



Black Eggs

Throughout Japan, at thousands of spas called *onsen*, chicken eggs are lowered into hot mineral waters, becoming soft boiled in about 15 minutes or hard boiled in 20. These *onsen* eggs, gobbled up by Japanese tourists who entertain a vague notion that they are somehow beneficial to their health, look just like eggs boiled in tap water on a kitchen stove. But something remarkable happens to eggs dropped into the waters of Owakudani, the highest mountain station on the Hakone ropeway leading to Lake Ashi. The egg shells turn black as coal, like the eggs held above by Yoshi, who complained as I snapped the photo. She thinks her hands look awful because of all the gardening she does back home.

Owakudani, 1,000 meters above sea level, is nicknamed “Big Hell.” A dozen sulfuric steam plumes spout there. But it’s not the sulfur that colors the eggs black. If it were, *onsen* eggs at Kusatsu up north, the most sulfur-stinking hot springs I know, would be black, too, and they aren’t. My guess is that it’s sort of a trick, a tourist attraction. Owakudani black eggs, I think, are boiled in what amounts to hot black tar, and thus emerge as demon Easter eggs.

Anyway, the black eggs of Owakudani are legendary in Japan, and the legend has it that eating one of them will extend your life span by seven years. Not a

bad deal. I bought a half dozen for ¥500, less than five bucks. Money well spent, although most likely the eggs will just raise my cholesterol instead of extending my life.

Late in our trip, days away from returning home, we hosted a small Chinese dinner party in Tokyo's Shinjuku. Guests were Masako and Yutaka Katayama, Shizue and Shozo Usami, and Harumi and Eiichi Shimizu. My old friend Mr. Katayama, known as "Mr. K" in Nissan Motors circles, listened to my story of the black eggs of Owakudani, a story he knew well because he has been everywhere. *Doesn't my 95-year-old friend look great as he laughs in the photo below?* He asked me if I had ever eaten a black Chinese duck egg called a *pidan*. When I said I hadn't even heard of such a thing, he ordered one for me. As I shelled it, I was startled to see that the *inside* was opal black, much more impressive than the black-shell eggs I was talking about. Then the large egg was wedged and served to the eight of us in a vinegar sauce. Delicious. These eggs are not cooked but preserved, Mr. K told me. The Chinese are good at preserving and not wasting food, he said. A little Internet research informed me that *pidan* are produced in the following way: The eggs are coated in a clay-like plaster of red earth, garden lime, salt, wood ash and tea, wrapped in rice husks, and packed into an airtight container. *Pidan* are often called thousand-year-old eggs, but they are actually only about 100 days old.

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Photo by EIICHI SHIMIZU

Mr. K and Jackson Sellers are together once again at a Tokyo dinner party.