

# Sepia chef Martin Benn's guide to eating and drinking in Tokyo, Japan

PETER BARRETT March 19 2018



Yakitori (grilled chicken skewers). Photo: Shutterstock

He's the English-born chef behind Sydney's 2018 (equal) best restaurant, the multi-award winning, three-hatted (and Japanese-influenced) Sepia. With plans under way to open a new restaurant with Melbourne restaurateur Chris Lucas, we catch up with Benn after a recent trip to Tokyo, a city he and wife and Sepia co-owner Vicki Wild have visited annually for more than a decade.

## Is there somewhere you always go back to?

I particularly like yakitori. Everyone knows it's grilled chicken (and you can't get better than grilled chicken) but there's so many places that do it in different ways. The most famous is Bird Land at Ginza Station, which is next door to Sukiyabashi Jiro, the most famous sushi restaurant in Tokyo. Workers just drop in, have a few skewers and go home. Then you've got higher-end ones, like Torishiki.



### Quintessential Tokyo dining experience?

It was our anniversary last time so we went to the New York Grill in the Park Hyatt on the 52nd floor. They play jazz and sell wagyu from Hokkaido right down to Osaka and Kobe. It's got an amazing view over the red glowing lights of the city. I overdid it and had a very fatty wagyu from Kagoshima, which was so rich.

### Favourite market?



Fresh fish for sale at the Tsukiji fish market. Photo: Shutterstock

The obvious one is Tsukiji Market, which is the number-one fish market in the world. I remember the first time I went there was with Tetsuya [Wakuda] about 18 years ago. We got a pass to the auction floor, and then had a sushi and beer at six in the morning, which was quite an experience. [The market is due to move to the Toyosu waterfront district in October 2018].

### Any more?

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I usually take the overnight flight and land in the morning. Then I drop my stuff off at the hotel and go to one of the big food halls in one of the department stores, like Mitsukoshi, Isetan or Takashimaya. You go down to the basement and it's amazing: there's pastry, jellies, sushi, yakitori, soba, sake shops and fresh fruit and vegetable produce. It's not like Woollies - this fruit and veg is prized. I saw a bunch of grapes for \$200. And peaches so big you couldn't wrap both your hands around them. My tip: go late in the day, about 6pm, when they have a sale.

### Favourite food hall?

Coredo. They have a dashi bar and there's a kombu shop where you can buy strips of kombu and different types of seaweed; plus an amazing knife shop and a shop that specialises in gold - honey with gold, oil with gold - it's just great to have a browse around.

### What about ramen?

I remember once, in the wintertime, it was really cold and Vick and I went to this ramen shop called Kururi. It's since changed to Otsukaya but it's basically the same shop, from what I understand. It's unassuming, on the banks of a river, but known by ramen connoisseurs. The miso ramen I had was so thick you could stand your chopsticks up in it.

### Most interesting sushi?

Every time we go to Japan we try something new. This time we went to a place called Sushi Tokami, which is regarded as "new blood" in sushi making. Tokami makes his rice with red vinegar, instead of the regular rice vinegar. It's almost as if the rice itself has a different texture and a different colour; and quite an interesting taste, as well - more savoury, less sweet.

### What about bars?

Vick and I love jazz. The New York Grill is great because at 8.30pm every night they have a singer. There's another in the Grand Hyatt called Maduro - a classic jazz lounge where you can still smoke (not that I smoke). The other one I found interesting was Star Bar Ginza. Their attention to detail is second to none; it can take five to 10 minutes to make a drink. They only have five or eight seats, so you might pay \$100 for a drink. Make it last, that's what I say!

### Can you recommend a place to try sake?

Hasegawa Sake Store in Azabujuban . You can do tastings there and last time I stumbled across a gin out of Kyoto with soft botanicals called Ki No Bi. I brought a couple of bottles home with me this time.

### Soba noodles. Talk to me.

I'm a big soba fan. We went to a very interesting place for lunch called Muto Soba, named after the chef. He's another monk-like looking guy: shaved head and all the robes and he actually invited me to make soba with him and took me into his kitchen, which is about the size of an ATM. I got to cut my own soba for lunch, which was really an amazing experience.

### Anything else?

To have really good tempura is life-changing. I went to a place once in Ropponghi, called Raku-Tei - it's not there any more - but it was a two-Michelin-starred tempura restaurant. The chef was 84 years old. It was a really memorable experience so I thought we should go back this time but we found out [the chef] had died, which was sad. We looked for some other tempura restaurants and found one in Ginza called Fukamachi. We had another amazing experience and I got talking to the chef and it turned out Raku-Tei was his old boss. It was great.

### DETAILS

**Bird Land Ginza**, Tsukamoto Sozan Building B1F 4-2-15 Ginza, Chuo, 3 5250 1081

**Sukiyabashi Jiro**, 4 Chome-2-15 Ginza, Chuo, 3 3535 3600

**Torishiki**, 2-14-12 Kami-Osaki, Shingawa, 3 3440 7656

**New York Grill**, level 52, Park Hyatt, 3-7-1-2 Nishi Shinjuku, Shinjuku, 3 5322 1234

**Tsukiji Market**, 5 Chome-2-1 Tsukiji, Chuo, 3 3542 1111

**Mitsukoshi**, 4-6-16 Ginza, Chuo, 3 3562 1111



Sepia chef Martin Benn visits Tokyo annually. *Photo: Supplied*



The New York Grill at Tokyo's Park Hyatt. *Photo: Supplied*

**Isetan**, 3-14-1, Shinjuku, Shinjuku, 3 3352 1111

**Takashimaya**, 2--4-1, Nihonbashi, Chuo, 3 3211 4111

**Coredo**, 1-4-1, Nihonbashi, Chuo, 3 3272 4801

**Otsukaya**, 3-2 Ichigayatamachi, Shinjuku, 3 3269 0801

**Sushi Tokami**, 8-2-10, Ginza, Chuo, 3 3571 6005

**Maduro**, level 4, Grand Hyatt, 6-10-3 Roppongi, Minato, 3 4333 8783

**Star Bar Ginza**, Sankosha Building, B1F 1-5-13, Ginza, 3 3535 8005

**Hasegawa Sake Store**, 2-3-3 Azabujuban, Minato, 3 5439 9498

**Muto Soba**, Umemura Building 1F, 1-13-1 Nihonbashi-Muromachi, Chuo, 3 3231 7188

**Tempura Fukamachi**, 2-5-2 Kyobashi, Chuo, 3 5250 8777

## RECOMMENDED



Junior diners shunning nuggets in favour of grown-up food



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