

A Celebration of Diversity

Tokyo's international food festivals add a new dimension to the city's reputation as a center of superb cuisine.

In its annual “quality of life” survey in 2017, UK lifestyle magazine Monocle named Tokyo as the world’s most livable city for the third consecutive year. It cited the closely-knit neighborhoods, superlative food, punctual trains, countless cultural offers, greenery and safety. They could also have mentioned the increasing number of public food festivals organized by its diverse population.

Yes, the city hosts more Michelin-starred restaurants than any other city in the world. But on weekends, thousands of visitors also find great culinary appeal at these open-air festivals of international cuisine, including the Samba Churrasco Festival in Shinjuku and the Bangladesh Boishakhi Mela (New Year) & Curry Festival in Ikebukuro.

These festivals add much to Tokyo’s cultural milieu, showcasing not only ethnic food but also traditional music and dance performances by native artists dressed in indigenous costumes. Yoyogi Park in Shibuya, a leafy expanse in the heart of Tokyo, is one of the most popular venues for these kinds of events sponsored by countries such as Thailand, India, Ireland, Laos, Spain, Sri Lanka and Vietnam.

The Laos Festival, for example, is co-organized by the Embassy of the Lao People’s Democratic Republic in Japan and Sakura Kokusai High School in Tokyo, whose students have been involved in a project to build elementary schools in Laos since 1996. Their mutual exchanges paved the way for the first Laos Festival in Tokyo in 2007, which has developed into an annual event. In 2015, when Laos and Japan celebrated the 60th anniversary of diplomatic relations, some 200,000 people visited the two-day event.

Earlier this year, on May 27 and 28, the seventh edition of the festival took place in the park under blue skies. Sprawled across the park were rows of booths and stalls showcasing Lao specialty dishes, such as *larb* (minced meat salad) and *ping gai* (Lao yakitori), and Laotian beer, as well as colorful clothes, silk scarves, bags and other handicrafts. There were exhibitions

of NPO activities and a charity bazaar organized by the high school students. On the main stage, artists from Laos and Japan performed before an appreciative audience.

Organizers were pleased by the turnout. “This festival is one of the most important ways to promote Lao culture and traditions, which in turn deepens mutual understanding, and brings Lao and Japanese people closer,” said Viroth Sundara, Lao Ambassador to Japan.

The festival also was an opportunity for members of the small Lao community in Japan to congregate. “I come to the Laos Festival every year,” said Sunantha Phommahasay, who came to Japan in 1983 as a refugee with her husband and daughter after the Laotian Civil War. Now she has three children and three grandchildren. “I’m very happy to see friends without having to arrange it,” she said. She was clearly enjoying talking with her family members, neighbors and friends over the dishes of home country cooking.

The Lao Student Association in Japan spent two months preparing their booth and stage at meetings or via SNS. “Through this festival, we make friends with other Lao students in Japan, as well as with Japanese people,” said Soukvisan Khinsamone, a university student of economics who serves as a representative of the association.

In mid-May, the Italia Amore Mio! Italian festival was held at Roppongi Hills in central Tokyo. The event was inaugurated in 2016 to commemorate the 150th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Italy and Japan, and attracted some 50,000 people. “I feel as though I am home in Italy,” said Simone Berardelli, who was attending the festival with a group of Italian friends. He also spoke of his feelings about his present home. “Life in Tokyo is good,” he said. “It’s a very safe city.”

The home countries of the events span the globe, from Asia to Europe to the African continent. The beginning of June saw the first Ethiopia Festival held



Top to bottom: Musicians were a hit at the Ethiopia Festival; Lao dish (left) and Ethiopian dishes (right) at their respective festivals; Yoyogi Park, host to the Lao Festival; and a visitor digs into a Laotian dish.



in the plaza in front of the Tokyo Big Sight exhibition hall in the Odaiba waterfront area. During the opening ceremony, the crowd practiced the Ethiopian national anthem several times before its official performance so that Ethiopians and non-Ethiopians alike could join in the song; and that set the friendly mood for the following events.

Supported by the Tokyo Metropolitan Government and other partners, the Ethiopian Embassy was proud to make its long-dreamed-of project a reality. “I think we made a good start,” said Ethiopian Ambassador to Japan Cham Ugala Uriat. “And I expect that even larger crowds will come to experience our culture at next year’s event.”

Nearly every weekend, Tokyo international food festivals act as bridges between people, making the metropolis an even more livable place for residents—Japanese and non-Japanese alike—who appreciate tolerance and diversity.

