



Part of the inn crowd

Traditional charm meets foodie heaven in Kanazawa

CHRISTINE MIDDAP

It's mid-morning at Omicho food market in the Japanese garden city of Kanazawa and the selfie-stick hordes are circling the crab stall, jostling for front position to admire the neat rows of leggy crustaceans.

Of the 200-odd outlets in this undercover market, the crabs seem the least interesting, so we stick to our rule – avoid all tour groups – and wander down other alleyways where tiny specialty stores hold culinary promise and no crowds, just smiling vendors happy to help a couple of clueless Aussies who have fallen hard for Japanese food.

What began as a relaxing mother-daughter holiday on the main island of Honshu has become a foodie tour devoted to unearthing the tiniest izakaya or longest queue of office workers patiently waiting outside ramen joints well off the tourist beat.

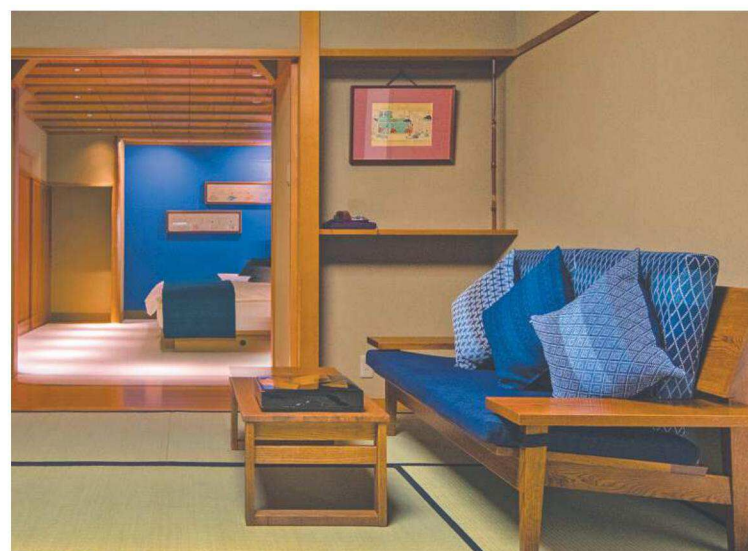
By the time we reach Kanazawa we know our oden from our udon, our kaisendon from our katsu, but the Omicho market is about to push us to another level.

The west coast city of Kanazawa, an easy train ride from Tokyo or Osaka, is famous for its gardens and well-preserved samurai and teahouse districts, but people travel here just to eat the seafood hauled from the Sea of Japan and delivered fresh each morning. This is a city

that takes food seriously and wants visitors to enjoy it. We poke around Omicho's smaller stalls, where fish pastes and kelp, fermented this and pickled that, demand a friendly exchange with the stall holder and a sample to try. We eat and we nod and silently thank the tech gods for our translation app now perennially stuck on the phrases "what is this?" followed by "very tasty!".

Further along, there's a busy trade in fresh wasabi, lotus root and heirloom vegetables that hold special classification in recognition of their historical significance to Kanazawa. There's a sense of timelessness about this orderly scene of selecting and weighing, wrapping and paying – not surprising when you consider this market, known as the "Citizen's Kitchen", has been operating for more than three centuries.

But temptations must be curtailed because our accommodation for the evening is just across the road and we are about to step from one fabulous food experience to another. Ryokan – small Japanese guesthouses – are among the best places to try local cuisine and Asadaya, with its exclusive three-room offering and Michelin recognition, is the place for food lovers who like their creature comforts. It's here that the produce we've puzzled over at the market is transformed into intricate kaiseki (multi-course haute cuisine) menus served on



Dining area and guestroom at Asadaya ryokan in Kanazawa, top and above

antique tableware or the famed Kanazawa ceramics and lacquerware.

Walking out of the markets and passing through the ryokan's colourful noren (curtains) onto a private stone pathway is akin to entering another world untouched by time. To the sound of trickling water, shoes are removed as our hosts bow low and escort us to a sunken hearth, where we drink tea and sort out the formalities before heading to our suite. This inn feels like a cross between a formal private home and a small museum, with Edo-era sword guard displays, traditional artworks, scrolls, screens and other antiques reflecting the history of the site, which can be traced back to 1659.

Asadaya's 16th-generation owner Qta Asada explains it was once a casual affair with 37 guestrooms, but

MORE TO THE STORY

For an in-depth food experience, combine a guided tour of Omicho market with a temari sushi-making lesson in a traditional wooden building. Your guide will explain some of the market's more unusual ingredients and point out the city's chefs doing their shopping. Afterwards, in the cooking studio, guests learn how to craft pretty ball-shaped sushi using fresh seafood and vegetables. It's a fun, hands-on session and a great way to learn more about the city and its culture; 68,000 yen (\$676) for two.

in-kanazawa.com

In Kanazawa, geisha are known as geiko and it's rare to see them perform in public. The geiko performance at Kanazawa Asanogawa Enyukai Hall (Geisha and

Teahouse District Museum) is entertaining and informative; the Q&A means you can ask burning questions: can geiko marry? (yes); how old is the oldest working geiko? (91). Afterwards, stroll the district and try the famed Kanazawa ice cream topped with edible gold leaf. Entry 400 yen.

kanazawa-asanogawaenyukai.com
visitkanazawa.jp

The city is crammed with bars and restaurants but for a unique experience, drop in to the 18-seat Rock Bar Sturgis in Katamachi district.

sturgis1992.wixsite.com/official

For izakaya, grab a seat at the bar, order sake and sashimi, and watch the chefs in action at Itaru Honten.

3-8 Kakinokibatake, Kanazawa



was demolished about 50 years ago and reborn as a luxury inn with five guestrooms, since whittled down to just three suites to concentrate on highly personalised service and fine dining.

Our Tsuzumi suite, named after an antique hand-drum displayed in the room, is the size of a small apartment, with a combined dining and sitting area, separate bedroom with Western-style beds, dressing room and generous bathroom with a jacuzzi and television. A private ornamental garden visible from the suite and framed like an artwork reflects the stylish minimalism of the entire property, which has been modelled on sukiya (teahouse) simplicity.

All of this doesn't come at the price of comfort; we're offered five pillow choices as we sip freshly whisked matcha tea, and the yukata robes delivered to our room fit so well they could have been made to order.

There's a large communal bath for guests, but our attention has already turned to our nine-course seafood-laden dinner, to be served in our private dining room. The menu is a journey of discovery that touches on some of our Omicho market experiences and then takes us down entirely new culinary paths.

That glistening green globe sitting pretty on a gold-rimmed antique plate? That would be jellied okra with sea urchin, prawn, baby corn and sweet potato. The green buds covered in a gelatinous film that float in our clear rock trout soup? They would be from water shield plants, prized in Japanese cuisine.

There's grouper topped with caviar, grilled rockfish with asparagus and lotus root crackers, and abalone with miso mustard dressing. All of these delicate flavours are plated with precision and the portions are small enough that we look forward to the next offering.

Raw tai (sea bream), a prized fish and symbol of good luck, comes two ways, cut and chopped, with a simple ponzu citrus sauce. We laugh as we recall photos of Japan's newest sumo champion Onosato Daiki, who hails from this region, holding two red sea bream in victory. Who needs a trophy when you have fish?

Still the food keeps coming: creamy wagyu simmered with earthy burdock root and beaten egg; rice with a clam miso soup. Sake made from the fine rice and clear waters around Kanazawa is the ideal accompaniment and a fruit platter for dessert makes a neat conclusion.

Thankfully Kanazawa is a pleasantly walkable city and so the next morning is devoted to the renowned Kenrokuen gardens, situated next to Kanazawa Castle.

In the final flush of spring, the cherry blossoms have given way to dazzling clusters of azaleas and irises. As we walk we plot our eating for the remaining days.

The thick chocolate-coloured curry, a specialty of Kanazawa, is top of the list at an informal little joint called Turban. The ramen at Uguisu, not much more than a hole in the wall, has been recommended, so that's a must visit, along with a trip to atmospheric Chuo Mishokugai, a rickety strip of 20 small bars and restaurants, some consisting of just a few seats at a counter.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves. There's still breakfast at Asadaya, where we're sent on our way with a kaiseki selection of sashimi, grilled salmon, miso soup, fermented vegetables, steamed kintoki beans, tofu and fruit, each small bowl another new discovery.

As we walk out through the ryokan's colourful noren and the staff wave us goodbye, we instinctively look over at Omicho market and share a single thought. No more food.

Christine Middap was a guest of Visit Kanazawa.
visitkanazawa.jp



IN THE KNOW

Entrance to Asadaya, above left; delicate dish, above; tea is prepared, above right; Kanazawa's Kenrokuen gardens, below

Kanazawa is blessed with a range of hotels and ryokan. For something different, the industrial-chic Korinkyo is ideally situated near the city's parks and the Nagamachi samurai district. An aroma distillery at the entrance sets the scene for a classy establishment, which has a rooftop sauna and bath and flotation tub. Standard rooms, from 19,320 yen (\$192) are nice, but opt for the higher-level suites for some wow.

korinkyo.com

For a top-end experience, Asadaya is from 82,225 yen for two people in a Japanese-style room, including kaiseki dinner and breakfast.

asadaya.co.jp