



>> Fake Food

Good Enough to Eat

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The worktops are crowded with plates and bowls, chopping boards and knives. Jam jars full of colorful ingredients jostle for space with spoons, ladles and large tureens of liquid. Ovens stand here and there, and women in aprons bustle past carrying plates and trays. It could be any restaurant kitchen except, oddly, there is no smell of cooking.

In fact, this kitchen does produce food—but you wouldn't want to eat it. Maiduru makes some of the plastic food models often seen in Japanese restaurant and cafe windows. And while the more trendy eateries these days set out displays of the real thing, few people would dispute that Japan has taken plastic food to the level of an art form. These models don't just look realistic; many are exact copies of a restaurant's actual fare.

Statistics on the plastic food business in Japan are scarce, as the industry is mostly in the hands of small highly skilled operations like Maiduru. But a conservative estimate would put its turnover at billions of yen. There is certainly no shortage of demand for food models in food-loving Japan. These plastic reproductions are largely handmade, and not cheap. Duplicating a restaurant's entire menu could cost anywhere from hundreds of thousands of yen to more than a million. The market is even expanding overseas as Japanese food becomes popular around the world.



Secret Recipe

At Maiduru, General Manager Etsuji Isozaki shows us how the plastic food is made. They use real food to make the silicon molds—in some cases the actual food from the client restaurant. “We have more molds than we can count—molds for all the different foods in the world,” says Isozaki. For example, they have molds for various onions and for six or seven different kinds of *nori* (sheet laver). In a month the company will use about 100 kilograms of silicon.

A vacuum machine removes bubbles from the milky liquid plastic, which is pumped into silicon molds, then cooked until it sets. Maiduru mostly uses a single kind of plastic, and sometimes oil gelatin for drinks. They utilize 60 to 70 kilos of plastic a day, but the price of materials is relatively insignificant compared to labor costs.

Isozaki stresses that the key to making delicious looking plastic food is to mimic the actual cooking process. That's why they use real chef's knives to chop the plastic. “Each chef will instruct us to cut the vegetables in his own particular way,” says Isozaki. For sushi they take a plastic ball of rice and a plastic slice of raw fish. After heating the ingredients, the artisan forms the sushi by hand, just like a real sushi chef. For fried shrimp they use real hot oil to



attach the breadcrumbs. Isozaki shows me a box of plastic rice that I would never have guessed wasn't real. I ask him how it is made: "It's a secret," he says, moving us swiftly on.

A Fresh Palette

Nearby, Masao Masano is working on a plate of curry and rice. He spoons the rice onto a plate then pours the curry on top. There is real curry powder in the sauce for authentic color, so the mixture smells faintly spicy. "Leaves are the most difficult ... and raw ingredients," says Masano. "That's why Japanese food is so hard."

Masano started at Maiduru when he was 17, but says it took him five to six years to



become really proficient. He has been with the company for more than 30 years.

"The most important thing is the color," says Isozaki. "Something sweet has to look sweet, something spicy, spicy." Maiduru only uses high-quality oil paints. The delicate hues of raw fish are a challenge for any artisan; the color has to be just perfect for it to look fresh. Not that plastic food is always an exact copy of the real thing. Cafes often ask for food that looks a little brighter than the original.



Almost all Maiduru's 40 skilled artisans are women. According to Isozaki, women know more about food. "Women cook every day," he

says. "They go shopping every day. They can recognize what looks fresh and tasty." When they hire, they look for people who like cooking—or at least eating.

New employees start with something simple. "Tofu is the easiest—it is white and smooth," says Isozaki. Kazuko Muramatsu has been working at the company for 10 years, and it has changed her attitude to food. "I have started looking at food a bit differently," she says. "Why does it look fresh? Why does it look tasty?"



According to one history of the industry, Yasunobu Nose's *Japanese Who Eat With Their Eyes*, plastic food

models have an unlikely and not entirely appetizing origin. Probably the first food model was made around 1917 by an anatomical model maker from Kyoto, Soujiro Nishio. He made those first food models from wax, not plastic. (Model makers switched from wax to plastic several decades ago—the later is easier to handle and doesn't melt in direct sunlight.)

Fake a Few Eggs

But it was 15 years after Nishio's work when 37-year-old Takizo Iwasaki helped the industry really take off. Iwasaki is said to have got the idea from anatomical models, imitation food used in nutrition lessons, and watching wax from a candle drip onto tatami. His first creation was a rice omelet, which he sold to restaurants in Osaka. In 1932 he founded food model company Iwasaki Be-I, still the market leader today.

According to Yuta Kurokawa, a manager in Iwasaki Be-



The vast array of artistic silicon modeling of food includes tofu blocks and strawberries (opposite top), shrimp (for sushi) and marbled beef with squash (opposite center and bottom), and richly colored raw tuna (below) from skilled craftspeople using precision molds and tools, including deep fry tubs, pasta and udon presses, and more.

I's sales planning division, the company makes 50% to 60% of the plastic food in Japan. The company has 330 employees and a ¥3.2 billion turnover. Kurokawa says that overall the market for restaurant models is more or less static, but recently his company has sold many food models for nutrition lessons at companies and local health centers. "People are worried about metabolic syndrome and other lifestyle diseases," says Kurokawa, "so there is a lot of attention being paid to food education now."

Maiduru's Isozaki says they have a small but growing number of customers on the Asian continent, where Japanese food is popular. They have particular hopes for the





Maiduru's outlet in Kappabashi is a colorful harvest of food and drink, right down to the cream-swirled cup of coffee and imitation ice-cream that never melts, with something for everyone, from restaurateurs to tourists (who favor plastic food clocks and fridge magnets).



huge Chinese market. They have also branched out into food model souvenirs and trinkets, key rings, cell phone straps, fridge magnets, and brooches.

Always hungry for a challenge, Maiduru doesn't even limit itself to human food. At Maiduru's Tokyo HQ, work is being done on cakes for dogs. The customer is a dog cafe in a trendy part of Tokyo. Another unusual new product is imitation ice cream, the result of 10 days of patient experimentation at the company. You can spoon it and make it into sundaes, but the silicon product never melts, and the ice cream can go straight back into the tub. It is ideal for use under hot TV or photography lights. Another time the company was asked to make lipstick samples for cosmetics retailers. The police even ordered samples of illegal narcotics. (Maiduru had to obtain court permission to handle the original drugs.)

The best place to get a taste for Maiduru's products is their outlet in Tokyo's Kappabashi, an area famous for its restaurant supply shops. The shop's brightly lit shelves are crammed with impossibly perfect looking food. According to a staffer, customers include both restaurant owners and ordinary members of the public. Plastic food clocks and fridge magnets are particularly popular with tourists.

Some of Maiduru's finest handiwork is on display there. There is a lobster for ¥26,250 and a sushi set for ¥12,600. An angry-looking giant crab is going for ¥85,000. A bowl of *natto*, potent-smelling fermented soybeans, costs ¥3,990. (It is considerably more expensive than the real thing, but has the not insignificant advantage of being odorless.)

But by far the most expensive item in the shop is a hefty block of raw tuna. It took half a dozen artisans three weeks to replicate the delicate tones of tuna flesh. The block was ordered by a Japanese restaurant at a cost of ¥294,000. "Our customers look for quality," says Isozaki. "They want to show that they are using the finest ingredients. That's why we spend so much time and effort on the models."