

Kitade Shokudo: 'Tokyo-Mex' tacos, with Brooklyn flair

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The eastern fringe of Nihonbashi feels like a ghost town on weekends, especially the Bakurocho and Iwamotocho neighborhoods. But here and there among the barren wholesale warehouses and empty office buildings are a few small oases where people can congregate for nourishment and community. The best of them all is Kitade Shokudo.

The name is misleading; it sounds like it could be an old-school diner serving lunchtime *teishoku* set meals. In fact it's a *taqueria*, totally up to the minute, occupying a former incense store that's been converted in the sweetest, funkiest way.

Outside, the first thing you see is the street-level blackboard-look sign urging you simply to "Eat Tacos!!" and "Tortillas Hechas a Mano" ("Handmade Tortillas"). The next is the wide-open window where you order your quesadillas and takeout tacos.

Unlike most other Mexican restaurants in Tokyo, no attempt has been made to make it look "authentic." The old shop space has been left as it was, with its high ceiling, split-level dining, a bar at the back near the kitchen — and absolutely no sombreros or other faux knickknacks.

Owner Shigeo Kitade says his inspiration came not from south of the U.S. border, but Brooklyn. That was where he first ate tacos made with fresh, handmade tortillas. It was, literally, a life-changing moment. He went all over New York City trying all the tacos he could find, then came back to Tokyo intent on opening his own homegrown version.

Kitade says he calls his style Tokyo-Mex, and once you've tasted his food you get what he means. His recipes are based exactly on what he tasted in New York, except he's using Japanese ingredients — down to the corn used for the tortillas.

It's grown in Sorachi, Hokkaido, freshly ground and nixtamalized each day, then peeled out of the tortilla press and cooked to order. And yet the tacos taste entirely Japanese: mildly seasoned, precisely flavored and with no duds among them. Just remember to bring your own hot sauce.

There are over a dozen different taco toppings. Options include beef, lamb, pork and chicken; several kinds of seafood; some vegetarian choices; even a deep-fried tempeh cutlet.

As a starter, Kitade offers an interesting take on guacamole, sending out a half avocado and letting you mash it yourself. It works well, especially as the chips are freshly made, light and crisp.

He also has some good craft beer — needless to say from Brooklyn Brewery. It's a connection that has deepened further this year since Kitade Shokudo was invited to serve tacos in the brewery's new B bar in Tokyo's K5 building.

Since opening in late 2013, Kitade Shokudo has become an essential port of call in Iwamotocho. Later this summer, two new branches will open, one in Nihonbashi, the other inside Tokyo Station. Tacos and beer on the train home, anyone?

Iwamotocho 1-13-5, Chuo-ku, Tokyo 101-0032; 03-6240-9920; kitadeshokudo.com; open daily 11:30 a.m.-2 p.m., 5-9 p.m. (L.O.); Sat., Sun. & hols. 11:30 a.m.-9 p.m. (L.O.); tacos from ¥350; set lunch from ¥950; dinner menu for parties of two or more from ¥2,900, also a la carte; nearest station Bakuro-Yokoyama; nonsmoking; major cards accepted; English menu; takeout available; English spoken