

# Chefs change food to ease mealtimes for elderly eaters

By **Motoko Rich**  
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**YOKOHAMA, JAPAN** —> The 94-year-old man had come for lunch at a Chinese restaurant, and he was determined to make the most of his squid and leek stir-fry.

Eigo Shinoda, a former shipbuilding executive and fighter pilot in World War II, spends his days in a wheelchair and has trouble eating solid food. But that was no impediment as he dug into his meal with a turquoise plastic spoon recently.

That's because the staff at the restaurant, Kaze no Oto, had pureed the stir-fry in a food processor and served it to his group, which was from a nearby nursing home. While it didn't look that appetizing, it did the trick for Shinoda. He finished by licking his plate clean.

Kaze no Oto, in a suburb of Yokohama, is one of a few restaurants in Japan catering to an aging population with meals for those who have difficulty chewing or swallowing. In the way that restaurants have long offered children's menus, some are now offering special senior meals, as well.

Japan has the world's highest proportion of people 65 and older, at more than one-quarter of its population. The country is a global leader in adapting to the needs of an aging citizenry, with racks of reading glasses at bank counters and walking-cane holders in city offices.

With its expanding efforts to accommodate the growing population of seniors, Japan offers a foretaste of the kinds of societal changes that are beginning to shake wealthy places with rapidly aging populations, including many countries in Western

Europe as well as South Korea and Hong Kong.

In Japan, companies are developing special thickening products that can be added to meals during preparation to alter the texture of various foods and ease swallowing. In a culture where meals are prepared with great care and artistry, the thickening gels make it possible for chefs to reshape the food into visually pleasing dishes.

At the Mutuai nursing home in Yokohama, nutritionists and chefs experiment regularly so that they can offer residents a variety of meals.

On a recent afternoon the lunch menu was Japanese sea bass and sweet-and-sour marinated carrots and radishes, with a side dish of spinach and mushrooms. To adapt the meal to those with slight swallowing problems, the kitchen staff substituted flounder, a more tender fish, and removed the mushrooms and stems from the spinach.

For the residents who have more severe swallowing problems, the staff sent the meal through a food processor, adding a gel powder before cooking the pureed versions in vacuum-sealed plastic bags. Then the resulting gelatinous blocks were poured into molds so that the chefs could create meals that looked like a piece of fish accented with slices of carrots and radish.

"We want them to enjoy different textures, flavors and looks," said Fumie Egashira, a dietary consultant who works with the nursing home. "This is one of the greatest joys for them. We are not satisfied just because they feel full or can eat safely. We also have to give them pleasure and let them share a meal together."



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Nursing home residents are fed at the Chinese restaurant Kaze no Oto in Yokohama, Japan. The restaurant is one of several in Japan catering to an aging population.