A Kare Pan Is a Pretty Good Start
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Above: *An assortment of pastries at Donq bakery.*
PHOTOGRAPH BY ANDREW SIMMONS © 2010

As our plane rattled down a runway at Narita, the pilot mumbled repeated apologies over the loudspeaker. We were ten minutes late, but I didn't care about the time. My stomach was squeaking and rumbling along with the wheels and engine. I'd passed on the calcified wafer of cod protruding from the foil-wrapped airline meal, and by the time we reached the gate, the queasy flips of my innards were as rhythmic and insistent as a tom drum. Yet, I was determined to hold out, to avoid acting rashly at the first opportunity to eat.

I had reason to be concerned. In nearly fifteen years of travel, it seemed as if every meal I'd eaten upon arrival at a new destination had been bad. At an empty bistro beneath the shadowy crags of Notre Dame in Paris, I had brooded over fish quenelles the consistency of old sponge. At a Scottish tavern in the port town of Patras, Greece, I had succumbed to a nest of slick, limp fries topped with runny eggs and ketchup. Near a crowded train station in Rome, a friend and I had grimly chewed slices of pizza far inferior to the pasty triangles our college cafeteria produced. The problem of the bad first meal had materialized when I was a kid on family vacations; it firmed into a pattern once I began traveling on my own. After countless bleary-eyed miscues and botched orders, it swelled, a maddening, full-blown curse I struggled to understand, much less push aside.

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Above: *Donq bakery in Tokyo Station.*
PHOTOGRAPH BY ANDREW SIMMONS © 2010

Visiting Japan for the first time, over half a decade after my last trip abroad, I was worried that the curse would reappear and the beginning of yet another trip would be marred. At the hotel, I drank several beers and went to bed hungry. In the morning, I was even hungrier. Few eateries were open when my girlfriend and I set out to dodge motorized carts and snap pictures of tuna at the Tsukiji Fish Market. As we waited at Shinjuku station for the right train, my first meal in Japan happened, as do most first meals, at the one place it could. This time it was a second-floor bakery with a suspiciously non-Japanese name.

The bakery, called Andersen, appeared spotless, illuminated by a soft flood of light that reminded me of the glow inside an oven. I felt my body heat up as I contemplated the trays of pastries, buns, and breads stacked on racks, three high, wrapping around half the store in an L-shape. The burnished brown baubles were lined up in perfect rows, a parade. I glanced at the patrons around me and followed their routine as best I understood it. I took tongs from the stack near the entrance and scrutinized the options. I selected a plump, oblong doughnut and put it on a plastic tray I'd found next to the tongs. I walked to the counter, carefully counted out a few hundred yen in change, handed the coins to the cashier, and emerged back into the humming station.

On the walk to the platform, I examined my purchase. The exterior was not crisp like tempura or a croquette, but instead soft and springy, dusted with panko, a little warm, I discovered, once I touched it with my fingers. I gave the pastry a tentative squeeze and a dark filling rushed toward the outer layer. It had been injected, jelly doughnut style. But was it chocolate? I wondered, sniffing for clues. Red beans? A nut paste of some kind? A few minutes later, on the train, I took my first bite. Panko scattered across my jeans like snowflakes. I was eating meat, but I did not know what kind. The filling was a tasty curry, pulpy threads of a mysterious protein suspended in the sort of sweet, mild sauce only packages produce. I took another bite. It's a *kare pan*, my girlfriend told me. The *kare pan* was gone in fifteen seconds, and with it the curse of the bad first meal. In the brief, pleasurable process of shedding that affliction, however, I gained another: an unwavering compulsion to consume as many baked goods as I could for the remainder of my journey through Japan.

There are, I later learned, lovely artisan bakeries tucked into the side streets of Japanese cities. Like the rare paper stores and dark bars without signs, one must seek them out. However, the chain bakeries are not secrets, and I have visited, over twenty days of foraging on two trips to Japan, most of the ones I have walked past. Each similar in design and

formula, they inhabit most department-store basements and many of the larger train stations, uniformly accessible and relatively inexpensive. Donq, a 105-year-old company, operates nearly two hundred retail outlets around Japan, using flour imported from France and Italy as well as domestic grain. Apparently, its baguettes became trendy in the 1960s, when stylish young women carried them through the streets as edible fashion accessories. While Donq takes cues from France, Andersen identifies as Danish. Looking for automated baking equipment in Copenhagen in the late 1950s, founder Shunsuke Takaki fell under the spell of the pastries he inhaled at local bakeries. Back in Japan, he changed his bakery's name from Takaki's Pan Co. to Andersen to honor his new muse, and he began paying tribute to Danish breads, cakes, cookies, and pastries with his own creations. Today, the chain's motto remains, "Always Denmark." Although Vie de France, a sixty-two-year-old chain owned by Yamazaki since 1991, claims France as well (hence the name and the *tricoloure* popping out of its logo), its wares, like those of most Japanese bakeries, read as a freewheeling waltz through Europe: fried ground-beef *pirozhki*, a *carbonara* tart with bacon and eggs, and a *croque monsieur* served rather cleverly on saffron-yellow French toast.

At these bakeries and a number of others, I have consumed, to name just a few highlights, a Hokkaido-style potato tart, its top teased into peaks like a Baked Alaska; asparagus spears wrapped in golden biscuit dough like pigs-in-a-blanket; a *gratin* roll layered with bacon, potato slices, and cheese; hot dogs in bread shells with grids of yellow mustard and red ketchup etched over the top; and dozens of "sandwich sets."

Regardless of which bakery they hail from, the sandwiches come off like a twist on tea canapes: usually, two slices of white and one of wheat bread, cut into square quarters, lightly packed with three different uncomplicated fillings and stacked in clear plastic trays. The fillings are interchangeable. Fried pork cutlet is an easy favorite, boasting a salty, crunchy interplay between battered meat and shredded iceberg reminiscent of a good, fast-food chicken sandwich, only better, because it is small, made with pork, and cute. Potato salad works with tomato bits and thinly sliced boiled ham; egg salad and smoked turkey don't look so hot together, but the flavors marry well. With drizzles of Kewpie mayonnaise and dainty dabs of butter on ultra-soft, crustless bread, the sheer soothing blandness of the sandwiches might be their most winning attribute. Nothing is aggressive; nothing is spicy; nothing is even warm; it's odd food, yet utterly safe. It's so safe you hardly have to chew it, making it perfect for baby birds, small children, and finicky, jet-lagged adults.

Of course, not every daring combination pays off. At Sizuya, a Kyoto-based chain, bacon and a thin folded omelet are tucked into a mayonnaise-and-ketchup-smeared rice bun, puffed up and sliced like a disc of pita. It tastes mostly of mayonnaise, and the bacon is, at least on the occasion I ate it, a peculiar glittery pink-gray, the color of a car. Vie de France spreads a tangy tuna salad between slices of egg-battered toast, and despite being enlivened with mustard and gently pressed in a grill, it stops just short of appetizing. Yamada, another chain, offers small rounds of cracker-like flatbread, or "pizza," studded with Brussels sprouts and jutting pyramids of Brie. Andersen stuffs a round, baseball-sized dough sack with a shockingly sweet potato salad and calls it a "knish." On both trips, I wondered why so many of the pastries contained potato. I later discovered that, as of 2006, several popular Japanese bakery chains have enjoyed a special relationship with American producers of dehydrated potato flakes.

For travelers who view museums and vistas as ways to kill time between feeds, a day's major meals—usually lunch and dinner—are big occasions, carefully calibrated opportunities to spend good money on meaningful experiences. The hurried breakfasts and street-side nightcaps devoured upon arriving at a new place, the snacks wolfed down on trains, the meals I have messed up repeatedly on my travels—even for dedicated eaters, these are usually held in lower esteem. I think of them as liminal, meals between meals. They exist to tide you over, and that is usually that; but when a trip extends past a day or two, the liminal meals improve. You develop eating patterns shaped by a growing knowledge of your surroundings—the café you walk past each morning, a convenience store near the closest train station. You eat the same thing often—and not just because you have to, but because you wish to. Once you're compelled to eat foods that are affordable and easily available, they become priorities, and you eat them every chance you get. In Greece, just three days after the Scottish tavern disaster, I was a *tiropitakia* addict. I saw the rest of that trip through a feta-flecked shard of phyllo.

On my most-recent trip to Japan, I ate many meals I may never have again. There was a salty, grilled river fish and a charcoal-roasted sweet potato on the side of the road in snowy Nikko. There was eel grilled live and wriggling at a nondescript lunch counter in Tokyo. Although one was impulsive and light, and the other decadent and substantial, both meals are inseparable from the places where they unfolded and the specific moments in time they occupied. In contrast, *kare pans* are an easy liminal luxury. You can have one whenever you leave the hotel. They follow you

and hang out around the corner, rarely more than a few blocks away.

When I returned home after each trip, I shared my photos with family and friends. While the sparkling sushi spreads and bowls of soba enveloped in billowing steam did not go unappreciated, the bakery wares I'd documented captured more imaginations. "Those sandwiches, I'm intrigued by them," wrote a friend via e-mail. My brother scrolled through the pictures on my computer. When I described a *kare pan*, he immediately pulled up a Google search. "I've got to see if I can find those here," he said.

The breads, pastries, and sandwiches intrigue and tantalize because anyone can conceive of enjoying them—of being ravenous, low on funds, tired, bad at speaking Japanese, and still somehow able to find something delicious. "You could make the sandwiches yourself," my dad offered when my brother coveted them too. "One should eat Japanese food in Japan," he added, clearly unconvinced. One should, but one should also realize that the bakeries don't simply mimic the baking traditions of Europe. In representing something foreign—and attempting to do so honestly—they reveal much. Few countries interpret as frequently, as thoroughly, and with as much imagination as Japan. In the baked goods I have enjoyed, I have found wit, absurdity, and reverence along with dehydrated potato flakes. This sense, one I haven't gotten from the little meals I've eaten elsewhere, challenges a traveler's notions of authenticity. The Japanese chain bakery may not be the site of traditional Japanese food, but it is the site of authentic Japanese cultural expression no less brilliant and valid than less-portable interpretations For example, on my trips there I have enjoyed: fiery yet refined Sichuan fare crafted from Kyoto's array of heirloom vegetables; linguine with clams, butter, sake, and nori flakes; and Japanese-style Korean barbecue—thin, luscious slivers of beef striated like pink granite, rubbed lightly with salt and lemon after spending mere seconds on a smoldering, suet-greased grate. This is not fusion food, a collision of culinary traditions, a low-end wink at the played-out pile-up of French techniques and Asian ingredients. This is different, a familiar picture seen through an unfamiliar lens, a classic song played, straight-faced, on a new instrument.

The bakeries and their customers understand this. Andersen's press literature suggests that the company has always seen its task as a kind of faithful representation and approached the potential challenges with a seriousness belying the actual products, which seem drenched in whimsy as well as Kewpie: "Our company manufactures and markets a symbol of a culture that is originally foreign to Japan, namely bread." If the fistfuls of receipts I have brought back are any indication, the mission has been a success. What's more, walk through toy stores in larger Japanese cities and you may see giant stuffed cupcakes and macaroons—plush, cuddly representations of the baked goods being manufactured and marketed a few floors down in the store-basement food courts. Here, foreign cultural symbols aren't merely appropriated; they're savored, celebrated, and digested—and then regurgitated as something fresh and new.

In 1869, the first western-style bakery opened in Japan, a shop in the Tokyo neighborhood of Ginza. In 2009, Andersen opened its first shop in Copenhagen, where its founder was initially inspired—perhaps, as I'd like to think, when he stumbled into a bakery on his first day in town. While the Danish Andersen and the company's Japanese outlets don't offer the same assortment of baked goods, this sort of cultural pinball—the continued bouncing and redirecting of traditions—is a lovely effect of Japan's national enthusiasm for playing artfully with the minutiae particular to places and cultures. What will happen, then, when a young Danish pastry whiz frequents the Andersen in Copenhagen and is inspired to take a bakery tour of Japan? Imitation is a great form of flattery but loving, creative adaptation is a greater one. Searching for a multitude of meanings in a wad of dough may be risky reductionist business. After all, a *kare pan* can say only so much. Still, when it is early in the morning, and you have been in the country for just a matter of hours, a *kare pan* fried to a Krispy Kreme's pillowy consistency, munched with beer in the window seat of a bullet train speeding out of Tokyo Station—a *kare pan* is a pretty good start.