

Restaurateur's 'Japantown' Helps Victims



JULIE GLASSBERG FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

NEIGHBORS Restaurants on East 10th Street, among 11 owned by Bon Yagi.

By **JEFF GORDINIER**

SOON after the earthquake and the tsunami pulverized the northeastern coast of Japan earlier this month, the men and women who work at Japanese restaurants in the East Village began setting out little cardboard boxes so customers could leave a few dollars to help the ravaged country.

Before long, though, almost a dozen of those restaurants heard from the Ninth Street office of a man named Bon Yagi.

Mr. Yagi didn't think their donations should be randomly scattered. He suggested that they wait and join a concerted, city-wide, thoroughly vetted effort — which eventually materialized as Dine Out for Japan Relief.

That so many restaurants obeyed his command probably shouldn't come as a surprise. He owns them all.

Although many of New York's most dedicated gastronomes aren't even aware of it, Mr. Yagi, who was born Shuji Bon Yagi in Japan in 1948 and started his career in the United States as a dishwasher in Philadelphia, is one of the most influential ambassadors for Japanese cuisine in New York.

If you have a fondness for Japanese food, especially the unpretentious street grub and lunchbox fare that are a common part of day-to-day life in Japan, it's likely that you've patronized one of Mr. Yagi's 11 restaurants.

Many are clustered around East Ninth and Tenth Streets. Soba-Ya, which special-

izes in noodles, is a few steps from Robataya, where meat and vegetables are theatrically grilled and presented to customers on long wooden oars.

Across the street you'll find Cha-An, a

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hushed teahouse that serves jewel-like sweets, and Otafuku, where young cooks fry up cabbage pancakes and takoyaki — gooey, mayonnaise-splattered spheres of octopus and batter — in a sweltering space that often seems as loud as a disco and as cramped as a food truck. In a stroke of inspired urban planning, Otafuku waits there for the drinkers who wobble up the stairs from Decibel, a crepuscular, lantern-lighted sake bar where the wallpaper is a riot of hand-scrawled graffiti and old sake labels.

Shoot west, toward Third Avenue, and you'll find sushi, sashimi and tempura-battered ginkgo nuts at Hasaki, which is named after the coastal town where Mr. Yagi grew up. Wander east, to 10th Street between First and Second Avenues, and there are hot bowls of ramen sloshing atop the counter at Rai Rai Ken, and Berkshire pork cutlets quilted in comforting spiced gravy at Curry-Ya, and crimson slivers of beef simmering away their fat in hot pots at Shabu-Tatsu.

All of them joined a growing list of restaurants, including JoJo, SD26, Telepan and Mercer Kitchen, in the Dine Out for Japan Relief campaign, which planned to give to the Red Cross — 5 percent of their profits was suggested — from March 23 to 30.

New York has no Japantown, per se, but in his quiet, deliberate way, Mr. Yagi has dedicated himself to building just such a culinary and cultural vortex, casting himself as its mustachioed Buddhist godfather, reverently known as Yagi-san.

"He's kind of a pioneer," said Chikako Ichihara, the president and chief executive of Azix, a marketing and consulting company that helps promote Japanese food and culture. "He brought real Japanese food to New Yorkers."

After years of roaming the world, Mr. Yagi moved to New York in the 1970s and broke into



the food business with a wholesale vegetable store in the East Village. Glamour elbowed its way into his life in the early 1980s, when he opened an East Village diner called 103 Second, which became a commissary for artists and performers.

"You know who came?" Mr. Yagi said in his office above the teahouse. "Keith Haring. He was my first customer. He did graffiti in the bathroom. Andy Warhol came. Madonna came. John Belushi came at 2 o'clock in the morning." Mr. Belushi, he said, had a tendency to soothe his demons with a sloppy Joe. "This was a hot diner. Nobody knew that a Japanese man owned it."

The entrepreneur kept staying out of the spotlight as he opened Hasaki in 1984, then slowly Choshi and the rest — each new arrival meant to introduce New Yorkers to a relatively unsung element of Japanese gastronomy.

Tom Birchard, the owner of Veselka, the neighborhood's beloved "Ukrainian soul food" spot, attributed Mr. Yagi's success to a preference for hard work over hype. He recalled that back in his vegetable-selling phase, Mr. Yagi used to kick off the day with a few minutes of calisthenics out on the sidewalk.

While Mr. Yagi has never attracted the media glare that surrounds restaurateurs like Masaharu Morimoto and Nobu Matsuhisa, "in terms of Japanese food, what he's doing is totally cool," said Henry Sidel, the president of Joto Sake, a distributor based in New York. "His main talent is for seeing an opportunity. There really weren't any good ramen shops before Rai Rai Ken. Decibel feels like an underground Tokyo sake bar. What he does is very authentic and fills a gap."

The Bon Yagi mini-empire has been plugged into news of the catastrophe in Japan in an intense and immediate way. Over the last few days, as the restaurants geared up the fund-raising that Mr. Yagi favored, the deepening tragedy was a conversational theme in dining rooms and in kitchens.

At Robotaya, Hisaya Kadoi, the restaurant's 41-year-old manager, seemed shaken as he pulled

up a chair to sip green tea and talk about the haunting news from his home country. Historically, the type of grilling that's done at Robotaya has its roots in Sendai, one of the cities now heavily damaged by the tsunami. In keeping with that tradition, Mr. Kadoi has in the past served a lot of fish — sea bream, horse mackerel — that he has gotten from the famous Tsukiji fish market in Tokyo. A disrupted supply chain and anxiety about radioactive contamination have changed that; customers have encouraged Mr. Kadoi to slip a note into the menu assuring them that the fish being served is safe.

"We don't serve any fish from Japan right now," he said. Watching the news from Japan has been difficult for Mr. Kadoi, who grew up south of Tokyo, in Shizuoka. "I see it every day, but I'm always crying," he said.

Mr. Kadoi's wife, Makiko, comes from the city of Kesennuma, in the Miyagi prefecture. Soon after the earthquake hit, Mr. Kadoi came across images of Kesennuma engulfed in flames. "I was so shocked," he recalled. "I was thinking, nobody's alive. I came here to work, but I don't remember what I did." A week passed before Mr. Kadoi and his

CONCERTED EFFORT Bon Yagi, left, has organized fund-raising at restaurants, including his Otafuku, on Ninth Street, above, patronized recently by Valerie Zeng and Joey Chan.

wife learned that her parents had survived the fires and the floods.

Business must go on, of course, and some customers seem to view the simple act of eating out as a gesture of financial and spiritual support for the people of Japan. "That's why I wanted to order something," said Xai McGerty, 40, who could be found at the counter at Cha-An with a large platter of porridge and side dishes in front of her.

"I just ate, but I thought, I can eat something more," she said. "I'm eating for charity."

At Decibel, the menu is now flanked by a flier offering customers "authentic products" that

are used in sake breweries in Japan. There's a maekake, or brewer's apron, for \$25, and a hand-size wooden drinking box for \$15. One evening, while Aerosmith blasted away on the sound system, Yuki Mori, Decibel's manager, went off to grab a sample of unpasteurized sake. He came back with a bottle of Urakasumi Tokubetsu, from a brewery in the hard-hit Miyagi prefecture, a place where there are fears of radiation in the water. "I think this is the best sake we have now," he said wistfully.

Perhaps it's a sign of Mr. Yagi's unofficial "mayor of Japantown" status that next to his desk stands a red and gold-plated mikoshi, a portable Shinto shrine that is carried at Japanese festivals in the city. The next time the mikoshi is dusted off, Mr. Yagi said, prayers will be sent out, and more money will be raised for Japan.

It would not be out of character for him to make a personal sacrifice, too. A few months after Sept. 11, 2001, Mr. Yagi went on a Buddhist retreat in the Catskills.

There at the zendo, he found himself wondering what he could offer in tribute. The answer arrived while he was meditating: He decided to give up sake.

"I love drinking sake," Mr. Yagi said. But he has not had a glass of it since.



ABOVE, JULIE GLASSBERG FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES; LEFT, JOSH HANER/THE NEW YORK TIMES

