

# Tokyo district tries to reel in tourists with whale meat

October 9 2015, by Harumi Ozawa

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A dish of whale meat sashimi is pictured next to diners at a restaurant in Tokyo during the Ebisu whale meat festival

When tourists think of Japan, images of dramatic landscapes, futuristic cities and world class sushi might spring to mind.

But one Tokyo district is hoping to reel in outsiders with one of the country's more controversial traditions—slaughtering whales.

Ebisu, a chichi gastronomic hub close to Tokyo's frenetic Shibuya shopping district, is hosting an annual food festival aimed at introducing foreigners to the culinary delights of [whale meat](#).

"With so many foreign tourists visiting Japan now, we would like to show how we really feel" about eating the animal, Takashi Furui, head of the event's executive committee, said at a press conference declaring the festival open last week.

A record 13.4 million foreigners visited Japan in 2014, up from 10.4 million the previous year.

The figure has already reached 12.9 million by August this year—with many regions jostling for ways to stand out as the 2020 Olympics approaches.

Around 30 restaurants in Ebisu district are offering whale dishes throughout the festival, which closes on 18 October.

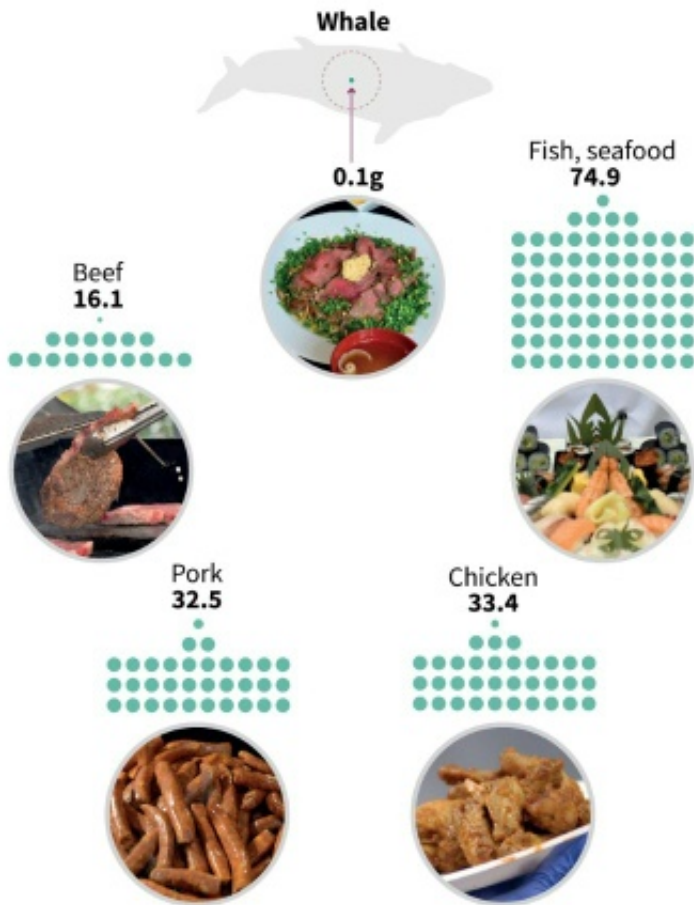
But few tourists visiting the district this week seemed willing to tuck into the dark meat, which fans say has a gamey quality, similar to venison.

"I don't believe I would do that unless I was absolutely starving and there was nothing else to eat," Canadian visitor Betty Lidington told AFP near the main Ebisu station.

Her husband Bill agreed: "I don't really want to, and I won't miss it if I don't taste a whale."

## Eaten in Japan

Average daily consumption per capita



Source: Japan's Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries Ministry

AFP

Graphic on the whale meat in the Japanese diet

French tourist Agathe Lavielle said she was more open to the idea, though.

"It doesn't shock me to eat different kinds of food and meat," she said.

"I could try some, maybe, yeah," she added, provided that the animal did not suffer.

## Fishing god

Japan's culinary relationship to cetaceans is both controversial and complex.

The seafaring nation has hunted whales for hundreds of years but the industry only really took off after World War II to help feed a hungry country.

In recent decades it has used a legal loophole in the international ban on whale hunting that allows it to continue catching the animals in order to gather scientific data.

But it has never made a secret of the fact that the whale meat from these hunts often ends up on dining tables—even though consumption has fallen sharply in recent years.



A dish of whale meat carpaccio pictured at a restaurant in Tokyo during the Ebisu whale meat festival

The country's influential Japan Whaling Association has given the festival its blessing.

"If foreign visitors actually see the food being served at restaurants, I hope they understand and say it may be alright to use it as resources as long as the animals are not endangered," chairman Kazuo Yamamura, who attended the festival opening, told AFP.

Festival organisers say Ebisu's name is deeply entwined with fishing, whales and foreigners.

Ebisu is a fishing god and one of the Seven Deities of Good Fortune—popularly venerated throughout Japan as the tutelary gods of one's occupation.

The word can also refer to a whale, in a deified form, and was once used as a term to describe foreigners, relating to the belief that the gods of fortune come from faraway places.

Seattle tourist Eric Johnson said the festival put him off the district entirely.

"It would make me not want to come to Ebisu if I knew I was one of their main targets," Johnson said.

"Based on the principle of it, I would not even want to try it even if it tastes amazing and wonderful."

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