junsei near Nanzenji temple. Order the *yuba kaiseki*, and the staff will demonstrate how to make yuba (tofu skin) by simmering soy milk and skimming off the top layer.

Nanzenji-Monmae, Sakyo-ku; [to-fu.co.jp](http://to-fu.co.jp)

## Izuzu

At Izuzu, in Gion, the specialty is *hakozushi*, rectangular pressed and sliced sushi. Try the *sabazushi*—pickled mackerel and vinegared rice tightly rolled in kelp that's peeled before eating. The narrow dining room, lined in faded shoji screens, holds only about 20 people; sushi can also be taken to go.

292-1 Gionmachi Kita-gawa, Higashiyama-ku

## Kiln

Kiln showcases ingredients from the city and neighboring Shiga Prefecture in dishes that fuse Japanese and Western cuisines. Wagyu beef, for example, is dry aged and wood-fire grilled—two uncommon techniques in kitchens here. A communal table at the front doubles as a tea counter for matcha.

Murakamiju Bldg. 2F, 194 Sendo-cho, Shijo-Sagaru, Nishi-Kiyamachi-dori, Shimogyo-ku; [kilnrestaurant.jp](http://kilnrestaurant.jp)

## Ajiro

For *shojin-ryori* (vegetarian cuisine eaten by Buddhist monks), try quiet, Michelin-starred Ajiro, outside Myoshinji temple. Expect dishes like fried tofu-skin dumplings stuffed with lily bulb petals or grilled *kamonasu* (a native eggplant).

28-3 Hanazono Teranomaemachi, Ukyo-ku

## Torito

Many think of yakitori as fast food, but at Torito, the experience is slower. Take a seat at the counter and try the *tsukune* (chicken meatball), which comes with a raw egg yolk for dipping, or a salad of Yamaguchi Prefecture leeks tossed with chicken and a light citrus-based ponzu sauce.

Kimihara Bldg. 1F, 9-5 Higashi-Maruta-cho, Sakyo-ku

## Gokenshimo

The *obanzai-ryori* (Kyoto-style home cooking) at Gokenshimo uses medicinal herbs to delicious effect. The pork belly and vegetable hot pot arrives in a broth of green tea, while spices such as ginger are added for digestive benefits. The restaurant is housed in a restored *machiya* (wooden townhouse), where a kimono-clad hostess welcomes diners.

609 Kikkoya-cho Takakura-dori, Nakagyo-ku



A kaiseki course at Hyotei features boiled eggs, goosefish liver, sushi, dried mullet roe, and vegetables in miso.



Slices of yellowtail fish are seared over Japanese sumi charcoal at Tempura Matsu, which serves more than its name suggests.

## My Own Favorite

by Matt Goulding

### Ogata

"Kaiseki hounds know that Michelin two-star chef Toshiro Ogata cooks precise, soulful food. His menu eats like poetry—from the dashi stock made with springwater to a warm bowl of rice dusted with crispy shards of salt. You'll understand when he says, 'Western cuisine is about addition; Japanese cuisine is about subtraction.'" *726 Shinkamanzan-cho, Ayanokoji-dori Nishitoin-Higashiru, Shimogyo-ku.*

### Tenyu

Twenty-seat Tenyu specializes in Kyoto's twist on tempura, made with cottonseed oil, not sesame, so it's lighter and less oily. Opt for the \$100 tasting menu for the uni tempura: sea urchin wrapped in seaweed and flash-fried, so the outside crisps up and the inside retains its custard-like consistency.

324-1 Ebiya-cho, Gokomachi Sanjo-Sagaru, Nakagyo-ku

### Tempura Matsu

When Tempura Matsu first opened in the northwestern Arashiyama district four decades ago, its specialty was, as the name suggests, tempura. While it still appears on the menu, the cuisine has evolved. Young chef Toshio Matsuno's ingredients, like line-caught fatty tuna from Aomori Prefecture, make it worth the 30-minute cab ride from the city center.

21-26 Umezu Onawaba-cho, Ukyo-ku

### Miyamasou

In forested mountains an hour north, Michelin two-star chef Hisato Nakahigashi continues his family's tradition of foraging, but he incorporates modernist techniques gleaned during his six-year stint in France working with Alain Ducasse. The tasting menu features wild delicacies such as bitter *fukinoto* (butterbur plant) in spring and umami-rich wild bear that Nakahigashi gets from local hunters in winter.

375 Daihizan Hanaseharachi-cho, Sakyo-ku; [miyamasou.jp](http://miyamasou.jp)