
Rice, Steel and Silence

A working chef's guide to kitchens in Japan and Asia

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Nordic chef · 30+ years from Tokyo embassies to Mogadishu and the Arctic

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Before you pack

I lived and cooked in Tokyo for the better part of a decade: Chef de Cuisine at the Embassy of Finland, then the Embassy of Belgium, then the cafeteria at the Embassy of the United States, with my own catering for diplomats and Japanese companies on the side. I once had the honour of preparing canapés for Their Majesties the Emperor and Empress of Japan, now the Emperor Emeritus and Empress Emerita. My hands were steady. My heart was not.

Japan changed how I cook and how I think about the job. Nowhere else have I seen so much respect for the work itself – the knife, the stock, the cleaning of the station at midnight when nobody is watching. This guide is for cooks and hospitality people who want to work there, or elsewhere in Asia, and want the truth before the romance.

In Japan nobody tells you to do it properly. They just do it properly, every day, until you are ashamed not to.

Why Japan, and why not

The good

- **Craft.** Kitchens where a cook can spend years on one thing and nobody calls it boring.
- **Ingredients.** Seasonality taken seriously: the first bamboo shoots, the right week for a fish, fruit treated like jewellery.
- **Safety and order.** Trains on time, streets safe at 3 a.m., a society that works.
- **Food culture.** Every station, side street and department store basement is a lesson.

The honest part

- **Language.** Outside international hotels and embassies, kitchen Japanese is the working language. Without it, your options shrink fast.
- **Hierarchy.** Seniority matters. You learn by watching, and you earn the right to touch things.
- **Long hours.** Many local kitchens still work very long days. International hotels are usually closer to Western norms.
- **Visas are the hard part.** Japan does not hand out work permits for ordinary line jobs. Read the next chapter twice.

The paperwork, without the panic

This is the chapter that decides whether Japan is realistic for you. Check every point with the Immigration Services Agency of Japan or the Japanese embassy in your country before you plan anything.

Skilled Labour visa - foreign cuisine chefs

The main route for a foreign chef cooking their own country's cuisine - Nordic, French, Italian, Indian and so on. The usual requirement is around ten years of documented professional experience in that cuisine, which can include culinary school. There are exceptions by treaty, for example a shorter requirement for Thai chefs. Keep your references and employment certificates: this visa is won or lost on paperwork.

Specified Skilled Worker - food service

A route for working in Japanese restaurants and food service. It requires passing a food service skills test, held in Japanese, and a basic Japanese language test (the JFT-Basic or JLPT N4). It is realistic for cooks who are ready to study.

Other doors

- **Working holiday.** Several countries, including Finland, have working holiday agreements with Japan for young people. Check the age limit and the quota for your country.
- **Embassies and residences.** Chefs employed directly by foreign embassies and ambassadors may work under different arrangements. That is how I started.
- **International hotel groups** sometimes sponsor experienced chefs for senior roles.

If anyone promises you a Japanese work visa for a fee, walk away. Real visas come from real employers and real paperwork.

Inside a Japanese kitchen

- **Cleanliness is the job.** Not part of the job – the job. Your station is judged before your food is.
- **Greetings matter.** Say good morning, say thank you, say "otsukaresama" at the end of the shift. Silence reads as rudeness.
- **Do not improvise.** Learn the house way first. Suggestions come later, if they are asked for.
- **Punctuality is absolute.** Five minutes early is late.
- **Respect the knives.** Never touch another cook's knife without asking.

The rest of Asia, briefly

Asia is not one kitchen. Singapore and Hong Kong run large international hotel and restaurant scenes with English as the kitchen language. Thailand, Vietnam and Indonesia have big resort industries. Each country has its own work permit rules, and most require a sponsoring employer. The same rules apply

everywhere: written contract first, permit before you start, and never pay a recruiter.

How to get hired

- **Start with international operators:** hotel groups, embassies and residences, international restaurant brands.
- **Document everything:** employment certificates with dates and duties, diplomas, references. Japanese immigration reads them closely.
- **Learn some Japanese now.** Even basic greetings and kitchen words change how you are received.
- **Bring proof of craft:** photos of your plates, menus you wrote, a short video of your knife work.

Red flags

- Anyone who asks you to pay for a job, a visa or a place on a list.
- An offer to work on a tourist visa "for now". It is illegal and can get you banned from Japan.
- A contract only in a language you cannot read, with no translation offered.

Last word

Japan will not make your life easy. It will make your cooking honest. If you go, go humble, go prepared and go ready to learn from a seventy-year-old who has made the same broth every morning for fifty years. You will never cook the same way again.

If you want help finding the right kitchen, here or anywhere else, get in touch. I recruit cooks, service staff, supervisors and kitchen leaders for restaurants, hotels, resorts, embassies and remote sites across the Nordics, Japan and Asia, Africa and the

Middle East. The employer pays my fee. Candidates never pay.
Always.

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Facts in this guide were checked in October 2026. Visa rules change: always confirm with the Immigration Services Agency of Japan, the Japanese embassy in your country and your employer before you travel. This guide is general information, not legal, tax or immigration advice.