



Keeping it Fresh

Edo Japan, a Canadian QSR founded by a Buddhist reverend, has turned fresh, simple food into nearly five decades of success

BY KYM WOLFE

The health of a franchise system can often be seen in the commitment of its franchisees. Steven Ng opened his first Edo Japan franchise in Calgary in 2005. Twenty years later, he is a multi-unit owner with seven locations spread north to south across the city. And, if the opportunity arises, Ng says he would love to own a few more.

Ng is not the only one who loves Edo Japan. The proudly Canadian quick service restaurant (QSR) brand has been serving fresh and delicious Japanese-inspired meals in Calgary since 1979. After its founder, Buddhist Reverend Susumu Ikuta, came to Calgary from Japan, he cooked and served teppan-style meals to nourish and provide for his local faith community. Two years later, he opened another Edo Japan restaurant in Edmonton. By 1986 Edo Japan's popularity led to Reverend Ikuta's decision to offer franchises.

Reverence for the brand

Although Reverend Ikuta left the company in 1999 (when he was appointed Bishop of the Buddhist Churches of Canada), Edo Japan has maintained his original concept: high quality, flavourful, teppan-style food made fresh to order, that is both nourishing and affordable. The brand even continues to serve Reverend Ikuta's signature teriyaki sauce.

"We're in a bit of a sweet spot," says current CEO, Dave Minnett, noting that Canadians have an appetite for global tastes, and Asian cuisine is growing in popularity for both lunch and dinner.

At the same time, there's a demand for healthy QSR options that use fresh and local ingredients, and convenience and price heavily impact purchase decisions. Additionally, customers like to have the choice of eating in-restaurant or opting for pick-up and delivery, depending



on their situation. “We fit perfectly—we’re convenient, fast and affordable, and our food travels well,” says Minnett.

The franchise system has grown to 205 units, mainly in Western Canada, and starting to spread east. There are currently close to 30 Edo Japan locations in Ontario, and the first maritime location opened in Fredericton this past spring. “We have the runway in Canada to have 700 locations,” says Minnett. “We’re already the largest QSR Asian food franchise in Canada, and we’re just getting started in Ontario.”

While Edo Japan is in the QSR business, Minnett says that the corporate team’s main objective is supporting its franchisees. “Our number one concern is their success. We have a massive responsibility to make it easier and more profitable every year to operate an Edo Japan franchise.”

More than 70 per cent of stores are owned by multi-unit operators, and Minnett is extremely proud of the fact that Edo Japan has earned the CFA Awards Franchisees’ Choice Designation for 15 consecutive years, a recognition that comes directly from the franchise owners. “It speaks well to how they feel about our collaborative partnership, and that it has their best interests at heart.”

As a franchisor, Edo Japan provides the tools, systems, and support that a franchisee needs.

Each new franchise is a turn-key operation, and after the initial five weeks of intensive immersion at a training restaurant, the new franchisee has corporate training staff available to work beside them during their opening weeks. Afterwards, regional operations managers work with the owners to help them identify opportunities for business growth, and to find solutions to any challenges they encounter.

While the franchise wants to grow, says Minnett, the priority will always be to protect and strengthen existing stores. “Our franchisees expect us to step in to help and support as needed,” he says.

Ng confirms this mindset: “Edo doesn’t just pop up a new location anywhere. They always look at what the impact will be on sales in existing locations and if it’s in close proximity to me, they’ll talk to me first.”

Following the recipes

When Ng purchased his first franchise location, he knew what to expect because he had grown up in a QSR environment, working in his parents’ Subway franchise and learning the necessary hospitality skills. “Having QSR experience is great, but it’s not required,” says Ng. “The benefit of joining an Edo Japan franchise is that they give you the tools and recipes, and they have a great training program and proven procedures.”

“You do have to have a good work ethic and strong communication skills,” Ng adds, “and be ready to embrace established systems. Following guidelines and recipes is what ensures consistency for customers and protects the strength of the brand.”



ICONIC BRAND



David Minnett, President and CEO

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Ng learned the hard way how important the smallest details can be. “Early on, I overlooked the importance of inventory. Since all ingredients come in raw, precise portioning is essential. It’s one of the most valuable tips I pass on to new franchisees.”

You also need to be ready to put in long hours, particularly during the start-up phase, Ng says. He recalls spending most of his time in the business, seven days a week. “For the first two years, I was there 14 to 16 hours a day, from opening to close. It took time to build the business and my team, but the foundation it created was worth it.”

He is happy to report that for the most part, he now works Monday to Friday and, with trusted staff in place, he’s not working those long hours. But he still works in all his stores regularly, visiting three to four a day, meeting with team leaders, ensuring they have the coaching and practical support that they need, and connecting with all the team members. “We have close to 100 employees; I know them all and have worked a little with all of them. Being hands-on is key,” he says. “You need to be there, full time, every day, and be prepared to be on any of the stations if required, wherever you need to be. You need to go out into the community; do some door knocking; don’t just wait for business to come to you.”

Spicing things up

Of course, every restaurant owner wants to stay on-trend, and Edo Japan has a history of adapting to changing market demands while staying true to Reverend Ikuta’s original vision. The company embraces the Japanese business philosophy of kaizen, continuous improvement through small, incremental changes to processes and systems that result in significant improvements over the long term.

Edo Japan franchise partners, who are on the front lines in their communities every day, actively participate in these processes. “Some of our best ideas come from our franchisees, who are closest to our customers,” says Minnett. Sometimes this leads to trials of new menu items, some of which have become permanent additions (sushi and bubble tea, for example). Sometimes it opens the door to system-wide policy or operational changes, such as introducing third party food delivery options like DoorDash and Uber Eats.

“One pain point we had as we became more popular was that people were starting to queue up,” says Minnett. Since everything is made to order, that meant long lines at the busiest times of the day. “We decided to enable pre-ordering, so it was ready for pick-up when the customer arrived.”

It was fortuitous that in 2018 Edo Japan began partnering with delivery services, and in 2019 introduced online ordering and the My Edo App loyalty and rewards system. Those changes resulted in relatively little disruption when the pandemic arrived in 2020, and most Edo Japan locations were able to quickly pivot and continue serving customers. “COVID-19 challenged everyone,” says Minnett. “We not only survived, we thrived.”

Whether in person, through delivery apps, or picking up take out, Edo’s loyal customers are ensuring the brand continues to thrive, nearly 50 years after it all began. 🍁

