


Hearty Chicken Katsu Curry 'Onigiri Sandwiches' By Pastry Chef Turned Hawker At Senja Hawker Centre

Onigirazu Don is run by a cheerful millennial couple and serves comforting Japanese rice ball 'sandwiches' and donburi from \$3.50.



Alvin Lim

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Onigirazu don home-based business chicken katsu Onigiri-Sandwiches



Senja Hawker Centre opened its doors last December in Bukit Panjang, drawing formidable queues at a number of its stalls – many of which are outlets of familiar brands like Amoy St Lor Mee.

Sounds like fierce competition for new kid on the block Onigirazu Don, which until recently operated as a home-based business. The word onigirazu roughly translates to a rice ball that's “not formed into a ball”. Instead, think of the onigirazu as a sandwich version of the onigiri. It's crafted with layers of rice and various ingredients spread onto a sheet of seaweed. The seaweed and fillings are then bundled into a square and sliced to reveal its interior. It's easier to make than the traditional onigiri, which requires filling then shaping the rice into neat triangles or orbs.

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Don, of course, alludes to donburi, aka rice bowls. The stall is the brainchild of couple Felicia Poh, 28, and Jacky See, 34, who run the stall full-time together.

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Started out as home-based business

Both husband and wife are no greenhorns to F&B. Felicia is a pastry-trained graduate of At-Sunrice GlobalChef Academy who spent four years working at InterContinental Singapore hotel's pastry department and mod European restaurant The Spot (also in the pastry section). Meanwhile, Jacky has about ten years of experience in F&B operations, having previously worked at Menbaka Fire Ramen as part of its opening team and other catering companies.

Felicia left her chef de partie gig at The Spot to care for her newborn baby boy in early 2020, while concurrently running a home-based business selling cakes for extra income – the idea for Onigirazu Don only came a few months later. “In the first year of Covid, we were always at home. So we were looking for things to do,” explains Felicia. “We were reminiscing about past trips to Japan, and started cooking Japanese food for fun.”

This included onigirazu and dashimaki tamagoyaki (Japanese rolled omelette with bonito stock). “At first, we just passed the food to our parents and friends. Then we gained confidence and started selling it to our neighbours, before starting a proper Facebook page [in 2021],” she adds. Other items sold via their home-based biz included rice bowls, soba and deep-fried snacks, some of which are now part of their hawker stall's menu.

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Tempting opportunity at new hawker centre

Sales for Onigirazu Don's items soon overtook her home bakery's, leading the couple to focus on the former. "It was enough for some decent money on the side, but it definitely wasn't large-scale," says Jacky, who helped his wife prepare the grub on weekends while juggling a full-time operations job at a catering kitchen back then.

Their lucky break came after they signed up with food delivery platforms to "get some extra market exposure". "Apparently, someone from [the FairPrice group that runs Senja Hawker Centre] ordered our food to try, and we were invited to apply for a stall here," says Felicia.

The pair decided to take a leap of faith to become full-fledged hawkers. Making the decision easier was the hawker stall's "lower-than-usual rent", says Jacky, quoting media reports that described monthly rents of between \$1,100 and \$1,600 for stallholders at Senja Hawker Centre (though he declines to reveal exactly how much he pays). Coupled with "minimal renovations" to their stall, this meant that the couple only spent around \$12K getting their hawker biz on its feet.



Promising start

Onigirazu Don benefited from the hype surrounding the opening of the breezy hawker centre. They managed to sell an average of “200 orders” daily, even though their stall “never had a super long queue like [their] neighbours”. “We’re already very happy with the business we get. By the end of each day, it feels like we are going to *pengsan* (Malay for faint) already,” laughs Jacky.



The menu

There are four onigirazu (onigiri sandwiches) on offer, ranging from the classic Spam and tamagoyaki to chicken katsu or smoked duck (from \$3.50). But selling even better than the snacks are their rice bowls and noodle sets (\$3.50 to \$11.90), which Jacky reckons is due to customers “wanting something more filling around mealtimes”.

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Spam & Cheese Onigirazu, \$3.50

The stall's entry-level onigirazu. Despite its name, it features a "local brand" of fried luncheon meat instead of the more traditional Spam, an American brand of canned pork popular in Okinawa after it was introduced to locals by the US military during WWII. It's layered with vinegared Vietnamese short grain rice, slices of dashimaki tamagoyaki, processed cheddar cheese, shredded lettuce, mayonnaise, house-pickled daikon and nori.

Everything comes together into a pleasant bite, with savoury crisp-edged luncheon meat contrasted by sweet, creamy omelette and occasional hits of tang from the crunchy pickled radishes. A tasty snack, though we wish they'd opted for the saltier and meatier (but also pricier) Spam instead of luncheon meat.

As Felicia layers the rice by hand (compared to, say, rival rice ball shop Mr Onigiri at Thomson, which uses an automated onigiri maker), we find the 'sandwich' messier – it has to be wrapped in paper to keep its shape. However, it's also slightly larger — we reckon one piece should fill up lighter eaters.



Kare Katsu Onigirazu, \$4.20 (8 DAYS Pick!)

We recommend getting the chicken katsu version instead for an extra 70 cents. Though it's supplier-bought, the breaded chicken cutlet is deep-fried to order and nicely crispy with a succulent interior – pretty yummy paired with a splash of Japanese curry (kare)-spiked mayo.

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Smoked Duck Onigirazu, \$5

The fanciest onigirazu is this smoked duck one and it isn't our favourite — the smokiness of the bird overwhelms the other ingredients, including the mellow *wafu* (a Japanese-style salad dressing made with rice vinegar and soy) mayo it's drizzled with.

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Tokachi Pork Oyako Don, \$7.90 (8 DAYS Pick!)

The *oyako* in *oyakodon* means parent and child, and typically refers to chicken chunks cooked alongside soft curds of egg, dashi, soy sauce and sake. However, the hawkers substitute the chicken with pork here.

Sliced pork loin and onions are cooked in a mix of sugar, sake and soy sauce. “The secret is in caramelising the sugar before stirring in the other ingredients,” explains Felicia of their bestselling dish, inspired by a pork bowl recipe that they once tried in the Tokachi region of Hokkaido, Japan.



The meat is juicy and well-coated with that luscious glaze – a nice pairing with the velvety, wobbly layer of egg it rests on. We especially like how the sauce seeps into the short grain rice beneath. Every bowl comes with a heap of shredded lettuce and nori alongside pickled daikon.



Chicken Katsu Curry Udon, \$6.90

While they used to sell cold soba when they were home-based, they've swapped it out with curry udon as "it's more suitable for the elderly [who aren't used to cold noodles]" who make up a significant proportion of their clientele.

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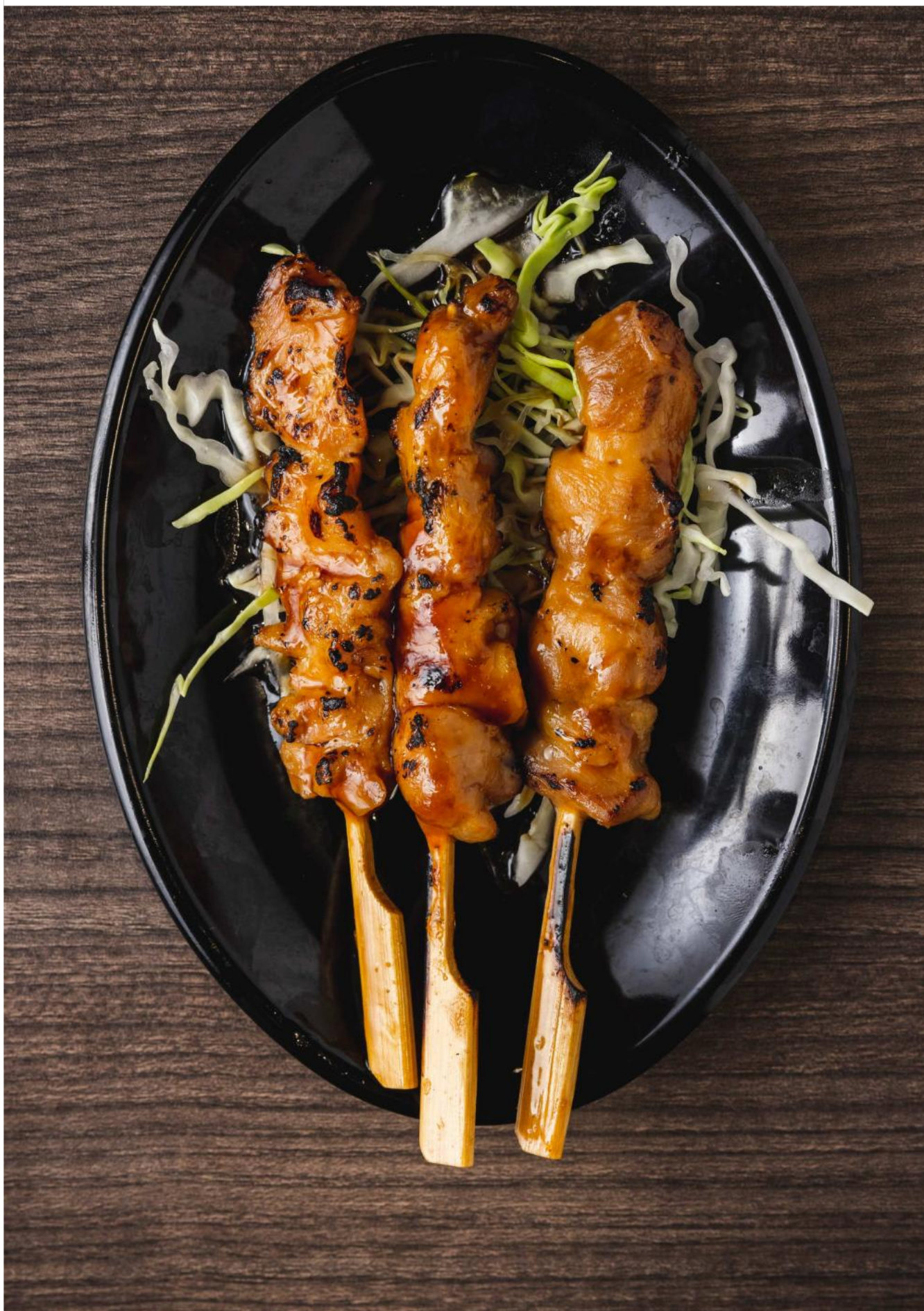
The mild Japanese curry, fortified with carrots and potatoes, and served with thick udon, chicken cutlet and omelette makes for a hearty bowl with a homely appeal, though we'd rather spend our calories on the yummier pork bowl.

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Mirin Zuke Salmon Set, \$11.90

You can also get your grub as a set meal with miso soup and a side dish of your choice. The *mirin-zuke* salmon set features a thick slice of fish marinated overnight in mirin, soy sauce and sugar before being pan-fried. It's flaky, moist and pleasantly sweet, while allowing the salmon's natural flavour to shine. Quite shiok.



For our side dish, we opt for the Chicken Yakitori Skewers (you get two with the set; \$4.50 for five pcs a la carte). The supplier-bought sticks, pre-cooked and reheated briefly on the pan before serving, add some bulk to the meal but are otherwise unmemorable.



Bottom line

With joints like Mr Onigiri, Hitokuchi Onigiri in the CBD and now Onigirazu Don in Senja Hawker Centre, it seems that these photogenic Japanese rice 'sarnies' are having a mini moment in Singapore. This hawker version is simple and homespun but quite satisfying. Our picks: the chicken katsu onigirazu slathered in curry mayo, as well as the tasty caramelised pork donburi.



The details

Onigirazu Don is at #02-04, Senja Hawker Centre, 2 Senja Cl, S677632. Open daily 11am – 2pm; 3.30pm – 5pm. CNY operating hours: 11am – 5pm, Jan 21 & 5pm – 10pm, Jan 22 – 23 (closed Jan 24). More info via [Facebook](#).

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