

(Octopus) Balls to the Wall

Takoyaki, the Japanese street snack you didn't know you were waiting for, has finally landed in Philadelphia.

by Trey Popp

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Neal Santos

STICK IT TO THEM: Chef Ryo Igarashi, who runs Maru Global Takoyaki with his wife, Nicole, mans his specially designed takoyaki griddle. Maru offers multiple renditions of the Japanese street-food snack.

[REVIEW]

The first of April is a strange day to say it, but there's no sense in waiting, so here goes. Friends, foodies, Philadelphians, lend me your ears: The time has come to eat octopus balls.

I'm not talking about an underwater analogue of prairie oysters. You'd have to swallow a lot of octopus testes to kill a decent hunger pang. (As opposed to octopus dingalings, which can grow to lengths that would stagger a porn star.)

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I'm talking about takoyaki, a spherical Japanese street snack that's somewhere between a crêpe, a fritter and a doughnut hole — only with a bit of octopus tentacle tucked into the middle. News of their availability in Philly may still sound like an April Fools' prank to people who've pined for these savory treats ever since a trip to Tokyo. Chowhound.com threads dedicated to tracking down Stateside versions are shot through with longing and disappointment, not to mention betrayed hope. Back in 2006 — the same year Masaharu Morimoto made some lobster takoyaki on *Iron Chef America* — the Japan-based Gindaco fast-food chain announced plans to bring the snack to 20 locations in California between 2007 and 2010. They've yet to open the first. In the meantime, takoyaki sightings seem to have been vanishingly rare, outside of a few spots in Los Angeles and New York.

I'd never tasted an octopus ball until I walked into Maru Global Takoyaki on 10th Street between Locust and Spruce. The narrow storefront isn't much to look at. There's a cash register by the door, a fridge and TV in the back corner, and a few tables and chairs opposite a long counter. The spare décor ensures that Ryo Igarashi's takoyaki griddle — a compact shelf of cast iron pocked with inch-deep dimples — is the center of attention.

The Tokyo native drops a bit of batter into a dimple; adds bits of octopus, scallion and pickled ginger as it sizzles; and deftly flips the puffing morsel upside down with a pair of slender skewers to crisp its other half. He credits powdered mountain yam for giving the batter its distinguishing lift. There is little room for error. One of Igarashi's line cooks says it took him a week of failure before he scaled the takoyaki learning curve.

Igarashi has cooked at RAW, Amada and Distrito. Each of those kitchens can turn out dishes that shine — but I can't think of a single one that beat my first octopus ball at Maru. The batter, fragrant with dashi, puffed around its cargo like edible goose-down edged with a layer of crispiness as delicate as a micrometer of meringue. Each squash-ball-size globe rode on a sweet-sour slick of Worcestershire-dominated tonkatsu sauce. The composition crested in wide ribbons of dried bonito whose flavor seemed to spring from the depths of another dimension and whose beauty rivaled a pale roseate pane of shaved Spanish ham.



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Wet, dry, crackle, puff — four textures collapsed on my tongue and a tender tentacle emerged as a fifth. Each flavor burst wide open in unison. I was as giddy as a traveler and as surprised as a child. How long since novelty and comfort had come together in such a gestalt? How long since I'd been this eager for a second bite?

Maru sells six balls in a paper boat for \$3.25. It never got better than that first half-dozen — though a denser sweet-and-sour miso version came close, on the strength of the contrast between its crispy shell and moist interior. That's partly because chasing your first high is a lost cause. But execution also varies, as a second round

of the traditional octopus balls showed. Five seconds on the griddle may be all that separates perfect from not quite, but the gap between them is wide. (Whatever you do, don't let them steam under the foil of a takeaway package; these are best eaten the moment they land in your hand.)

Octopus isn't the only option — you can substitute shrimp, chicken, sirloin or tofu in the more traditional balls. Igarashi, who runs the place with his wife, Nicole, also crafts a few heterodox varieties. A cheesesteak version is a step toward straight junk food. That isn't necessarily a knock against them — they're pretty great junk food — but they lack the textural complexity that makes their Japanese counterparts so bewitching. The same goes for a south-of-the-border corn and cotija cheese takoyaki, though they come with a vivid salsa verde that three-quarters of Philadelphia's taco joints could learn something from.

The unexpected excellence of that salsa isn't the only surprise. Maru's fresh-cut French fries (which were good one day but too greasy the next) come with a dipping sauce that could give Monk's a run for its money. A roux-based, garam-masala-spiked beef curry is another winner, as long as the ladle doesn't completely miss the beef (which Igarashi happily corrected when my original scoop turned up only potatoes and carrots). The crab-cake balls are no great shakes, but dessert takoyaki flecked with molten chocolate chips are flat-out delicious.

Maru has a little ways to go when it comes to consistency, but \$3.25 is a pittance to pay for a shot at street-snack perfection. So listen up. It's no joke. The time has come to eat octopus balls, and there's no sense in waiting.

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Maru Global Takoyaki | 255 S. 10th St., 267-273-0567, maruphilly.com. Mon.-Thu., 11 a.m.-9 p.m.; Fri.-Sat., 11 a.m.-11 p.m.; closed Sun. Salads and sides, \$2.75-\$6.95; soup and rice dishes, \$2-\$5.99; takoyaki, \$3.25 (for six)-\$25 (for 50); yakisoba, \$5.99-\$6.99; combos and bento boxes, \$7.99-\$11.99. BYOB. Wheelchair accessible.

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