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UNITED TASTES

A City’s Specialty, Japanese in Name Only



Photographs by Michael Hansen for The New York Times

Clockwise, from top left: Manna; Nasai Teriyaki; Teriyaki Bowl; and 5 Seasons Grill.

By JOHN T. EDGE  
Published: January 5, 2010

Seattle

UNITED TASTES

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Recipe: Chicken Teriyaki (January 6, 2010)

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Michael Hansen for The New York Times

**A KOREAN ONE** Chicken teriyaki at Manna in Seattle; the dish pops up all over the city.

SALAAMA, a Somali roadhouse near the airport here, serves chicken suqaar, a dish of griddled halal chicken, onions and peppers, popular with cab drivers. Interlopers to this clubhouse restaurant order the dish the way the menu advertises it — as chicken teriyaki.

At 5 Seasons Grill, a Vietnamese restaurant north of the city, a banner promises “The Best Teriyaki in Town.” That would be Item 38, com bo nuong, beef short ribs, marinated with lemon grass and other nontraditional teriyaki ingredients.

“This is just like teriyaki,” said Cat Vo, an owner. “Only it’s much better.”

In Seattle, teriyaki is omnipresent, the closest this city comes to a Chicago dog.

At Safeco Field, home of the Seattle Mariners, fans eat chicken teriyaki. Specialty food retailers stock teriyaki sauces, including a triple garlic take from Tom Douglas, perhaps Seattle’s most well-known chef.

Many Hawaiian restaurants serve a version. Some Thai restaurants do too. Tokyo Garden Teriyaki in the University District violates the dictates of traditional American and Japanese cookery with its corn dog teriyaki, a \$5 gut punch of deep-fried corn dogs, sliced, tossed with wok-fried vegetables and drizzled with teriyaki sauce.

The Washington State Restaurant Association has identified 83 Seattle restaurants with teriyaki in their name, including I Love Teriyaki and I Luv Teriyaki. (A concurrent search yielded about 40

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Michael Hansen for The New York Times

**INNOVATION** Manna has wraps with teriyaki ingredients.

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**VARIETY** A Tokyo Garden version features corn dogs.

restaurants named Burger King, McDonald’s or Wendy’s.)

In Seattle, teriyaki is shorthand for a range of dishes, from teriyaki burgers, piled with chopped beef, to pineapple teriyaki, platters of chicken paved with canned pineapple.

The phenomenon, now in its fourth decade, has roots in Asian immigration. (For a 2007 Seattle Weekly article, Jonathan Kauffman wrote that Toshihiro Kasahara, a peripatetic Japanese-born restaurateur, may have popularized the teriyaki sauce style now standard in Seattle when he opened Toshi’s Teriyaki Restaurant in 1976.)

Teriyaki is derived from the Japanese root words *teri*, to shine, and *yaki*, to broil or grill. That’s the way traditional teriyaki looks: shiny and incised with grill marks. In Japan, teriyaki is a mix of soy sauce, sake and the rice wine mirin, which imparts a subtle sweetness.

In Seattle, subtlety gets short shrift. Cooks sweeten with white sugar and pineapple juice. They thicken with cornstarch and peanut butter. Ginger and garlic go into the mix, because of the Korean ancestry of many cooks.

Tokyo Garden’s owner, Sujan Shrestha, immigrated from Nepal 11 years ago to attend college. He stayed to help his brother run a company that imports dried cow’s milk and yak’s milk cheese for pet treats.

For Mr. Shrestha, opening a teriyaki shop was just another entrepreneurial tack. “In Seattle, they eat teriyaki,” he said. “It’s American, it’s cheap and it’s good. I’m a businessman; that’s enough for me.”

He serves Nepalese dumplings, known as momo, with a side of coleslaw, along with gyoza, Japanese dumplings. All are prepared under the direction of the sushi chef, José Ramirez, born in Puebla, Mexico.

That corn dog teriyaki is a stunner. But his signature dish is chicken teriyaki: butterflied boneless thighs, marinated in a soy-based sauce, then grilled, glazed with a thicker version of that sauce and sliced into strips.

“Chicken teriyaki is the best cheap food there is,” he said. “It’s ideal for international students. I got through school on oatmeal [cookies](#) and coffee. If only I could have had teriyaki, things would have been different.”

Seattle is not the sole American city that loves teriyaki.

Dozens of manufacturers market sauce riffs, like Veri Veri Teriyaki from Soy Vay Enterprises in Felton, Calif. Waba Grill Teriyaki House, which promotes skinless chicken, cooked without oil or MSG, has more than 20 California locations. Teriyaki Madness, based in Las Vegas (but owned by Seattle natives) is selling Nevada on teriyaki, pitched by an Elvis impersonator.

Only in Seattle, however, are teriyaki restaurants so ubiquitous that they’re virtually invisible, said Knute Berger, the author of “Pugetopolis,” a book of essays on modern Seattle mores.

“Seattle likes to talk about local foods, about ridiculous things like fiddlehead coulis,” Mr. Berger said. “Seattle yuppies love the idea of going to some obscure Chinese place for dim sum but won’t dare tell you that they eat chicken teriyaki. Those places are so much a part of the streetscape that we can’t even see them.”

Teriyaki claims its place at white tablecloth restaurants, too. Daniel’s Broiler, a steakhouse on Lake Union serves teriyaki-marinated beef as well as poached rock [lobster](#) tails.

But the average Seattle teriyaki spot is utilitarian, with fluorescent lights overhead and neon signs glaring from smudged storefront windows. The quality of ingredients is often measured by the salt water that packers inject into the restaurant’s chicken thighs. “We use a 2 percent chicken,” said Mr. Shrestha, decrying competitors who, in an effort to save money, buy chicken with much higher saline levels.

Economy is one of the virtues of Seattle teriyaki. It’s part of the problem, too. “Teriyaki is cheap and kind of dirty,” said Debbie Sarow, a bookstore owner who often eats a brown-bag lunch at her desk. “Everybody here is focused on what’s in their food, but teriyaki sauce is mysterious. You can’t figure out what’s in there, and that scares some people off.”

Boo Yul Ko and her husband, In Ja Ko, own Manna Deli & Teriyaki, cater-corner from the 5 Seasons Grill. She sells chicken, beef and pork teriyaki plates.

On the front counter, Ms. Ko stacks teriyaki wraps with the heft of lead piping. Engorged with meat, sauce, rice and [salad](#) — the constituent ingredients of a teriyaki plate — they rise in pyramids near a

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ceramic cat statuette, its paw raised in a gesture of welcome. She takes great pride in selling those wraps for \$3.99, a price that first-generation immigrants (and college students) recognize as a bargain.

The Kos, Korean natives, moved to Seattle from Idaho in 1999, when their son, Sam Ko, enrolled in Seattle University as an undergraduate. (He went on to earn a dual M.D./M.B.A. degree from the [University of Rochester](#).)

“Seattle has a thousand teriyakis,” Mrs. Ko said one afternoon. Her tone was dismissive, as if explaining the looming presence of the Space Needle to a not particularly bright child. “No Americans do the cooking, Koreans do.”

“This is Seattle food,” she said, extending her argument. “For Seattle people. This is what we eat here. Seattle people eat teriyaki. This isn’t Dallas.”

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A version of this article appeared in print on January 6, 2010, on page D1 of the New York edition.

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