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

L.A.-Tokyo express

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 Ramenlord 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 relaunched 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 Akira (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 G-Ro stores on Sawtelle Boulevard — they have myriad options for buying Japanese-influenced clothes and more. Ricky Takiawazawa (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...
Art-rock wizard Cornelius casts a powerful spell

Keigo Oyamada — better known to U.S. fans as Cornelius — has been called "the Japanese Beck," but the multi-instrumentalist would rather be compared to a studio wizard like Daniel Lanois or Brian Wilson. "I like Beck, and we are similar in some ways," he says via e-mail from his Tokyo studio. "But I think we have our differences too."

Tonight, Angelos will get a chance to decide for themselves whom Cornelius most resembles when he plays Disney Hall as part of the L.A. Philharmonic's Frequency series, in what should be one of the more talked-about gigs in art-rock circles. His sets feature dazzling computer-generated visuals and lighting to perfect sync with his band. Cornelius’s most recent release — "Rausu" on L.A.-based Everloving Records, his new U.S. label — is just that, with hypnotic, effects-laden tracks such as "Waltzer." But the more interesting offerings are ambient jazz-like tunes such as "Monroe," in which he uses an ink-jet printer as an instrument.

A SAMPLER OF ALL THINGS JAPAN


FAMINMAIL, 8525 Santa Monica Blvd., West Hollywood, (323) 689-2691, faminmail.com. An offspring of Japan's Family Mart convenience store, the chain began its first U.S. store in WeHo three years ago. Today, it has 13 U.S. locations, all in SoCal.

GIANT ROBOT, 326 S. Sawtelle Blvd., L.A. (310) 478-2833, giantrobot.com. Surrounded by streetwear shops line S. S. E., Giant Robot has a line of original art, clothes, and accessories. It’s a must-see for anyone interested in Japanese culture.

MOMO, 638 N. Stanley Ave., L.A. (323) 964-2460. A boutique specializing in designs from Japan.

MUSHA, 512 W. Carolina St., L.A. (323) 787-7344. A gift shop featuring Japanese-inspired art and designs, the dimly lit shop is a hidden gem in the heart of Boyle Heights.


SHIBUYA, 6559 S. Western Ave., L.A. (323) 592-4336. Known for its delicious Japanese ramen dishes, it is a popular spot among locals and tourists alike.

POMPMONSTER, 2416 Crescent Blvd., Torrance, (310) 325-8666. It carries fashion items such as T-shirts, hats, and clothing.

SANTOUKA RENAI, 8151 Western Ave., Torrance, (310) 324-1311. Serves delicious ramen in a cozy atmosphere.

SHIBUYA, 7020 Beverly Blvd., L.A. (323) 921-5001. The famous Shibuya branch has fashionable clothing and accessories. It is a must-visit for shoppers.

SHIN YAKITORI, 22807 Hawthorne Blvd., Torrance, (310) 328-0110, shin-yakitori.com. This restaurant serves delicious yakitori skewers with a variety of sauces.

For more finds, go to latimes.com/japan

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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. Takahawa says he gets requests from stores in Chicago and New York 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 26th floor of his Wilshire Boulevard office, where he employs a staff of more than 10. (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 Nikkan-savy Angelos. 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 company is in the verge of a break-through with "a few titles in development," thanks to Hollywood's hunger for story lines from Japan ("The Ring," "The Grudge" and the current "One Missed Call.")

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

"You can find an authentic Japanese experience in Los Angeles. You just have to know where to look." — STUART LEEV, Founder of Tokyopop

Where does Levy head when he gets hungry? "Alphama is very solid," he says of the restaurant on 3rd Street near the Koreatown Center. "Another place I like is Tai-Chi on Beverly," an independent, or pub-style, place. When Levy really misses his second home overseas, he heads to Gardenia restaurants such as Otafuku to get his fix of real Tokyo-style ramen.

In general, ramen in L.A. is either a little too watery or too soy-based, he says. "The other thing is that the noodles are 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."

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