

Japan's eateries, karaoke spots increasingly catering to solo patrons

Fukuoka Japan is witnessing an expansion of businesses catering to solo customers, including restaurants and even karaoke spots targeting patrons who value privacy and minimal human interaction.

Some ramen shops and yakiniku (grilled meat) restaurants, which customarily serve families or groups, are switching gears to focus on individual customers who enjoy dining alone without distractions from staff or other customers.

Service industry insiders believe the trend reflects an effort to address diversifying consumer tastes amid the country's graying society, declining birthrate and protracted deflation.

"We have devised a way for customers to enjoy ramen without being bothered by others around them looking in their direction. This is especially supported by women," said a representative for the Hakata ramen chain Ichiran Ramen from Fukuoka, known for specializing in tonkotsu (pork bone) broth ramen.

Ichiran, founded by President Manabu Yoshitomi, provides solo dining booths separated by wooden panels, obstructing the view of potential neighbors.

When entering the shop, customers choose their ramen using a ticket-dispensing vending machine and select any vacant booth.

Instead of being escorted to a table by a waiter, customers sit down on their own, press a call button and present their tickets to a server through small window with a shutter.

Customers also have the option of customizing their orders with various toppings, as well as for degrees of flavor, soup thickness, and even firmness of noodles, using a paper card that is handed over through the same window. Once the dish is ready, the shutter lifts again and the server hands over the ramen.

The company's system was conceived by Yoshitomi in the 1990s. His main objective became developing an arrangement where customers could be totally engrossed in their food without worrying about the people around them or who is serving the dishes.

He got the idea for private booths by surveying his customers, discovering that many women found it difficult to visit ramen shops alone because they didn't like being watched as they slurped their noodles.

Women are a key demographic for the chain these days, making up 40 percent of its customer base. The chain has more than 70 locations in Japan, and it has expanded to Hong Kong, Taiwan and the trendy Bushwick neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York.

The West Co. restaurant chain has yakiniku outlets in Fukuoka's Hakata Ward with individual seats for solo diners. The shops, which are open for lunch, have become popular among office workers and are being frequented by a growing number of women.

"We decided to introduce this because we thought it would be attractive to those who want to eat by themselves," said Masaharu Hagi, the head of the restaurant's general planning office. In the future, the company is planning to offer individual seating at more of its outlets.

"It's good for when you have something you have to think over or you want to focus on eating," said a 33-year-old male office worker who used the service for the first time.

Solo karaoke, meanwhile, became a trend mainly among young women in the mid-2000s, but now it has thoroughly taken root. Koshidaka Holdings Co., known for its Manekineko shops, has been providing solo singing in urban areas such as Tokyo, Osaka, Sendai and Kawasaki since 2011.

As other karaoke firms vie for business from solo customers, Koshidaka has developed high-fidelity microphones and headphones that allow users to sing their hearts out alone in a soundproof room.

"We have a high rate of repeat users, and sales continue to grow at a steady clip," a company representative said.

Other businesses are catering to solo golfers who want a partner on the links. Value Golf is a system that allows for single reservations at golf clubs. Users enter their schedule and are then matched with other solo players using the service.

There are about 380,000 registered Value Golf members, most of whom are middle-aged and elderly men.

“After retirement there are many people who find it difficult to make friends, so there is a lot of potential here,” a company representative said.

Tomoki Inoue, an associate analyst at think tank NLI Research Institute who is familiar with consumer behavior, said the trend toward catering to individual customers is a sign of changing demographics.

“Because people are marrying late and other factors, there has been an increase in single people even among the middle aged and elderly, and this market is growing,” Inoue said. “It’s necessary to expand the customer base in segments like the restaurant industry where the competition is fierce, so we believe this trend of welcoming the lone customer will continue.”