

HOW to EAT LIKE A SUMO WRESTLER



A HEAVY DINNER

In Tokyo, DESIREE KOH takes on chanko-nabe, the meal of champions – sumo champs, that is.

I am 62.5kg, 1.58m tall, run marathons and take part in half-Ironman races. A typical sumo wrestler weighs between 115kg and 230kg, and averages 1.8m in height. The comparison is stark but that didn't stop me on my quest to take on chanko-nabe, the staple heavyweight training diet of these rotund athletes, which features mounds of meat, seafood and vegetables cooking in a hotpot stew.

Bursting with protein and an avalanche of carbohydrates, chanko-nabe is devoured in massive quantities directly proportional to the wrestlers' statures, often complemented with rice and beer to boost their caloric intake and achieve competition-ready physiques.

I made my way to Ryogoku, the centre of the sumo wrestling universe, one autumn night in Tokyo. It only made sense for me to head straight for Tomoegata, founded by one of the sport's legendary yokozunas (grand masters) and whose name the restaurant bears. Now run by his son, dinner prices there range between ¥3,000 (US\$38) and ¥6,000 per person. I was led past a ton of sumo memorabilia that lined the walls to a table where an earthen pot – about the size of a wash basin – awaited to be filled to the brim with gut-busting grub. Together with dining companions of regular girth, I ordered the biggest spread. This would have served two sumos or about six non-sumo wrestlers.

I was initially taken aback by a massive mountain of raw meat and greens that was about three times the size of my head. The pile of fresh fish, prawns, prime rib-eye and chicken thighs was ringed by items like tofu, potatoes, mushrooms, carrots, leeks and udon noodles. To get the meal going, a waitress deftly picked various slices of meat and sprigs of vegetables from all over the platter and tossed them into the hearty chicken broth.

It was time to move in for the win. I dug in, retrieving scoops of flavourful bounty, needing to stand up and flex some bicep in hauling my catch. If that wasn't enough, big bowls of rice and pickles were also served to supplement the feast. I stole glances at other large banquet tables of locals digging in lustily, washing everything down with beer – because you should never miss a calorie.

We took about three hours to finish the feast. By then, all I wanted was to waddle back to my hotel to sleep off the meal while inches crept up along my waistline. ■

THREE SUMO EXPERIENCES

1 Japan's biggest sumo tournaments take place in Tokyo every alternate month starting from January. Kokugikan stadium in Ryogoku is the best place to see these wrestlers throw their weight.

2 Brave enough to get up close to the action? Most beya or sumo stables – where the wrestlers live and train – open their doors to visitors who want to check out morning training sessions.

3 Outfit yourself with a sumo suit, not forgetting the signature geta wooden sandals, at stores in the Ryogoku neighbourhood. The clacking sounds on the pavement always mean a wrestler is around the corner – louder right after a chanko meal.

www.sumo.or.jp/eng