

THE JAPANESE DINING EXPERIENCES

FROM CONVEYOR-BELT SUSHI AND CUSTOMIZABLE CURRY TO YOKOHAMA BENTO CULTURE AND POLISHED STEAKHOUSE DINING, THESE STANDOUT BRANDS SHOWCASE THE RANGE, REFINEMENT AND GLOBAL APPEAL OF JAPAN'S EVOLVING RESTAURANT SCENE. *By Daniel de Bomford and Bernard Thompson*

From the clean brininess of expertly prepared sushi to the rich warmth of Japanese curry and the comforting satisfaction of a well-crafted bento, Japanese cuisine greets diners through tantalizing aromas and unforgettable taste. Beneath that appeal lies a deeper dining culture shaped by precision, discipline and a discerning taste for ingredients. In Japan, perfection in the kitchen is pursued in every detail, from knife work and timing to balance, presentation and seasonality. Service is equally essential, turning each meal into an experience of attentiveness, care and refined hospitality. Japan is turning that appeal into a global movement, bringing *washoku*, Japanese cuisine, hospitality and its traditions to audiences around the world.

Japanese Classics Reborn

For Japanese comfort food, Curry House CoCo Ichibanya is the first port of call. Since opening in 1978, the brand has built a global following for its Japanese-style curry, which is warm, glossy and wholesome. "Japanese-style curry is approachable, widely adaptable, and fits contemporary consumer preferences for comfort, personalization, and consistency," President Mamoru Kuzuhara said. The restaurant lets diners shape the experience through customizable spice levels, rice portions and toppings. With over 1 billion combinations, there is always a fresh flavor for new and returning customers alike. Expect a polished, crowd-pleasing introduction to Japan's beloved curry culture.

Sushi is one of Japan's most ubiquitous cuisines, and for an experience that balances tradition and modernity, GENKI SUSHI x Uobei in Ueno is a compelling pick. Opened in October 2025 as the first concept store to unite the internationally recognized Genki Sushi brand with Japan's Uobei format, it pairs made-to-order freshness with a lively, global point of view. Expect sleek service, sushi that arrives fast and exclusive menu items inspired by international flavors, including limited-time fair menus from around the world. As Genki Global Dining Concepts (Genki GDC) President and CEO Mitsuzo Fujio said, "the Ueno location is especially compelling as it allows the company to bring together global and domestic customers in one place, creating a new kind of sushi experience that connects Japan with the world." It is, as the president described, a vivid, crowd-pleasing showcase of how Japanese sushi culture continues to evolve.

WINNING FANS AROUND THE WORLD

Global Experiences Refined By Japan

For a meal with old-school glamour and serious indulgence, Benjamin Steakhouse is a standout. With locations in Tokyo, Osaka and Kyoto, the New York-born brand brings polished steakhouse theater to Japan, from richly marbled USDA Prime beef aged for at least 28 days to a dining room made for celebration. Oizumi Foods has preserved that standard with remarkable precision. As President Kenji Oizumi put it, "In Japan, we have recreated the New York Benjamin Steakhouse experience very faithfully, in both service and cuisine."

Meals That Complement Exploration

Moving through Japan is hungry work and Kiyoken offers the kind of meal that deepens the journey rather than interrupting it.

1. Curry House CoCo Ichibanya sausage curry with spinach.
2. Genki GDC Sushi.
3. Kiyoken Old-fashioned Shiumai.
4. Oizumi Foods Benjamin Steakhouse Steak.

Born in Yokohama, the brand captures the city's cosmopolitan spirit in its famed Shiumai Bento, an *ekiben* sold at about 160 locations, and celebrated as a Yokohama specialty. "The bento becomes part of the journey itself," President Akira Nonami said. Expect a delicious, distinctly local taste of Yokohama that travels beautifully with you across the country.

Taken together, these companies show the breadth of modern Japanese dining: not one style but many distinct expressions. From Yokohama bento culture to made-to-order sushi, customizable curry, theatrical yakiniku and polished steakhouse service, each brand offers its own way into Japan, shaped by local identity, culture and hospitality.



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CURRY HOUSE COCO ICHIBANYA TAKES JAPANESE CURRY GLOBAL

CURRY HOUSE CoCo ICHIBANYA IS EXPANDING ITS GLOBAL PRESENCE, EXPORTING JAPANESE COMFORT FOOD TO CURRY LOVERS WORLDWIDE, ALONGSIDE ITS UNMATCHED HOSPITALITY.

By Daniel de Bomford, Bernard Thompson and Kyann Edouard

When someone steps into a Curry House CoCo Ichibanya, they are immediately greeted by an employee's warm smile and the appetizing aroma of Japanese curry. Whether visiting for a familiar comfort food or something new and exciting, the restaurant has them covered. Perhaps beef or seafood, or an extra-large *katsu* cutlet. Will they mix vegetables in and perhaps reduce the rice? What spice level? The reliable "Normal" or an adventurous "10"? With over 1.2 billion combinations, they never have to eat the same thing twice.

washoku, is a global phenomenon. Curry House CoCo Ichibanya is a driving force in this global movement. President Mamoru Kuzuhara acknowledges that dishes like sushi and ramen remain central to *washoku's* popularity, but he says that Japanese curry is being accepted globally. "Japanese-style curry is approachable, widely adaptable, and fits contemporary consumer preferences for comfort, personalization, and consistency," he said. "It can be introduced naturally into many food cultures, while still retaining a clear Japanese identity."

Curry is already a global staple, first prepared in India, evolving in the U.K. and brought to Japan in the Meiji Era, where, over time, it became people's comfort food. Its flavor, amid its spiciness, is mild and rich, and easily adaptable to a variety of ingredients. Now, Curry House CoCo Ichibanya is exporting this Japanese soul food back to the world.

Customer-Focused Mentality

Curry House CoCo Ichibanya began in a café, where the founding couple's curry became popular. They pursued a strategy of hospitality to define themselves. "We have a motto, expressed as three



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Mamoru Kuzuhara
President, Ichibanya Co., Ltd.



With 42 million inbound visitors to Japan and the number of Japanese restaurants abroad reaching around 200,000, up from 50,000 a decade earlier, Japanese cuisine, known as

principles: always be smiling, always move quickly and energetically, and always respond clearly and politely," he said. The motto, expressed as "*niko niko, kibi kibi, haki haki*," became central to the company's philosophy and operations.

This philosophy expressed itself in the founder's desire to satisfy every customer's requests. "Our founder's approach was simple: if it is for the customer, we want to do it. If a customer wants a cutlet on top, if they want less rice, if they want it spicier, we want to respond to all of those requests," Kuzuhara said. "Over time, that mindset became the system that defines our brand today."



This, at a time when customer requests were uncommon in Japan, was an important step in shaping Curry House CoCo Ichibanya's "All for the Customer" approach. Customers can choose everything from their preferred level of spice to toppings and portion size. "This customer-first approach earned strong support and enabled the company to expand to approximately 1,200 locations across Japan," he said. "We have remained committed to selling curry that customers can eat every day without getting tired of it." Even as the company scales as a major chain, its commitment to "*omotenashi*"—where every dish is prepared individually—sets it apart from competitors that increasingly rely on standardization and automation.

From Japan to the World

Curry House CoCo Ichibanya's global journey began modestly with its first overseas store in Hawaii, initially conceived as an employee-focused initia-



tive rather than a strategic expansion. A decisive shift came in 2004 with entry into Shanghai, where Japanese curry was still unfamiliar. At first, local interest was tepid, so the company pivoted, redesigning stores with stylish interiors and visually appealing menus to attract new customer segments. This approach delivered immediate success, drawing hundreds of customers daily. Supported by business partners, the company expanded steadily across Asia and beyond, introducing not only Japanese curry but also its signature customization and hospitality to diverse markets worldwide.



The company's success in Asia proved its ability to adapt while preserving its core identity. In the U.K., a highly diverse and internationally minded food culture has enabled smooth entry, with strong customer uptake and steadily growing sales. In the United States, expansion has focused on directly operated stores along the West Coast, supported by franchise partnerships in other regions. The ultimate prize for Kuzuhara is India, the birthplace of curry. The company has introduced its

rice-based Japanese style to a market traditionally centered on naan, gradually building a customer base that is now around 60 percent local. "We want to achieve the goal of 100 stores through a franchise approach, moving steadily toward that target," he said.



North America is a key pillar of Curry House CoCo Ichibanya's global strategy, where the company already directly operates a location on the West Coast. A standout milestone is its new opening at Petco Park, the stadium home of the San Diego Padres, bringing Japanese curry to a major international venue. This location serves as a gateway for new audiences to discover the appeal of the brand's hospitality.

By combining Japanese hospitality, deep customization and a taste that never grows tiresome, with pleasant, comfortable service, Curry House CoCo Ichibanya has turned curry into a global experience. As it expands across continents, the company is sharing a uniquely Japanese food culture that invites every customer to create a dish of their own.

GENKI SUSHI EXPANDS WORLDWIDE

THE COMPANY IS BUILDING AN INTERNATIONALLY RECOGNIZABLE SUSHI BRAND THAT BRINGS AUTHENTIC JAPANESE CUISINE TO GUESTS AROUND THE WORLD. *By Daniel de Bomford and Bernard Thompson*

ne of Japan's most enticing tourism attractions is its cuisine. The fresh aroma of seafood, the subtle accent of wasabi and the delicate balance of flavors unfolding on the palate—each element reflects a deep respect for ingredients. Japanese sushi is more than just a meal; it is an experience to be enjoyed with all five senses.

Authentic, Quality Sushi, Made Accessible

Genki Global Dining Concepts Corporation (Genki GDC) led the charge for accessible conveyor belt sushi in the 1990s.

Now, in 2026, the company continues to evolve with its Uobei brand, serving sushi prepared fresh in-store, with ingredients carefully handled and made to order.

President and CEO Mitsuzo Fujio said the name uses the characters for fish and rice, representing the company's focus on quality. "Uobei removed the conveyor belt entirely," he said. "Sushi is made only after an order is placed and delivered to the customer within two minutes."

The brand's flagship conveyor-belt restaurants, Genki Sushi, enjoy international recognition, with over 250 stores overseas. Genki GDC is leveraging that recognition and has established a hybrid Genki-Uobei concept store in Ueno as a brand anchor that showcases the brand's innovation.

The acquisition of the Australian-born sushi chain Sushi Sushi is also one of the key strategies symbolizing the company's international expansion.

About 25 years ago, Sushi Sushi introduced sushi



handrolls to Australia and pioneered the grab-n-go sushi market. Today, it is widely recognized as a leading premium sushi brand in the country. The brand currently operates more than 180 stores across three countries, including Australia, in locations such as shopping centers, urban commercial districts and tourist destinations.

It also utilizes multiple store formats—including micro stores, kiosk-style outlets, inline street stores and sushi train restaurants—serving a broad range of customers. In addition, Sushi Sushi is built around the Japanese philosophy "sushi is an art form." This concept is reflected in its stylish stores, package designs, food safety management and selection of ingredients, enabling the brand to provide high-quality and health-oriented sushi.

"By bringing Sushi Sushi into the group, the company has been able to accelerate its overseas expansion not only in the United States and Asia but also in markets such

as Australia and the Middle East, with the long-term goal of expanding its store network on a global scale," he said.

One important innovation the brand is pursuing is securing its own supply chain as external economic pressures and evolving environmental challenges have complicated the seafood supply chain. "We changed our strategy to develop our own sources of fish through aquaculture, essentially producing our own supply," Fujio said. The company is securing domestic and in-house partnerships for the procurement and production of key sushi ingredients.

In the company's seven-year plan, at full scale, Genki GDC aims to produce 1,000 tons of salmon and 50 tons of salmon roe annually. For offshore aquaculture species, the company is looking to integrate AI-driven technologies to develop high-efficiency, low-labor and sustainable aquaculture operations.

Diversifying Beyond Sushi—Osaka Yakiniku Umakatsu

In January 2026, Genki GDC launched a new concept with the opening of "Osaka Yakiniku Umakatsu." Fujio said the brand is built around "affordable, high-quality, and approachable Osaka-style yakiniku."

Selected meat is prepared in-house and paired with the restaurant's original yakiniku sauce, enhancing natural flavors. "Chefs skilled in fish preparation apply their knife techniques to serve high-quality meat at reasonable prices," he said.

The company aims to build a solid foundation while targeting 100 domestic stores within five years.



Genki Global Dining Concepts

"While we are currently focused on Southeast Asia, we plan to grow into the U.S., Europe and beyond."

Mitsuzo Fujio

President and CEO,
Genki Global Dining Concepts Corporation
<https://en.genki-gdc.co.jp>





OIZUMI FOODS EXPANDS GLOBAL DINING

OIZUMI FOODS FOCUSES ON QUALITY AND SERVICE, SETTING IT APART AS IT SEEKS TO EXPORT ITS ARRAY OF CULINARY EXPERIENCES WORLDWIDE. *By Daniel de Bomford, Bernard Thompson and Quentin Lange*

Dining at a restaurant should not feel routine. Each experience should be the culmination of the producers' dedication, the chefs' skill and the staff's hospitality. Every bite should be a revelation of flavor, and every sip memorable. Oizumi Foods sets its sights high; the restaurant company aims to provide culinary experiences beyond the standard fare.

President Kenji Oizumi wants guests to experience the dedication of Japanese producers not just in Japanese cuisine but also in its global restaurants. "Working directly with producers allows us to understand production processes and procure ingredients with confidence," he said. The company operates over 320 restaurants across dozens of locations, from classic Japanese staples like izakaya to global favorites like Italian, Chinese and American. In Japan, sales have consistently exceeded 100 percent year-over-year.



With Japan's shrinking population, Oizumi Foods is looking abroad for partners to continue its growth. In terms of overseas expansion, having started in 2016 in Vietnam, the company has experienced a post-COVID-19 boom with sales consistently exceeding 100 percent year-on-year, despite a "red ocean" of competitors opening nearby. However, Oizumi said that "cultural differences make direct operation everywhere unrealistic, so strong local partners are essential," and added, "the most important thing is to find the right

partner who can operate responsibly and sustainably." The company packages its unique operations and know-how, cultivated and standardized across 50 business formats, allowing partners to benefit from this wealth of operational knowledge.

Growth isn't the company's only focus, and Oizumi said that maintaining and improving service was just as important. Oizumi sees the industry's traditionally high level of service slipping as skilled staff become harder to find, making expansion meaningless. However, the company strongly believes that the human touch creates value and a more satisfying experience. That's what differentiates Oizumi Foods; rather than relying on automation, it concentrates on maximizing performance. Ultimately, better service results in higher customer loyalty and increased profits.

The proof is in the pudding: Oizumi Foods' dinner restaurants deliver a high level of service that automation simply can't replicate. "Dinner-centered formats require high levels of service skill and cooking skill," Oizumi said. "That is the main reason we have operated directly."



OIZUMI FOODS



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Kenji Oizumi
President, Oizumi Foods

KIYOKEN BRINGS YOKOHAMA FLAVOR ABROAD

BORN IN YOKOHAMA'S MELTING POT OF CULTURES, KIYOKEN IS SEEING GLOBAL DEMAND FOR CUISINE BORN IN JAPAN AND MOLDED BY THE WORLD.

By Daniel de Bomford, Bernard Thompson and Kyann Edouard

Yokohama is Japan's gateway to the world. The smell of European spices wafts through the streets of Chinese architecture, framing a port city shaped by cultural exchange. Kiyoken is the culinary embodiment of Yokohama, offering meals that are distinctly Japanese but influenced by the myriad cultures that passed through the port. President Akira Nonami described it as a place where visitors can experience "Japanese food that feels closest to your own country."

That sense of accessibility is central to Kiyoken's appeal for inbound visitors. Rather than limiting the brand to a single destination, the company sees itself as part of a traveler's broader journey through the region. According to Nonami, Yokohama's food should be first experienced in its restaurants, but when they move on, they should take a bento, a boxed lunch, with them to enjoy while traveling. "The bento becomes part of the journey itself," he said.

Kiyoken was established to serve food around train stations, and its ekiben remains a core part of the company. The company's *ekiben*, a compound of the Japanese word for train station, *eki*, and *bento*, features its signature shiumai—blending Chinese shumai with Japanese bento culture—and has transcended travel and become a part of Yokohama's local food culture. "Today our products have become widely recognized among local citizens as a regional specialty," Nonami said.

The company is also thinking well beyond Japan. "Through food, we want people to understand Japan and to feel closer to Japanese culture," he said. That outlook is also reflected in the company's international strategy, which is centered on its Yokohama-famous shiumai. Building on this, the company has developed products such as vacuum-packed tuna shiumai and positions East and Southeast Asia as key markets, with Taiwan standing out as a place where an ekiben-like culture already exists.

At the same time, Kiyoken remains grounded in the food culture that made it famous. The company's guiding phrase is "Continuing to create the deliciousness of Yokohama," a message that reflects both continuity and innovation. Its beloved Shiumai Bento still captures that balance. As Nonami said, "Japanese *ekiben*, with their ability to remain enjoyable even after cooling, may have increasing potential to be appreciated by more people around the world."



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"Through food, we want people to understand Japan and to feel closer to Japanese culture."

Akira Nonami

President, Kiyoken Co., Ltd.



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