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CALENDAR

LOS ANGELES TIMES | 1-17-08

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THE GUIDE

Who needs a trip to Tokyo when it's all right here?

THE RISE OF JAPAN COOL



MEL BROOKS, IN RETROSPECT |

JOAN'S ON THIRD GETS COMMUNICATED

COVER STORY

From left,
designer Mina
Taira with
popKiller's
Ricky Takizawa
at the Japanese
American
National
Museum.

Ai will play
the El Rey.

Girls browse in
Famima!!

Tokyopop
founder Stuart
Levy savors
ramen at
Otafuku.



MARK BOSTER Los Angeles Times

Art, fashion, music, food. It's all here on the . . .

L.A.-Tokyo express



Universal Music Japan



ALLEN J. SCHABEN Los Angeles Times



ANNIE WELLS Los Angeles Times

ADMIT IT: Ever since you saw “Lost in Translation,” you’ve been dying to go to Tokyo, but the \$1,100 plane ticket and \$450-a-night rooms at the Park Hyatt give you pause. Might we suggest saving a bit of cash and heading to Torrance — where you can find ramen and yakitori as good as anything you’re likely to find in Shinjuku?

Southern California is arguably the epicenter of Japanese cool in America, with three major hubs of restaurants, bars and shops in Torrance and Gardena, West L.A. and the Sawtelle corridor, and downtown’s Little Tokyo. And just about everywhere you look, it seems another Famima!! or Beard Papa is springing up.

Over the last year, there’s also been an explosion of authentic Japanese restaurants, including Yuta in Studio City, Yamato in Westwood, Ayame in Irvine, a re-launched Gonpachi in Beverly Hills and a new Shin-Sen-Gumi Yakitori and Shabu Shabu Restaurant in Monterey Park. And in the coming weeks, there’ll be several more high-profile, American-owned sushi spots: a just-opened Bond Street in Beverly Hills, a new Nobu in West Hollywood, an all-organic offering downtown called Shojin and Innovative Dining Group’s anticipated *kaiten* (conveyor belt-style) place, Luckyfish in Beverly Hills.

But SoCal’s love of all things Japanese runs much deeper than that — in art, fashion, music and more. Think Takashi Murakami, whose MOCA exhibit broke opening week attendance records in October and is in full bloom through Feb. 11; Eric Nakamura, whose pop culture magazine Giant Robot spawned a retail empire; cutting-edge musician Cornelius, who has flown in from Tokyo to play Walt Disney Concert Hall tonight (see sidebar on the next page); and R&B superstar Ai, who is headlining the El Rey Theatre in her only U.S. show this year on Jan. 31.

Though there are more than 50,000 Japanese nationals in L.A. and Orange counties, according to that country’s consulate, clearly such pop cultural offerings from across the Pacific are playing to a much larger audience.

“There are more Japanophiles these days for sure,” says Nakamura, whose magazine was just featured at the Japanese American National Museum in a retrospective. “It’s amazing how young some start . . . and they’ve never even been there, but many have a great appreciation for the culture, even though their start was from reading manga or watching anime.”

Of course, savvy tweens aren’t limited to checking out just Nakamura’s Giant Robot and GR2 stores on Sawtelle Boulevard — they have myriad options for buying Japanese-influenced clothes and more. Ricky Takizawa (our cover guy shown with Mina Taira, whose fashions can be found at Momo near the Grove) has done so well with his two T-shirt and accessory stores, popKiller on Sunset Boulevard and popKiller Second in Little Tokyo, that he is scouting

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BY CHARLIE AMTER, TIMES STAFF WRITER

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locations for a third in either Pasadena or Echo Park.

"Japanese [fashion designers] copy first, but after that, they make it better than the original," he says, explaining his growing business. Takizawa says he gets requests from stores in Chicago and New York frequently for his designs, but he wants to "keep it a little bit exclusive."

In contrast, Northridge-born Stuart Levy has no problem selling his products to anyone who will buy them. The chief executive of Tokyopop, Levy has made millions licensing and creating anime and manga books and DVDs for America's new breed of comic hipsters.

"I've been lucky and done very well," he says from the 20th floor of his Wilshire Boulevard office, where he employs a staff of more than 80. (Tokyopop also has offices in Tokyo, London and Hamburg, Germany).

The 40-year-old, who splits his time between L.A. and Japan, represents the ultimate Nippon-savvy Angeleno. Levy got into the culture the way many Americans do, via video games and food. By the time he went to law school, he did something about it.

"I had the idea to start a manga company in the U.S., and I just went for it," he says.

Now represented by William Morris, Levy's com-

pany is on the verge of a breakthrough with "a few films in development," thanks to Hollywood's hunger for story lines from Japan (witness "The Ring," "The Grudge" and the current "One Missed Call").

In the meantime, Levy is cranking out manga titles like "Fruits Basket" that fly out of Barnes & Nobles stores nationwide — and maybe sneaking in a nice lunch every now and then with his staff.

So where does Levy head when he gets hungry? "Mishima is very solid," he says of the restaurant on

3rd Street near the Beverly Center. "Another place I like is Ita-Cho on Beverly," an *izakaya*, or pub-style, place. But when Levy really misses his second home overseas, he heads to Gardena restaurants such as Otafuku to get his fix of real Tokyo-style ramen.

"In general, ramen in L.A. is either a little bit watery or too soy-based," he says. "Secondly, the noodles tend to be too soft. The good thing about Otafuku is they have solid miso ramen. . . . The other thing is that the noodles are not too soggy."

And though nothing will replicate the full sensorial onslaught of eating out in Tokyo — "It's constant stimulation," Levy says — there are plenty of spots that come close. "You can find an authentic Japanese experience in Los Angeles," he says. "You just have to know where to look."

'You can find an authentic Japanese experience in Los Angeles. You just have to know where to look.'

— STUART LEVY,
founder of Tokyopop