

What It Means to Be 'Osakan'

While most anyone can name Japan's capital, Tokyo, and any Japanese student can speak kantou-ben, most Americans are unfamiliar with its counterpart: the wonderfully lively city of Osaka. However, those who *do* know of it know three things: Osakans speak a different dialect, are some of the funniest, most hospitable people one will ever meet, and they love their food. These, of course, are stereotypes, but like most stereotypes they are by no means unfounded. In the two weeks I spent there, I became very familiar with the local dialect, enjoyed meeting all sorts of funny, hospitable, and remarkable people, and tried nearly every 'meibutsu tabemono' (a type of food that is particularly famous in a certain area) under the sun. I had the time of my life.

The first of these characteristics I noticed upon my arrival was, of course, the different dialect. Kansai-ben, while similar to kantou-ben, uses different endings, intonations, and occasionally different words which give the language an upbeat, humor-filled sound. For example: the use of 'ya nen' in place of 'da yo,' and 'meccha' in stead of 'chou.' My host mother had fun teaching me the basics of the dialect, which I've grown rather partial to. It has a personality to it that really speaks to the character of the people and the history of the city. Even now hearing it brings a smile to my face.

After spending even a short amount of time in Osaka, however, one will find the only thing more pronounced than the dialect is the open-hearted, good-humored, and genial nature of the Osakan people. For me, who was welcomed whole-heartedly into the Harada home and treated as though I was their third daughter, this characteristic is one which will stay with me for the rest of my life. Japanese houses tend to be small, narrow, and clustered, even outside the city, so when Japanese people invite friends out, they usually meet at a restaurant - making the home all the more personal. Even so, from the moment I met my host family, they made me feel as though we had known each other forever, welcomed me into their home, and fit me into their daily lives seamlessly. I was able to

make precious memories with each of them, and I feel like their openness allowed me to get to know them well despite the short amount of time we spent together.

They were also very funny, particularly my host mother, who would say things like 'gomennachai' (instead of gomennasai) in funny voices, teach me Japanese puns, and even demonstrated the yakuza (Japanese mafia) dialect for me. My host father seemed to be perpetually smiling and made an effort to speak to me in English. I had fun seeing how proud he was when I told him he had said something correctly. Yumi-chan, and Youko-chan (my host sisters) also had me smiling whenever I was with them.

It wasn't only the people I became familiar with that exhibited this 'Osakan hospitality' though. When I would order food or buy omiyage (gifts to bring home), I often found myself conversing with a very enthusiastic – and often surprised – shopkeeper. On the whole, people I met tended to be very candid and congenial, and many of them took to calling me jou-chan, which means little miss in Japanese. I felt more 'at home' than I would have walking around a shopping center in San Francisco!

Last, and most certainly not least, I was exposed to the Osakan love of food. I tried everything from takoyaki (chunks of octopus fried in a pancake-like batter), to okonomiyaki (the 'Japanese pancake' – which is entirely unlike a pancake except for its shape), to kushiyaki (seafood and vegetables battered and skewered). In fact, even though I got off at a small stop called Mito-eki and only walked about fifteen blocks home, I passed *three* takoyaki stands on the way. They were everywhere! I also tried something called nattou (fermented soybeans), upon my grandmother's insistence. It didn't smell much more appealing than it sounded, and even when mixed with mustard and eaten with rice the smell was overwhelming. Still, my grandfather tells me it's very healthy and he still plays tennis at the age of 82!

Even around the house there was always cooking, and I even got to help make some of the dishes. We cooked okonomiyaki on a hot plate my first night there, and we also made korokke (Japanese croquettes), kushiyaki, dango (sweets made from 'rice-dough' called mochi with red bean paste inside), and hiyashi soumen (chilled noodles with soup). I had so much fun!

Osaka and the Osakan people, with their up-beat dialect, hospitality, congeniality, and love of food, have come to hold a special place in my heart in ways I never could

have imagined. Now, when I think of Japan, I think of Osaka, kansai-ben comes out of my mouth in Japanese class, and I've developed a passion for all things Osakan. As a senior, I am looking to continue my study of Japanese in college, and if all goes well I'll be back there in three years' time. I'm even looking to work there in the future. For me, Osaka - although foreign in many ways - never seemed like a 'foreign country.' From the moment I arrived, the hospitality and kindness I was shown made me feel right at home, and I grew to love it more each day. In short: watashi wa Osaka ga meccha suki ya nen (I really love Osaka)!!!