

CUL286 FLPA Tokyo: WELCOME TO JAPAN (Part 2)

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Sunday, February 25 (Part 2)

I keep tapping the ground with my right foot. I can't help it. My order of ice cream is taking a long time. Yes, it's true we just finished off mounds of grilled chicken yakitori together with rice stew and salad, but a meal is not complete without dessert. Am I right, people?!

"Ask them if your order went through," said Mahjabeen, one of my students, while picking at her strawberry syrup mochi ice cream with a spoon. That's easy for her to say.

There are six of us bunched together at this thick light-brown wooden table. The rest of the FLPA group are seated at separate tables on either side of us. I like the ambience of this izakaya – wooden floors, narrow corridors, paper lantern lighting and surprisingly quiet and well-mannered for a pub.

I don't want to bother GG (a.k.a. Giovanna) and Carolyn, who have been running around all evening trying to coordinate our orders, to interpret for me every time. Let's let them sit this one out, I say to myself.

What the hell. Just do it.

I take the digital menu device in my hand, get up from my seat, turn around and make a beeline for the server walking briskly toward me, tray in hand. His calm face belies the pressure he is under catering to the constant demands of the dozens of customers present tonight.

"*Sumimasen*. Ah-ee-suh-kuh-reem ... coming?"

I realize in that moment I have resorted to the Korean-style phoneticization of the English word "ice cream." (Korean is my second language.) Good enough – Japanese and Korean pronounce English words similarly anyway.

The server peers intently at me. He releases a string of Japanese words that go over my head.

For already the third time since I've landed in Tokyo a mere three hours ago, I respond with the only substantial sentence I know how to say in Japanese: "Nee-hong-go-wa Wa-kari-masen." (I don't understand Japanese.)

The server points to the device in my hand. "*Tok, tok, tok, tok?*" he said, mimicking a person tapping away on the menu screen with their index finger.

"Ah, yes, *tok, tok, tok, tok,*" I said, nodding aggressively.

"Ah, ok." He gives me a thumbs up.

A few minutes later my soy sauce-drizzled vanilla ice cream arrives. *Mmm-hmm*. Icy cold and sweet.

While I am eating, it dawns on me that the server and I have just demonstrated good "Global English" – short, to-the-point, literal and the use of hand gestures and onomatopoeia when desperation sets in.

By Glen Choi