



# Artistry You Can Almost Taste

Japan's replica foods are superbly constructed, charmingly designed and appealing to the eye. They're also big business in a country that is fascinated by food.

by Rico Komanoya



Replica food subjects can range from classical dishes like croquettes (opposite) and sushi (top), to a roped salmon (left) and a playful stacking game of pork ribs (above).



Imaginative creations replicate Western snacks (left and above) and Japanese favorites, like this twist on an octopus dish (below).



PHOTOS COURTESY IWASAKI BE-I

Viewing one of Japan's replica foods can be a truly mouth-watering experience. They range from popular standards to what can only be called "high art." When used for their original purpose—as window dressing for the eyes of passersby—they can be effective both as a very visual menu and an innovative promotional tool for the establishment.

Replica foods were said to have been invented in the 1920s, but the business took off when the "father" of today's industry, Takizo Iwasaki, began making very realistic wax samples. He founded Iwasaki Factory (currently Iwasaki Company Ltd.) in Osaka in 1932, and spent a lot of time improving the quality of the products. The postwar era saw him establish the current business model of installing showcases for the replica foods in restaurants for a small monthly fee. This style became the standard of the food service industry.

The main ingredient of the replica foods at the time

was wax colored with oil paints. Those production materials, however, were replaced by vinyl resin and silicon in the 1970s and 80s, a modification that led to more elaborate reproductions and wider usage—like their adoption as a nutritional guidance tool in schools and hospitals.

The production process consists of a number of crucial steps. It starts with taking detailed notes of the actual dishes provided by the clients. Then the factory staff categorizes the requests into those that can be satisfied with off-the-shelf items and those requiring the production of new or custom products. The latter are placed in the hands of the most qualified craftsmen—who take them through mold-making, shaping the plastic resin, using airbrushes and brushes to do the detailed coloring and on to final arrangement and inspection.

Apart from their daily regimen, the factory staff also joins in an internal competition, where they can freely focus on works inspired by their own imaginations. Some of their

most eye-catching results are visible in the window display of Ganso Shokuhin Sample-ya, a shop in Kappabashi, Tokyo's most prominent kitchenware shopping area, that is directly managed by Iwasaki. Here is the pork cutlet rice bowl frozen at the moment it is being slid from the pan into the bowl and the human-shaped carrot enjoying a hot and steamy brown stew "bath."

But as whimsical as those replicas may be, this is a serious business. While Iwasaki claims to manufacture 80 percent of Japan's samples, there are some 50 producers all together, concentrating on a market that is worth an estimated 6.8 billion to 10.2 billion yen annually. Perhaps that is easier to understand when noting some of the prices in Iwasaki's catalog: While a standard bowl of miso soup can be had for 8,000 yen, a superbly crafted handmade replica of a *kurodai*, a type of sea bream, goes for 180,000 yen.

While the custom of using replica foods in showcases has

not become an international standard, that hasn't stopped these products from becoming popular gift items for many foreign visitors. Another reason both Japanese and tourists from overseas visit the Kappabashi store is to take part in workshops (reservation required), where they can try their hand at making their own replicas using the traditional wax production method.

Before shopping for the many popular gifts that line the shelves, such as magnets, keyrings and straps featuring food items, beginners can try making tempura and a lettuce leaf, something that will ensure a renewed respect for the craftsmen behind the real goods. "Some are surprised to hear that our goal is not to make the replica food exactly the same as the original food," says Asako Chiba, the shop manager and workshop leader. "Our passion is to create replica food items that appear even more attractive and mouth-watering than the real thing."