

KUSAKA JAPANESE RESTAURANT

BY RICH BELMONT



Did you know there is a Japanese Restaurant in Mineral Point, WI? I don't mean a sushi bar or Japanese steak house serving Teppanyaki on hibachi grills. I mean a real ramen noodle shop where you go for everyday Japanese food cooked as if it came out of Okami-san's home kitchen. Incidentally, Okami-san is the title of a lady in charge of a respectable Japanese restaurant.



And this one is owned by Chris and Hiroko (Hee-row-ko) Messer. Chris is from Cuba City, WI. After graduating from Eastern New Mexico University in Portales, New Mexico he worked a few jobs before going to Japan to teach English as a second language. There he met Hiroko who at that time was working part time

in a Chinese Restaurant in the same building Chris was teaching in and part time in a Ramen Noodle shop. Hiroko is a professionally trained chef who received culinary certification and had previously been a cook in a hospital for over 12 years.

Certainly fate brought Chris and Hiroko together. They were living in Sendai, the capital city of Miyagi Prefecture that has a population of over one million people! They married and opened a small restaurant called Maji Coffee serving American burgers and pizzas to the local Japanese citizenry.

On March 11, 2011 an earthquake and tsunami caused the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant disaster. Chris and Hiroko immediately decided to close their burger shop which was only about 30 miles away. They packed up their belongings and moved to Dodgeville, WI to temporarily live with Chris's mom.

On July 19, 2012 they opened Kusaka, this time serving everyday Japanese noodle and rice bowls to the local American citizenry.

Kusaka means "Under the Sun". The restaurant is named in honor of Hiroko's grandmother, Haruko Kusaka. It is a small place with only 6 tables and 22 chairs. It is set up like a typical noodle shop. There are small banners hanging on the wall. These are common displays in noodle shops advertising the main menu items. Each banner is a description of one item written in Kanji (con-gee) the characters used in the modern Japanese writing system. The four banners mean Takoyaki, Soba, Yakitori and Udon. And this is funny: at Kusaka these are only decorations; none of these items are on the current menu!

When you sit down the first thing you notice are the condiments on each table. There is a sesame seed dispenser, soy sauce (black), vinegar (white), sesame oil and Shichimi (Shee-chee-mee) powder. This last one is known as Japanese spice. It contains seven spices and is so good especially on Yaki noodles and fried rice.

Kusaka is first and foremost a noodle house. In Japan most noodle shops specialize in one kind of noodle. The most common ones are Ramen, Shirataki, Soba, Somen, Hiyamugi and Udon. Kusaka is a Ramen shop and specifically the ramen noodle variety found in the City of Sendai.

Ramen are thin, wheat-based noodles made from wheat flour, salt, water and kansui, a form of alkaline water. The dough is

raised before being rolled. Chris and Hiroko make their ramen from scratch and it is not an easy process. After mixing the ingredients the dough is hand-kneaded, hand-rolled and hand-cut.

The noodles are served in a salad or are pan-fried or are in three wonderful soups: Chicken Soup, Soy Soup or Aka Miso Soup. These soups are all excellent. The Chicken is a hearty chicken flavor broth. The Aka Miso is a soup made with the traditional Japanese seasoning of Miso. It is produced by fermenting soybeans with salt and the fungus *Aspergillus oryzae* and sometimes rice, barley or other ingredients. The result is a thick paste used for sauces, pickling vegetables or meats, and in soup stocks. There is a wide variety of Miso and each region of Japan has its own most popular version. Two of the most common are Shiro Miso (Shiro is Japanese for white) a light yellow or brown color with a mild flavor and Aka Miso (Aka is Japanese for Red) a red miso paste. It is fermented for a longer period of time than white miso so it has a much stronger and heavier taste.



Aka Miso Soup (above left) is a very tasty specialty of Kusaka. However, my favorite is Kusaka's special recipe Soy Soup (above right). It is made from a chicken base, soy sauce and sake. It is so delicious especially when vegetables, smoked pork belly and Irresponsible Sauce are added. They call the sauce irresponsible because it's hot! It contains sweet peppers, jalapeño and habanero peppers, and Thai chilies. It also has a touch of honey and it is reduced in Lake Louie Warped Speed Scotch Ale.

When you are placing your order for any of these noodle dishes you need to add your choices of toppings. These include minced garlic, pepper sauce, chicken, egg, shrimp, pork shoulder, kimchi, smoked pork belly (bacon) or Yasai Itame (stir fry) vegetables. The vegetables are bok choy, cabbage, green onions and carrots. Most of these vegetables are supplied by Shooting Star Farms in Mineral Point, WI.

The rice dishes are superb. You add chicken, pork, shrimp or vegetables to the Fried Rice for a dish you won't soon forget. You can make it really special by adding the smoked pork belly.

By the way, by now you have probably noticed there are two pork choices. The Pork Shoulder is cooked with soy sauce and smoked in house. The Pork Belly is also smoked in the kitchen low and slow for 6 hours. The wood for the smoke is white oak and is salvaged from the Yahara Bay Distillery, Madison, WI. The pork is supplied by Weber Meats in Cuba City, WI.

The rice is Botan white, short-grain and is cooked in a carefully controlled process. It is steamed with cold water so it is always fresh and never mushy. Its flavor really stands out when served in Curry Rice or Donburi. Donburi (Don-boo-ree) is a Japanese rice bowl consisting of fish, meat or vegetables simmered together and served over the rice.



As an alternative to the noodle and rice dishes there is Okonomiyaki (o-konomiyaki). This is a traditional Japanese potato pancake made from cabbage, flour, carrots, green onions and long potato. This so-called potato is actually a Chinese Yam. When it is ground

up it is quite sticky making for a convenient glue to hold the pancake together. The pancake is glazed with Tonkatsu Sauce. This sauce is very similar to Worcestershire but is thicker and unlike Worcestershire it is completely vegetarian.

There are several menu items that can be ordered either as a side dish or as appetizers. They are:

Gyoza (Gee-oh-za) – this is the Japanese version of pork or shrimp Chinese pot stickers.

Steam Buns – these are really good! They are made from Hiroko's own recipe she perfected through trial and error. They are made with a combination of bread and pastry flour, baking powder, dry yeast, sugar, canola oil and hot water. The dough balls are infused with your choice of pork, pork curry, sweet beans or Nutella, the Italian hazelnut chocolate spread.

Onigiri (oh-nee-gear-ree) – Traditionally, these are white rice balls wrapped in Nori (thin sheets of seaweed). They are filled with your choice of chicken, pork, cheese or Umeboshi. The Kusaka version of these balls does not include Nori so they do not have any fishy taste whatsoever. In case you are wondering Umeboshi are pickled fruits common in Japan. They are often referred to as plums but are more closely related to apricots. By the way, some people think Onigiri are sushi balls but they are not. These are made with steamed plain rice and sushi is made with vinegared rice.

Kimchi – Hiroko's special recipe calls for chopped Napa cabbage soaked for a day and rinsed well. Then daikon, carrots and onions are mixed into porridge with brown sugar, ginger, apple, fish sauce and Scottish Ale. Then it is allowed to ferment for a week. It is so popular it is available in jars for take-out.

Daikon Pickles – Daikon is a mild flavored Asian radish. Kusaka's version is pickled with a hint of lemon. You are served a large bowl of slices that are a refreshing compliment to everything on the menu.

Of course, you must save room for a little dessert, right? Castella cake is a specialty of Nagasaki, Japan. It is also a specialty of Kusaka, Mineral Point, WI, USA. It was brought to Japan by Portuguese merchants in the 16th century. It is a sponge cake made from a huge quantity of eggs, brown sugar, honey, flour and hot water. The Japanese cake is a little bland for the American pallet so Kusaka serves it with a home-made citrus berry glaze.

So when you are feeling bored with the usual meat and potatoes take a little ride to Mineral Point and try some true Japanese cuisine. Kusaka Japanese Restaurant is only 39 miles and a 45 minute ride from the Dubuque Wisconsin Bridge. Just take Route 151 North to exit 37 onto 151 Business. Turn right on Doty Street and bear right onto High Street. But fair warning, once you have experienced Kusaka you will be making the trip to Mineral Point... a lot.

KUSAKA JAPANESE RESTAURANT

148 High Street, Mineral Point, WI 53565

608-341-6764 • Facebook.com/KusakaRestaurant

Hours: Mon-Sun: 11 AM-2 PM; 5-9 PM

Dining Style: Come as you are

Noise Level: Conversational

Recommendations: Gyoza Dumplings; Steam Buns; Daikon Pickles; Chicken Soup; Soy Soup; Aka Miso Soup; Fried Rice; Okonomiyaki; Curry Rice; Yaki; Castella Cake

Liquor Service: Beer only

Prices: \$11-\$16.50

Pay Options: Cash, Debit, Local Checks, All Credit Cards

Accessibility: Ramp available for front door access, Rest Rooms-No • **Catering:** No • **Parking:** On Street

Kids Policy: No Menu; High Chairs: Yes; Boosters: No

Reservations: Yes • **Take Out:** Yes • **Delivery:** No



↑ Gyoza



↑ Nutella Steam Buns



↑ Daikon Pickles



↑ Castella Cake