



One Tokyo restaurant has turned to mannequins, seated among diners, to help enforce social distancing.



Restaurant owner Masato Takemine moves one of his mannequins, used as a method to maintain social distancing among diners, onto another seat at his restaurant in the Akabane district of Tokyo. — AFP photos

'Model' customers keep Tokyo diners at social distance

The coronavirus pandemic might have left many restaurants empty, but one establishment in Tokyo is relying on some model customers to enforce social distancing: life-like mannequins keeping diners from getting too close. Masato Takemine's Chinese restaurant looks busy even as many businesses in the city deal with a dearth of clientele, with ladies in ornate Chinese-style dresses and a girl in a kimono among those seated at his tables. But the 16 customers are actually mannequins he has placed randomly at tables to keep diners from getting too close.

"At first I removed some of the tables to have more space in between, but it then looked so lonely, as if the restaurant was under renovation," Takemine told AFP. "With these mannequins, the restaurant looks busy from the outside, and I can make sure customers are distancing themselves. "It's also fun, giving us a jolly feeling," he giggled. While Japan has avoided the devastating tolls since in places hit hardest by the coronavirus, many restaurants shut their doors during a state of emergency and even after it was lifted in May, the industry has seen customers shun eating out.

Takemine's restaurant Kirin Saikan in downtown Tokyo reopened in late May but sees about half the number the customers it did before the virus, he said. Among those returning was 51-year-old Tetsuya Kimura, who said he was startled when he walked through the entrance curtains for the first time after the reopening and saw the mannequins. "These dolls look so real that I need some time to get used to them," he said, tucking into a bowl of noodles at a table he was sharing with a child mannequin. Takeichi Otomo, 82, another frequent customer at the restaurant, said he struggled to not look too shocked at the beginning. "I still get startled when I come here," he said with a straight face. "This is a crazy ideal!"

While the mannequins keep the restaurant from feeling too empty, Takemine said he often thinks with longing about when his customers could visit with family and friends and enjoy carefree laughs and chats over platters to share. "I don't think we can go back to those times for many months," he said. "I am just hoping we will return to normal while creating an environment where people can eat and drink safely." —AFP



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The restaurant's owner tried spacing out tables at first, but found the atmosphere seemed too lonely, so opted for mannequins instead.