

Dotonbori

(target: 500–750 ww, actual: 714)

Dotonbori is one of Osaka's most celebrated dining and entertainment districts. Its restaurants cover the full spectrum of the city's food culture, from regional favorites like *takoyaki* and *kushikatsu* to ramen, udon, and sushi in the local style. The vivid, eye-catching signage these establishments use to vie for attention has become an attraction in its own right.

The Kabuki Quarter

Dotonbori began as a seventeenth-century project to dig a new artificial canal. Several Osaka entrepreneurs pooled their resources for the project, including one Yasui Doton. Records are sparse, but it seems that the development was named in tribute to Doton after he died in the 1615 Siege of Osaka.

In 1626, Yasui Kyubei, one of Doton's collaborators, was granted permission by officials to transfer a nearby theater district to the banks of the new canal. This brought immediate success. Theaters for entertainment, teahouses for private meetings, and dining options catering to hungry visitors of every appetite soon lined the canal and the streets that ran alongside it. Wealthy merchants would glide up the canal in their boats and dock directly outside their establishment of choice. For centuries, travel guides assured visitors that there was no theater district in all Japan to rival Dotonbori.

The largest and best-known theaters, which lined the canal's southern bank, were known as the "Five Playhouses" (*Goza*). Of these, Naka-za and Kaku-za were the most prestigious, staging only kabuki performances. Benten-za began as the Takeda Theater, wowing audiences with intricate clockwork automata. Takemoto-za and Toyotake-za were bunraku puppet theaters whose fierce rivalry produced masterpieces like Chikamatsu Monzaemon's *Love Suicides at Sonezaki*, which debuted at Takemoto-za in 1703.

During the twentieth century, the playhouses of Dotonbori struggled with the shift in public tastes with the onset of the age of cinema. Asahi-za converted itself to a movie theater, and other playhouses, out of desperation, began to show movies between dramatic productions. These changes were not enough, however, and one by one, the

Five Playhouses closed their doors and new tenants moved into their iconic buildings. The last holdout was Naka-za, which staged its final performance in 1999. (Shochiku-za is a newer theater—it opened in 1923 as a movie and revue theater in the Art Deco style and pivoted to kabuki and traditional performing arts in 1999.)

Dine Till You Drop

Throughout this period of upheaval, the restaurants of Dotonbori continued to thrive and were augmented in the 1920s and 1930s by a wave of cafes that brought European sensibilities and American jazz to the neighborhood. Today, the Dotonbori area remains the standard-bearer for Osaka's famous *kuidaore* ("dine till you drop") culture. While the options are nearly limitless, the most popular Osaka specialties are *kushikatsu*, fried meat and vegetables on skewers served with tangy dipping sauce; *takoyaki* and *okonomiyaki*, hot off the griddle and generously topped with mayonnaise, bonito flakes, and nori sprinkles; and Osaka-style soft udon in mild dashi broth.

Signage and the Battle for Attention

Standing out is everything in a town built on art and commerce like Osaka. The restaurants of Dotonbori know this dictum well, competing for attention with a riot of neon signage and enormous 3D signs. Some of these signs have gained fame across Japan and even overseas, like Glico's "Running Man" beside Ebisu-bashi Bridge, the enormous pincer-snapping crab on Kani Doraku's facade around the corner, and Kushikatsu Daruma's scowling chef, whose glare is a reminder to only dip your *kushikatsu* skewer once, before you take a bite. By night these signs are dazzling and intense, and in the light of day they add a note of cheer to the busy but friendly streetscape where there is something new to discover on every visit.

A Patchwork of Local Color

Every one of the streets and arcades that make up the Dotonbori district has its own character. The Kuromon Ichiba market is a spacious covered arcade where fresh fish and produce are always available. Ebisubashi-Suji is filled with fashion boutiques and shops selling sweet confections. Doguya-Suji, at the southern end of Sennichimae, is an entire neighborhood that caters to the needs of restaurateurs, with stores specializing in utensils, interior furnishings, and even plastic food samples.

South of Sennichimae lies the area known as Ura-Nanba. The narrower streets there create a more intimate, alluring atmosphere, and fashionable cocktail bars and retro

izakaya pubs offer sophisticated, adventurous takes on Osaka cuisine.