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A Taste of Okinawa

The 3 'R's to good eating –
Restaurants,
Reviews & Recipes

8-page pullout



Kanten Japanese jelly a sweet, healthy alternative

STORY AND PHOTOS BY SHOJI KUDAKA,
STRIPES OKINAWA

As a kid, every New Year I would look forward to a sweet jelly called kouhaku kanten. Kanten is a jelly made from boiled ten-gusa algae and seaweed. It is known for being low-calorie and rich in fiber, so it is often used as a healthy alternative to regular sweets.

If you are a foodie, you may have heard of or tried tokoroten, another Japanese food with a similar jelly texture to kanten. Though both tokoroten and kanten look the same, tokoroten retains some smell of the sea (weed) and kanten does not. This is because kanten is frozen and dried after boiling, which casts off the ocean odor.

According to officials of Nagano Prefecture, a major producing area of kanten, this unique food recipe was accidentally discovered by a lodging owner in Kyoto during the Edo Period (1603 – 1868). Tokoroten, on the other hand, can be traced earlier to the Heian Era (794 – 1185).

Back in the Edo times, it may have taken a lot of time and effort to create kanten from red algae, but these days konakanten, powdered kanten, saves us time. Konakanten is mixed with water and milk and once set with fruit, creates a photogenic food which has recently become a popular sweet to cook at home.

I found the recipe below online to try my hand at making the healthy and eye-catching treat. It was fun to mold the white jelly in a milk carton and see the way canned fruit can add vibrant colors to it. And most importantly, it tasted great and the soft texture was delightful.

Making this dish was probably the least difficult of any of the previous dishes I've tried. The recipe did call for any cutting or slicing ingredients, so it only required time to heat the milk, water and condensed milk.

Though hearing that kanten is made from algae may make you second-guess trying it, I guarantee that after the first bite you will not care what it is made from. It is that delicious!

Why don't you try kanten and find what this unique Japanese food tastes like?

kudaka.shoji@stripes.com

CHECK OUT
THE VIDEO



DIRECTIONS

1 Pour the milk and condensed milk in a heat-resistant bowl. Microwave the mixture for three minutes (600w).



2 Measure out sugar and powdered kanten into the water in a pot over low heat. Stir the mixture while heating it. Once the mixture starts to boil, heat for two more minutes.



3 Next, add the microwaved milk and condensed milk to the pot and continue to heat the mixture over low heat. Remove from heat once mixture reaches a thick consistency.



Tip: Test the consistency by adding a drop to a wooden spatula. If the mixture runs, it is not ready. If the spot of the mixture sticks, then it is ready.

INGREDIENTS

Recipe adapted from Cookpad

- Milk (600 ml) ■ Water (100 ml) ■ Powdered kanten (4 g)
- Sugar (40 g) ■ Condensed milk (30 g) ■ Vanilla essence (a splash)
- Canned fruit, strained (one can of whatever fruit you like)
- Empty milk carton, washed (I used a milk carton with 946 ml capacity. Any size over 800 ml would suffice.)

4 Mix in the vanilla essence then pour the mixture into an empty milk carton. (Make sure the milk carton is washed well). Tip: Pour the mixture through a tea strainer to keep your final product smooth.



5 Add in the strained canned fruit.

6 Close the milk carton and apply a laundry clipper to secure the top opening. Once it cools down, put it in the fridge to let it set for several hours (I refrigerated it overnight).



7 To remove the kanten, pour a splash of water to loosen it from the milk carton and gently slide it onto a plate. Alternatively, cut through an edge of the carton and use a splash of water to ease the process.



8 Cut into even portions, serve and enjoy with tea or coffee. いただきます (Bon appetite)!



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A Taste of Okinawa

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Offering authentic Japanese and Okinawan cuisine at a reasonable price, Gen was recognized in Stripes' Best of the Pacific 2013 as the best restaurant to experience the local culture on Okinawa. Owner and Head Chef Naoki Tsukayama highly recommends the "Fish Garlic Butter Combo," a popular dish among American customers. Tsukayama and his staff make you feel at home, so stop by and enjoy a delicious meal. Gen is located across from Camp Foster's fire station. Just look for shi-shi dogs on a traditional Okinawan tile roof outside Foster's Fire Station Gate.

RESTAURANT INFO

All about Tonkatsu

the Japanese crispy pork cutlet

What is tonkatsu?

Tonkatsu is best explained etymologically. That's to say, looking at the word itself since it is basically just a description. Like calling ketchup tomato paste, for example. The "ton" in tonkatsu is simply a reading for the kanji 豚, meaning pork. The katsu part is a little more complicated and gets really complicated later, but stay with me.

To katakana-ize the English word "cutlet," we get カツレツ "katsuretsu". Pull out the first part, 'katsu', and top it off with the pork 'ton', and you get 'tonkatsu'.

From here, you can probably figure out that tonkatsu is a pork cutlet.

Specifically, it's a pork cutlet that has been rolled in breadcrumbs and egg and double-fried for that extra-crispy, like-no-other texture. Abroad, the dish has taken on many forms and is occasionally double-named pork tonkatsu, but technically tonkatsu only refers to katsu-style fried pork to begin with.

You might be a little surprised to learn that the katsu part of tonkatsu comes from English, but its culinary origins are even more interesting than that!



File photo

The history of Tonkatsu

The first iteration of tonkatsu was served in Tokyo's glamorous Ginza district in the 1890s under the simple moniker "pork cutlet." According to the Nihombashi Restaurant Association (whose authority, I believe, personally,) this took the form of a thin slice of pork served aside raw cabbage due to a lack of personnel and funds. It wasn't until 1929 that today's melt-in-your-mouth juicy, thick tonkatsu was born in a competitor's kitchen in Chiyoda, a few train stops away.

Clearly, tonkatsu came out of Japan, which doesn't explain the foreign name. In fact, plenty of Japanese apparently even debate the classification of tonkatsu as yoshoku (western-inspired Japanese food), because it is so entrenched in the country's food culture. Thankfully, there's an explanation for this as well.

About a quarter century before the first tonkatsu ever graced a heap o' cabbage, the Meiji restoration established policies to popularize Western culture. Along with this came cuisine, such as the French côtelette de veau. Without Europe's long history of incorporating rich animal products in their diet, the buttery, pan-fried veal of this French dish proved not only expensive but unsuited to Japanese tastes. Fortunately, the Japanese had developed the deep-frying technique of tempura, which wicks off excess oil on the second dip. In this way, Tonkatsu uses the original flour-egg-breadcrumb breading technique of French cuisine but Japanese frying methods to achieve its unique texture. Sounds perfect for something that came out of Ginza, right? Add to that readily available cabbage, a characteristic tonkatsu sauce with its own history, and you get the beloved tonkatsu of our time.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY SYDNEY SEEKFORD,
BYFOOD

Most people would agree that if you haven't tried tonkatsu, you're missing a big part of Japanese food. It can be found on just about every menu at home and abroad, alongside staples like ramen (hint hint). But just what is tonkatsu? Where did it come from? And more importantly, have you ever ordered it, expecting to get a crunchy, juicy plate of fried meat and been met with a table of soup instead!?

Keep reading. All secrets will be revealed.

Tonkatsu vs. tonkotsu

At the start of this article, I asked if you have ever been unfortunate enough to witness this scene: Eagerly, you eye waitstaff coming around the corner, tonkatsu hopefully in tow. Then, in horror and surprise, that same waitstaff places before you or your dining companion a steaming bowl of soup instead of the requested hunk of meat.

The graphic scene I paint here is one that can only be born of experience. And shame.

On my first trip to Tokyo, I had the misfortune of ordering tonkotsu instead of my desired 'tonkatsu' thanks to a little language slip. Briefly, let's return to that etymology issue to explain.

We know that ton is pork. So obviously, I had ordered pork something. The kicker is that kotsu-katsu delineation. With a single letter, the whole menu changes.

Katsu, as we have learned, comes from cutlet.

Kotsu on the other hand comes from Japanese originally, and means bone. What I had requested (and you may have too, had I not saved you from this) was 'pork bone', which naturally conveys a desire for pork bone soup, a common base for ramen and readily available at most Japanese restaurants alongside its fried, hammy companion.

In brief, tonkatsu is a fried pork cutlet dish. Tonkotsu is the name for the rich pork-bone broth used in ramen. Sound similar, very different. Should one order tonkatsu ramen outside of Japan, however, you will probably get tonkotsu soup and not noodles topped with pork cutlet, though that would probably be great.

Tonkotsu!



Variations of 'ton'katsu

Aside from the original tonkatsu combination of pork cutlet, cabbage, and sauce on a plate, other delicious takes on tonkatsu have been born of novelty and necessity.

Katsudon

Katsudon is a tonkatsu recipe that swaps out the crunch of cabbage and zing of vinegary katsu sauce for an easy-to-eat meal even young children feel at home with. Fried pork cutlet gets simmered with sweetened egg, onion, and sauce, then served over rice. It's a one-bowl meal popular across the world and brings together some of Japan's best cooking techniques.



Katsu Curry

Apparently, the product of a customer's whims, katsu curry is now a staple in katsu and curry restaurants alike. Slightly spicy, thick Japanese curry meets the crunchy savoriness of tonkatsu in a perfect harmony of texture and flavors.



Photo by Katie Thompson, byFood

Katsu Sando

Some genius came up with the perfect way to enjoy the classic katsu combination of katsu sauce, shredded cabbage and pork cutlet on the go. Pillowy shoku-pan style Japanese white bread soaks up the sauce to prevent drips and softens the prickly crunch of katsu panko. Served hot or cold, katsu sando are a delicious, discrete riff on tonkatsu.





File photo

Types of ‘but it’s not really ton’ katsu

Now that tonkatsu has become an international catchall word for katsu-style fried foods, let’s look at a few other members of the katsu-family you may come across in Japan or abroad.

■ Other Meats: Chicken, steak and tuna “rare” katsu

For the many reasons one might abstain from pork, there is torikatsu. It’s what you’ll be getting if you order chicken tonkatsu or chicken katsu overseas. I like to think of it as a katsu that was adapted for western tastes back again...

On the other hand, recently popularized rare katsu takes inspiration from searing to flash fry high-quality tuna or steak in a katsu-style panko breading. The mouthfeel retains the juicy quality and envelopes the rare morsels in crunchy katsu-style goodness. It’s the opposite of the humble katsudon and elevates katsu to the luxury dining sphere with wagyu and maguro. Are you drooling yet?



Photo by Eliska Sikulova, byFood



■ Kushikatsu

Katsu on a stick! Shove a yakitori stick through just about any bite-sized piece of food, fry it katsu-style, and you get kushikatsu. This style of katsu frying has become popular enough to have its own restaurant chains and is a great way to enjoy many different types of ingredients. Some especially fun takes on kushikatsu are mochi, cheese (mozzarella stick...on a stick. Excellent.), and quail eggs, plus tons of veggies! Kushikatsu is a popular food in Osaka, the city known as the nation’s kitchen.

■ Bento-box katsu: Menchikatsu and friends

Menchikatsu, a combination of mince-meat menchi and katsuretsu katsu, is essentially a hamburger or meatball that has been katsu deep fried. It is often billed as a “healthy” form of katsu because cabbage and onions are included in the patty. Other bento-box staples like ham cutlet get the katsu treatment too, and korokke use the same panko-frying technique to get their unique soft inside crunchy outside texture.



File photo



■ Seafood katsu: Ebi-fry and Aji-fry, etc.

Although the name is different, the prep method for making these seafood “fries” is the same as making katsu. Since dishes like ebi fry are made from whole shrimp, aji fry from fish filets, and ika fry from sections of squid, they don’t receive the cutlet-shaped delineation of katsu. If you want a lighter taste with the same katsu crunch, try a fry! As a side note, ebikatsu does actually exist - in the form of a katsu-fried shrimp paste patty. Yum!



Photo by Katie Thompson, byFood

■ Hirekatsu: Actually, this one is tonkatsu?

Hire(hee-ray)katsu uses leaner cuts and has a reputation for being popular with women since it’s a little more tender, less fatty, and higher quality compared to classic tonkatsu. The characteristic shape of tonkatsu is called “ros” or “roast” katsu, as opposed to hirekatsu. These are still made of pork but tend to come in a nugget or round shape instead of a slab and at a higher price point. The precise cuts for each classification vary depending on where you look, but fat-on pork katsu is usually ros, and lean is typically hire.



How to enjoy tonkatsu

The short answer is: However you like!

Even within Japan, people’s preferences for tonkatsu vary greatly. The classic tonkatsu recipe is simple. Serve a panko breaded and fried sliced pork cutlet with a pile of shredded cabbage and drizzle it with tonkatsu-sauce. In Hokuriku, sauce tonkatsu features a pork cutlet dredged in sauce and served over rice donburi style, sometimes omitting the cabbage altogether. Nagoya is known for its miso-katsu using sweet miso sauce, and of course, you can class the dish up or down as you please. The best thing about katsu, ton or otherwise, is that it is a super versatile and always delicious way to enjoy Japanese food. So go out and explore the wonderful world of katsu!

Fun facts about katsu

The official unofficial companion to tonkatsu is bulldog brand sauce, but plenty of restaurants make their own.

On Bulldog’s English website they assert that it is indeed a form of washoku and not yoshoku. Rengatei, the inventor, calls it yoshoku, though! And so the debate continues...

Katsu sauce is based on British Worcestershire sauce, adapted to Japanese tastes. How’s that for cultural exchange?

Originally, julienned carrots and other root vegetables formed the sides of cotolette, but shredded cabbage was quicker to prepare and its antioxidant properties helped break down the oiliness of tonkatsu, so it won out.

Katsudon is similar to oyakodon made with tonkatsu instead of chicken! You can easily adapt an oyakodon recipe into katsudon at home.



Photo by Katie Thompson, byFood

A ton of information

The word tonkatsu, born of a combination of languages and lifestyles, has taken on a life of its own. In the modern day, Katsu has globe trotted its way to become one of the most recognizable Japanese dishes on the planet, no matter what form it takes. If you’ve ever wondered, “what is whatever-katsu? Is it the same as tonkatsu? Why did they bring me soup?!” hopefully, this article helped.

byFood is a platform for food events in Tokyo, with over 80 experiences to choose from and a fantastic resource for learning about Japan’s thriving food culture! What’s more, byFood runs a charitable outreach program, the Food for Happiness Project, which donates 10 meals to children in Cambodia for each person who books a food event through our platform!

WHAT TO EAT IN OKINAWA: The Hawaii of Japan

BY HUI SUM PING,
BYFOOD

What comes to mind when you think about what to eat in Okinawa? You might think about a staple food like goya champuru or tender boneless pork ribs or belly. Maybe taco rice even springs to mind.

Okinawan culture differs from that of mainland Japan, and this extends to Okinawan cuisine, too! Most of the local dishes in Japan’s southernmost prefecture are quite different from other traditional Japanese dishes due to Okinawa’s location and historical background.

Okinawa Prefecture consists of more than 150 islands in the East China Sea, between Taiwan and Japan’s Honshu island. Thanks to the tropical climate, vast beaches, and coral reefs, as well as the Ryukyu Kingdom’s history, there are lots of delicious Okinawan food to enjoy during each of the four seasons, from hot food to cold desserts. Due to its unique climate, the cuisine of the Okinawa Prefecture of Japan is distinct from the Japanese cuisine of mainland Japan. The longevity of the Okinawan people is often attributed to the island’s food, as Okinawan dietary habits have traditionally skewed toward vegetables and seafood products.

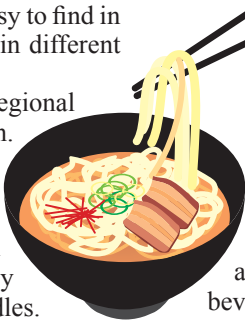
Let’s dive into some of the local food and explore what traditional Okinawan cuisine is all about.



1 Okinawa Soba

A staple of Okinawan cuisine, Okinawa soba, also known as Okinawa ramen, is a kind of noodle that is generally thick like udon and slightly twisted. It is a local specialty dish of Okinawa Prefecture that uses noodles made in a process derived from Chinese noodle-making. It is easy to find in most local restaurants in different areas of Okinawa.

There are also regional styles of this soba dish. For example, if you order this Okinawan dish on Ishigaki Island and the other Yaeyama Islands, you’ll find they have thin, straight noodles. The Okinawa ramen of the Yaeyama Islands is called Yaeyama soba. The buckwheat noodles of Miyako Island are also thin and flat without any shrinkage and are called Miyako soba because of the unique characteristics of the ingredients and the way they are arranged.



2 Rafute

Rafute (braised “pork cubes”) is another local dish of Okinawa Prefecture. It is made with skin-on pork belly stewed in soy sauce and brown sugar. During the Ryukyu Dynasty, the Chinese pork dish “Tong Po Lo” was introduced to the Ryukyu kings, who loved it so much that it became one of their court dishes. One of the characteristics of the dish is the use of awamori (an alcoholic beverage indigenous and unique to Okinawa) in the cooking process. One recommended Okinawan restaurant where you can try this dish is Yuunangii (ゆなんぎい) located in Naha.



3 Goya Chanpuru

Goya chanpuru (also spelled goya “champuru”) is another specialty dish in Okinawan cuisine, a stir-fry of bitter melon slices, usually with pork and tofu.

Okinawan bitter melon (“goya”) is known as the “king of summer vegetables” and is a staple food in Okinawa that’s rich in vitamins. It is said that one of the reasons why many people in Okinawa live long lives is because they often eat bitter melon, a traditional food in Okinawan cuisine. You can find this Okinawa bitter melon dish easily in most local restaurants in Okinawa.

Check out Goya: 3 Easy Japanese Bitter Melon Recipes for Summer to learn how to cook goya chanpuru and other bitter melon dishes!



4 Ishigaki Beef

When it comes to Okinawa’s specialty dishes, Ishigaki beef should be a must-try dish on your list. Ishigaki Island is one of the most popular tourist destinations in Okinawa Prefecture and boasts Ishigaki beef, a brand of beef raised in the warm and natural environment unique to Ishigaki Island.

Ishigaki beef refers to pure Japanese black cattle that have been produced and raised in the Yaeyama area with a certificate of registration and production history. The cattle must have been fattened and managed in the Yaeyama area for approximately 20 months or more after birth.

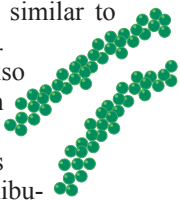
See our post on Ishigaki Island for Okinawan restaurant recommendations, including places to try Ishigaki beef and things to do!



5 Umibudo

Umibudo means “sea grapes” in Japanese. In Okinawa Prefecture, it has been eaten for a long time and is sometimes called “green caviar” because of its shape. Umibudo is eaten raw, dipped in soy sauce and vinegar as a sauce, and gives puchi puchi popping sensation similar to ikura (salmon roe).

Umibudo is also used as a garnish for sashimi. It is also eaten as umibudo-don (umibudo rice bowl) on a bed of rice topped with sanbaisu vinegar, or as umibudo soba (buckwheat noodles) without seasoning. If marinated in a seasoning solution for a long time, the umibudo beads will shrivel up.



6 Taco Rice

Among all of Okinawa’s specialty dishes, the flavors of this one may already be familiar to you. Taco rice is an Okinawan dish consisting of rice topped with typical taco ingredients from the Mexican-American style dish, served with a tomato-based salsa. It was first created in 1984 in Kanatake Town, Okinawa Prefecture. It has become a popular dish in the prefecture and has been used in school lunches since the 1990s.

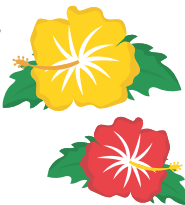
The rice is with minced meat or dry curry in the way it is eaten. It is usually served with a tomato-based red salsa, but sometimes tomato ketchup is used in place of salsa at popular restaurants and bento shops.



7 Mimiga

Mimiga (pig’s ear) is an Okinawan dish made from seasoned, thinly cut pig’s ears. The pig’s ears are boiled or steamed and cut into strips.

Mimiga is eaten as a vinegared dish, often with sauces such as ponzu, vinegared miso, peanut miso, or just salt. It is characterized by the crunchy texture of the cartilage, similar to that of hardened jellyfish. It is high in collagen and is considered beneficial for health and beauty. When mimiga is eaten cold, it is often called mimiga sashimi. The texture is crunchy and chewy.



8 Sata Andagi

Sata andagi (Okinawan donuts) is a type of deep-fried sweet from Okinawa Prefecture. It is a spherical fried doughnut made of sweet batter. It is considered to be a good luck snack and is served at weddings and other celebrations. Because of the sugar content, the small size of the air bubbles in the crumb, and the density of the dough, it is a confection that is satisfying and filling, with a crunchy surface.

In addition to being made at home, sata andagi are also sold at tempura stores, on street corners, and in markets, especially in Okinawa shopping streets such as Ishigaki City Public Market. When sold in stores, the type made with refined sugar is called “white” and those made with brown sugar is called “black.”



9 Okinawa Pineapple Ice Cream / Hyouka

Okinawa is famous for pineapples, so there are a lot of pineapple products to try. The pineapple-flavored ice cream or hyouka (ice) are both worth a try. Especially in summer, these pineapple treats are suitable for cooling off in Okinawa’s hot weather.

In traditional Okinawan cuisine, you can taste different flavors such as bitter, sweet, and salty; and enjoy a variety of textures, from popping umibudo to crunchy mimiga. If you are thinking about what to eat in Okinawa, mark down these Okinawan dishes so you can try them while exploring Japan’s southernmost island!



Experience Okinawan culture through food! Browse food experiences in Okinawa and check out our YouTube channel to follow along on our food adventures in Japan!



Food experiences in Okinawa
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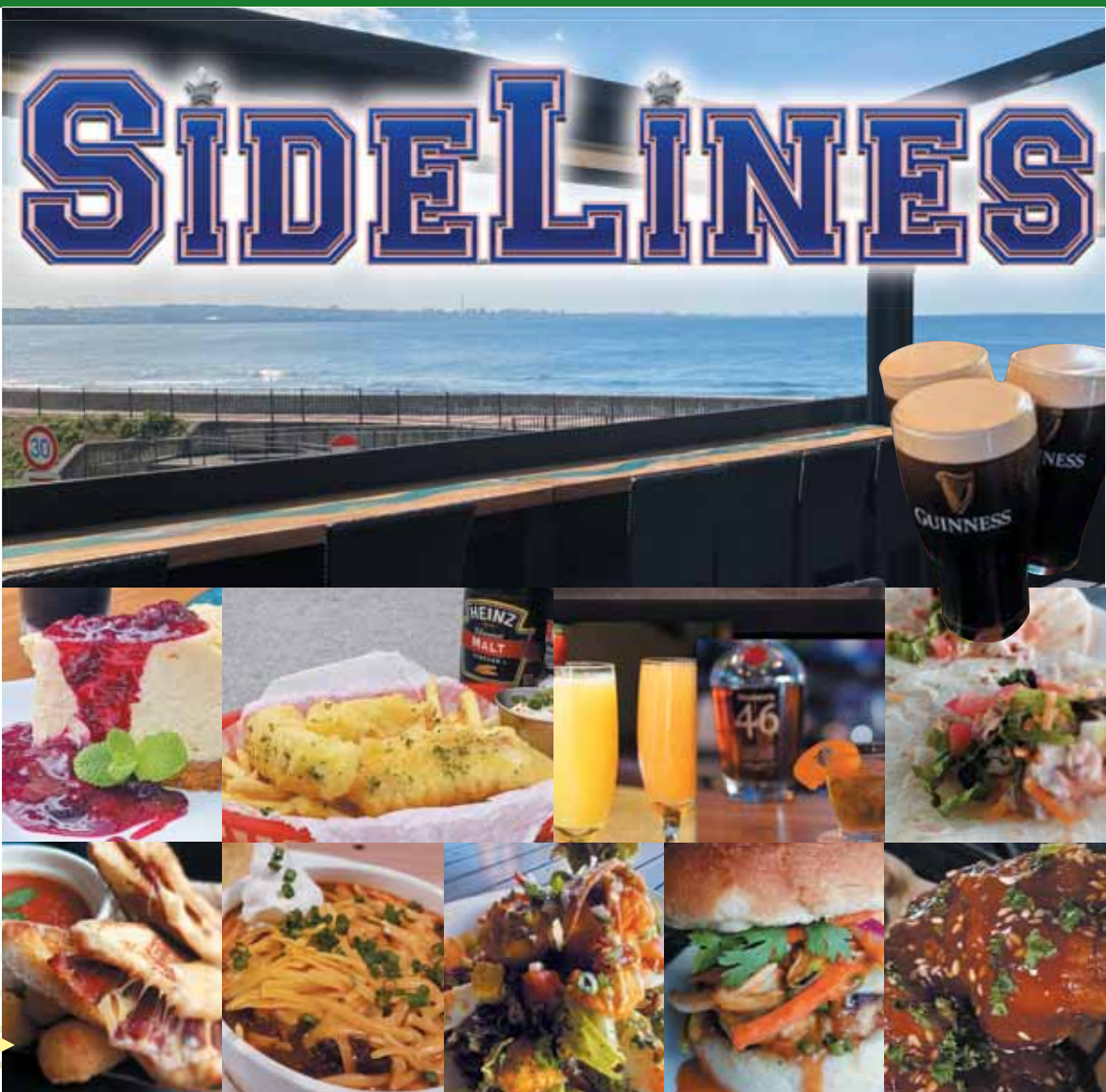
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A Taste of Okinawa





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A Taste of Okinawa



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