

Unagi, a Tokyoite Favorite

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During the hot days of summer, many Japanese people feel like eating unagi, or Japanese eel. Unagi-eating practice is especially common in Tokyo. According to the popular restaurant rating site Tabelog (<http://tabelog.com/>), Tokyo has 975 unagi restaurants, more than any other city, with second place going to Aichi with 509, and third place to Shizuoka with 401, comprising part of the nationwide 5,272 (as of 26 September, 2014) .



Una-don (Wikipedia)

When I visited Tokyo for the first time, I was surprised that there are many specialty restaurants called *unagi-ya* in the center of the city, something seldom seen in my hometown. The impression I got when I ate Kabayaki, grilled unagi, at a well-known restaurant is still unforgettable. I was enchanted by the fantastic aroma of the unique salty-sweet *Tare* sauce. Grilled unagi left me completely speechless with its exquisite and fluffy texture. Nothing can be compared with the happiness that spread in the mouth when I ate the grilled unagi on warm rice.

The origin of the popularity of unagi with Tokyo people can be traced back to the time of the Edo construction. Tokyo Bay seemed to be an environment unagi favored. When Shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu, the first city planner of Tokyo, began building Edo and filled in the Edo bay at the foot of the Edo castle, many unagi began to live in the ditch, waterway, and marsh. Since unagi were easily found and caught, their price was cheap. Even day workers could afford it. Baked unagi, chopped and skewered, resembled the shape of the kaba, cattail (*Typha latifolia*) and was called kaba-yaki.

Tare sauce, a keystone of the recipe, was formulated with sugar, mirin, sake, and Koikuchi soy sauce, which was developed in Choshi and Noda around the mid Edo period. The cooking method used today was established then. *Una-don*, the bowl of rice topped with grilled unagi won its reputation in the playhouse town in Nihonbashi in Tenpo-era, and *Unagi-no-kabayaki*, grilled eels, became a typical Edo food along with sushi and tempura.

In almost all unagi-ya in present day Tokyo, an unagi is opened from the back,

grilled first, then steamed removing excessive fat before it is made into kaba-yaki using tare sauce. For an unagi-ya, the tare is very important ingredient which determines the taste of the restaurant. When Tokyo suffered an air raid in World War II, an old unagi-ya owner was reported to have carried a tare turtle to protect the cherished taste of the shop.

In Kansai, an unagi is cut open from belly-side and the steaming step is often skipped. Some people say because Edo was the capital of Samurai, cutting from the belly was avoided. Probably, time-consuming back cutting and steaming are the recipes uniquely developed by the Edoite cook who responded to the demand by unagi fans. Rosanjin Kitaoji, a renowned epicurean, claimed that the recipe of the kabayaki of Tokyo is better than any other way. The fact that many unagi-ya which hold a Michelin star are located in Tokyo may support this opinion.

Sadly, as the production of unagi decreases, it is becoming less and less accessible for average Tokyoites. Doyo-no-ushi-no-hi comes during the summer, but autumn unagi may also alleviate your exhaustion from the hot summer. In fact, Autumn unagi is much tastier than midsummer unagi.