

REVIEWS

AND CRITICISM



NEW YORK THIS YEAR'S MODEL

IN DECADES PAST, WE'VE FALLEN HARD FOR FRENCH AND REVELED IN RUSTIC ITALIAN. BUT THESE DAYS MANHATTAN IS ALL ABOUT JAPANESE BY JAY CHESHES

IT'S BEEN TEN YEARS since Nobu Matsuhisa first came east to New York to open what was then the city's only stylish destination for innovative Japanese food. Nobu parlayed his success here into a far-flung empire. Oddly enough, though, he was the only one cashing in on the clearly winning formula. Until now.

The marriage of Japanese cuisine and a genuinely plugged-in vibe is this year's biggest thing. Three recently opened hotels all serve fare that's at

least inspired by Japan, and uptown the same aristocrats who have long piled into Serafina for Italian food in a setting made for preening are now packed in at Geisha, nibbling on sushi rolls and salty *edamame*. One third of a Japanese pop act has opened Sumile, down in the Village, and Masa Takayama is serving the city's priciest, and perhaps finest, meals over at the Time Warner Center.

And then of course there's *Megu*, the most eccentric new spot of all. Aromas of charcoal and searing meat cascade

through this enormous TriBeCa fun-house, a restaurant-cum-theme-park from the mind of young Japanese mogul Koji Imai. At the entrance stands an imperious Rising Sun mosaic, and in the dining room there's a 1,200-pound bell modeled on one from an eighth-century Buddhist temple. Five million dollars went into the 13,000-square-foot space. Plus there's the cost of the ice-sculpted

From the whimsical mind of Sumile's Josh DeChellis: *toro tartare with hot pepper, osetra caviar, and pickled abalone.*

Buddha that melts nightly under the big bell, and of the scores of products flown in from Japan, their provenance announced on the menu's annotated map.

Like the décor, the food is at once fascinating and absurd. Imai is a showman—think Chairman Kaga crossed with P.T. Barnum—and he manages a dining experience that's like a movie larded with special effects. Tiny raw oysters arrive on a bed of crushed ice, glowing blue from a light source within. A sultry creation layering too much of everything—sea eel, foie gras, and custard laced with black truffle—hides in its own ceramic temple. And a dish of rock shrimp and kudzu arrives in a ball looking like a snow cone studded with Sakura shrimp.

Megu is perfectly in keeping with that streak of Japanese culture that produces mayhem-fueled game shows and 18-inch platform shoes. The question is whether New Yorkers will embrace the dizzying spectacle or whether the whole thing will get lost in translation.

Farther uptown, in Chelsea, lies New York's other splashy new Japanese spot—**Matsuri**, in The Maritime Hotel. Set in a subterranean cavern, it feels like an old-style dance club and is packed nightly with enough Chelsea boys and waifish girls to fill a casting call for Style Network. Huge paper lanterns scrawled with Japanese calligraphy crown the dining room, where a big cage hides the city's largest collection of premium sake. The food comes courtesy of Tadashi Ono, the impressive chef who once brought hints of Japan to haute cuisine at La Caravelle. Two years after closing his solo venture, Sono, he has returned to the simple cooking of his youth in Japan.

While there's perfectly good sushi and shrimp tempura, other dishes are much more interesting. On a good night, fried sea eel will be delicate, the meat tender and sweet. Sea bass is slashed with a

knife before its plunge into hot oil, then presented upright, as if still swimming, with sweet dipping sauce on the side.

The food at Matsuri has plenty of heart, which, sadly enough, is not the case at the hotly anticipated Geisha and Riingo, spiritual siblings in both fusion vision and star-chef juice. **Geisha** is built on the premise that the late-night crowd sucking down Saketinis might actually be interested in serious food. Consulting chef Eric Ripert's touch is evident in the quality of the seafood, but the flavors are often so subdued that the dishes fade into the background, subsumed by the frenzy surrounding them. Only the sushi, in the adept hands of Kazuo Yoshida, would draw me back—for a quiet lunch of silky-smooth salmon and *o-toro*.

At **Riingo**, in the new Alex hotel, the big draw is the fingerprint of Aquavit's Marcus Samuelsson, who hired one of his former line cooks to run the kitchen. But the staff here seem bewildered, as if hawking newfangled cuisine in some far-flung backwater. "Diners really seem to like the bok choy in coconut," one offers, before delivering limp greens in a puddle of curried coconut milk. The pork belly achieves the seemingly impossible, being at once totally moist and abysmally dry. And so it goes, one awkward preparation after another.

Back downtown, however, one modest experiment in Japanese fusion is succeeding beautifully where its much-hyped brethren have failed. At tiny **Sumile**, the most offbeat addition to the scene, the design is architectural soma, a soothing wash of pale white light. What you notice, then, is the food, which springs from the fertile imagination of Josh DeChellis, who formerly worked at Union Pacific. DeChellis's whimsical style won over the member of Japan's Dreams Come True who was looking for a chef to head up her foray into the city's restaurant world.

An odd match, perhaps, but it works.

The idea with DeChellis's menu is to build a feast of three or four small plates. And as it is at Megu, the focus is on raw materials; every ingredient is handpicked. Tiny Kumamoto oysters get fruity zip from rice vinegar infused with ripe pineapple. *Toro* tartare, so succulent it melts on the tongue, is laid out on a shell with hot pepper slivers, osetra caviar, and pickled abalone. And *hamachi* "mi-cuit" is suspended between cooked and raw, with flavors salty and sweet, from finely sliced pickled melon and crushed nori salt.

Sumile may be the most accomplished pretender to the Nobu throne, but given the developments of just the past few months, it appears the Japanese ascension has only begun.

GEISHA

33 East 61st Street
212-813-1112

Lunch and dinner, Monday through Saturday. Dinner main courses from \$19.

MATSURI

369 West 16th Street
212-243-6400

Dinner daily; main courses from \$15.

MEGU

62 Thomas Street
212-964-7777

Dinner Monday through Saturday. Dinner main courses from \$28.

RIINGO

205 East 45th Street
212-867-4200

Breakfast, lunch, and dinner daily. Dinner main courses from \$16.

SUMILE

154 West 13th Street
212-989-7699

Dinner Tuesday through Sunday; all dishes about \$14. @

Sumile's serene design leaves the focus on the food; Matsuri's sirloin steak; Megu's scene-stealing shrimp ball with kudzu.

