High-end eateries get a boost as Malaysians splurge on 'revenge dining'

Hazlin Hassan
Malaysia Correspondent

KUALA LUMPUR – Imagine being served melt-in-your-mouth beef from free-range cows raised on local straw, clean air and mineral water from Japan's Mount Daisen. Or sampling fine sushi served on trendy Louis Vuitton tableware, with panoramic city views from a restaurant perched at the top of a 50-storey tower.

This is the sort of unique dining experience that many Malaysians emerging from coronavirus-induced lockdowns are seeking, if the number of high-end restaurants opening in the capital lately are anything to go by.

Malaysians are spending more on dining out, as the food and beverage industry bounces back from the lockdowns.

Following the lifting of restrictions on dining out beginning in August 2021, new restaurants have mushroomed, revealing a burgeoning appetite in dining demand. Some call it "revenge dining", as diners head to restaurants to make up for lost time.

But amid inflationary pressures and economic woes, it is – somewhat surprisingly – high-end restaurants that are gaining popularity.

Some observers believe that Malaysians are splurging more on leisure as they may feel that they saved money during the pandemic, when businesses were forced to shut down.

When the first Gordon Ramsay Bar & Grill outside the United Kingdom landed on Malaysian shores in June, it was fully booked through September, despite prices starting at around RM100 (S$30.50) for a cheese souffle.

The number of restaurants in the capital listed on user reviews platform Tripadvisor surged to 5,564 the week of Dec 10, compared with 4,292 the previous week.

"Over the last year, we have seen a steady month-on-month increase in the number of restaurant listings on Tripadvisor for Kuala Lumpur," Tripadvisor spokesman Skye Ferguson told The Sunday Times, without providing data.

Besides the very British beef wellington steak dish popularised in Kuala Lumpur by chef Ramsay and now offered at many restaurants, KL-ites are also splurging on lavish omakase meals, with numerous Japanese restaurants having opened this year.

This brings us back to the melt-in-your-mouth beef. The iconic luxury EQ hotel chain's Kampachi restaurants are currently offering omakase menus featuring halal wagyu beef and unique produce from Japan's Tottori prefecture, starting from an eye-watering RM950 per person with the option of sake pairing at an additional RM250.

Tottori wagyu, which in 2017 won a gold medal at the five-yearly Japanese Wagyu Olympics, is rarely exported and is reserved for top restaurants in Tokyo.

The prefecture has only 800 cows and accounts for less than 1 per cent of Japan's wagyu production. The finely marbled beef is processed by the only slaughterhouse in Japan that is recognised by Malaysia's halal authorities.

Kampachi's customers vary from those who come in for RM60 set lunches to those who do not flinch at spending RM860 on a melon.

Mr Gerard Walker, general manager of EQ KL, said dining traffic increased after the lifting of Covid-19 curbs at Kampachi and the group's other restaurants and dining establishments in the city.

"This is an expected and very welcome upswing after the lean, challenging times for the hospitality industry overall during the pandemic. The resurgence of full tables and well-patronised venues is testament to how many people are playing catch-up with friends they have not seen in over two years," he added.

Besides regulars who have returned, Mr Walker said EQ is also seeing "the emergence of a new middle-class, hungry for finer dining experiences".

The launch of the Michelin Guide in Malaysia on Dec 13 is also expected to place the country's food scene firmly on the global gastronomy map.

"Gastrotourism will undoubtedly see a growth following the debut of the Michelin Guide – attracting gourmands and foodies from around the world to visit Malaysia, hungry to inspire their taste buds," said entrepreneur Chryseis Tan, co-founder of CF Capital investment firm, which is the guide's official partner in Malaysia.

"We also hope the Michelin Guide will lure back Malaysian culinary talent overseas, to make their mark in their home country and, in turn, continue to elevate the dining scene."

The Curate Group hospitality company, which she also founded, has debuted three new Japanese concepts in the past six months.

Sushi Masa by Ishibashi is an extension of Michelin-star chef Masakazu Ishibashi's Edomae-style sushi restaurant that was first set up in Tokyo's Ginza district.

Sushi Sora is a trendy, upscale private sushiya that takes reservations only by referral, while Wagyu Kappo Yoshida by Michelin-star chef Junichi Yoshida offers beef omakase specialising in high-grade Japanese wagyu.

The group also plans to open a high-end yakiniku or a sukiyaki restaurant in the near future.

"Japanese cuisine is a popular trend in Malaysia, and we have been strategic in specialising in Japanese concepts that fill a gap of curiosity in the market. With our extensive travels to Japan, we have established networks with acclaimed chefs and restaurant concepts that we then partner with to bring to Malaysia," Ms Tan said.

While Curate's establishments cater to a combination of corporate regulars, savvy jet-setters and tourists, post-pandemic, the group has seen an increase in younger diners with an appreciation for imported fresh produce and an interest in seasonal Japanese delicacies, she added.

The resurgence in Malaysians' taste for fine dining is likely limited to the well-heeled.

A recent survey found that Malaysians are at their worst financial position this year compared with the past five years, with 70 per cent having saved less than RM500 a month or did not save at all, compared with 52 per cent in 2021.

Kampachi's chef Yusuke Ishigami (far left) and chef Bernard Chiah preparing sushi. Fine-dining restaurants such as Kampachi have seen dining traffic increase as many Malaysians emerging from Covid-19 lockdowns seek unique dining experiences. ST PHOTO: HAZLIN HASSAN

hazlinh@sph.com.sg