

ZEN OF GOOD TASTE

Klang Valley's finest Japanese restaurants are in hot pursuit of culinary perfection.

Words Alice Yong

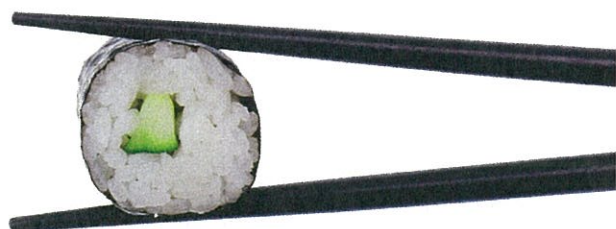
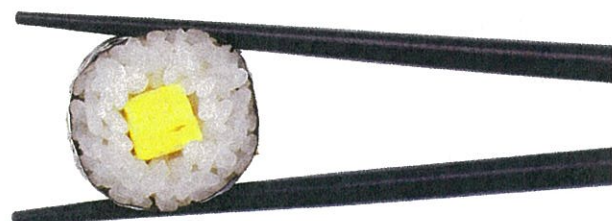
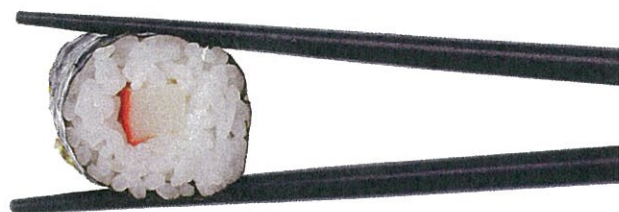
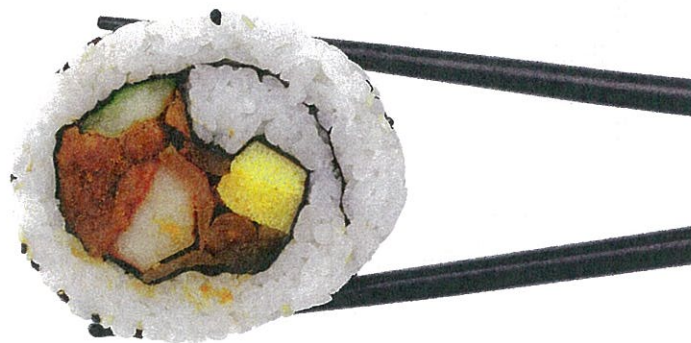
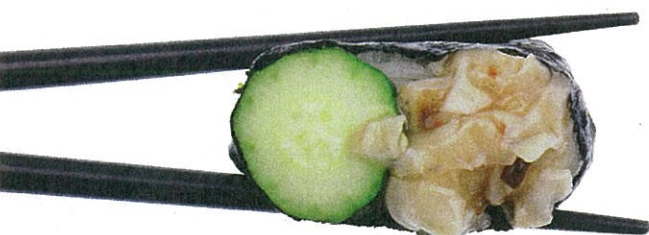
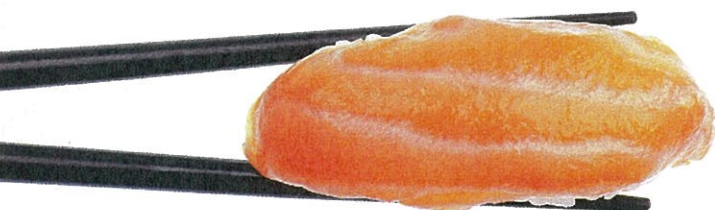
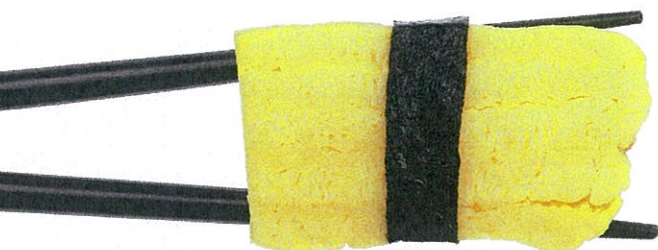
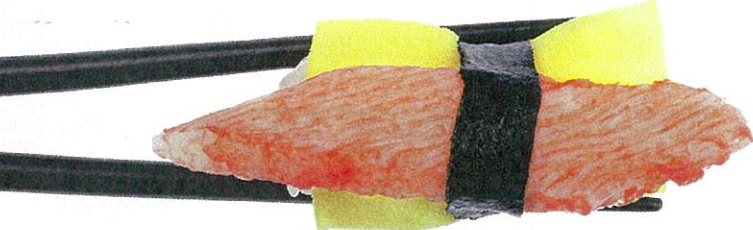
Photos Hanare, Kampachi, Gonbei San and Fukuya

After three decades, the appeal of Japanese cuisine not only remains undiminished, but has continued to grow from strength to strength in Malaysia. Exotic delicacies from the Land of the Rising Sun first captured the imagination of local palates in 1972 with the opening of Chikuyo-Tei – then the country's first and only Japanese restaurant in Kuala Lumpur. Hot on its heels came the Kampachi at Hotel Equatorial Kuala Lumpur a year later.

Despite the capital city's intensely competitive culinary scene, these stalwarts remain firmly entrenched to this day. Chikuyo-Tei is presently operating at Hotel Istana Kuala Lumpur, while Kampachi has evolved from a hotel-based establishment into a dynamic, independent entity with four outlets under its wing.

According to veteran Japanese cuisine chef Lew Ten Sin, these pioneers were unique in the sense that they proffered an amalgamation of all things Japanese: from food to the country's rich cultural heritage.

'Traditional restaurants in Japan focus on serving only a singular type of food, be it *sushi*, *sashimi*, *tempura*, *teppanyaki* or *ramen*,' said Lew. "In Malaysia, most Japanese restaurant menus cover almost every speciality you can think of."



Looking East for Inspiration

Local interest in Japanese cuisine and culture was spurred by the Look East Policy which was launched by the Malaysian government in 1982. Active bilateral trade relations and joint venture projects during the mid 1980s which drew scores of Japanese expatriates here saw the opening of more Japanese restaurants, especially in the Klang Valley.

It was *de rigueur* for every five-star hotel that opened then to include a fine-dining Japanese restaurant on premise. The Shangri-La Kuala Lumpur's Nadaman and the Pan Pacific Hotel Kuala Lumpur's Keyaki boasted no less than two Japanese master chefs helming their Japanese restaurants. Together with a Japanese manager heading the service frontline, they kept a predominantly corporate and well-heeled clientele enthralled with customary servings of jet-fresh *sashimi*, hand-pressed *sushi*, airy light *tempura* and sizzling hot *teppanyaki*, as well as artistically composed *bento* (Japanese boxed meals) and *kaiseki* (elaborate multi-course meals).

In those days, a Japanese fine-dining experience that was all encompassing; literally, an immersive sojourn that transported you to Japan from the moment you stepped through the *noren* (Japanese door curtains).

Unlike contemporary Japanese eateries where the cultural elements are subtly incorporated into the décor, the Japanese restaurants of yore stayed true to their classical roots. Traditional elements such as *shōji* (sliding doors and partition screens fashioned from wood and rice paper), *rōka* (wooden floored passages) or *tatami* flooring coupled with *karesansui* (stylised Japanese rock gardens with water features, moss, pruned bonsai trees and bushes, gravel or sand) and demure *kimono*-clad service personnel were the norm rather than the exception.



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Dawn Of A New Era

Japanese cuisine gained mass appeal locally when *kaiten sushi* restaurants like Genki Sushi, Sushi King and Sakae Sushi opened in the 1990s and played a pivotal role in getting the population to accept Japanese food, especially among the younger generation. As their palates gradually grow more discerning, they learn to appreciate the cuisine's finer aspects and higher quality fare.

It was during these halcyon days that the Equatorial's Kampachi restaurant sparked a mini revolution of its own, by introducing its legendary Sunday brunch. An idea far ahead of its time, few could resist the temptation of feasting on a lavish buffet of *sushi*, *sashimi*, *sukiyaki*, *tempura*, *menrui* (noodles) and *zensai* (appetisers and side dishes) among others, for a fixed price. At the height of its popularity, reservations had to be made six weeks ahead if one wished to be part of the extravagant affair.

On the global front, New York-based Nobu Matsuhisa raised the bar for his native cuisine when he artfully combined his classical *sushi* bar training in Tokyo with his own experiences abroad in Peru and Argentina. Other Japanese chefs like Tetsuya Wakuda in Australia also followed a similar path, fusing the Japanese philosophy of using natural seasonal flavours with classic French techniques to create intrepid dishes that took the culinary world by storm.

Nobu and Tetsuya also unleashed edgier, sleeker interior designs for their restaurants. To complement their culinary inventiveness, their restaurants flaunt modern Zen ID concepts that emphasise natural stone, wood and water elements. These game-changing trends soon rippled across our fine-dining scene with contemporary Japanese restaurants such as Wasabi Bistro at the Mandarin Oriental Kuala Lumpur and the Shangri-la KL's newly minted Tokyo-chic Zipangu serving as the best testaments of the new wave.

Chef Takao Ando was a pioneer who trail blazed his way into the hearts and minds of local diners when he went against the grain by adding chopped bird's eye chilli and fresh mango into his rolled *sushi*. He continues to hold court today at Fukuya or the House of Happiness, his own restaurant that is modelled after a wealthy Japanese family home from a bygone era, complete with a well-manicured courtyard surrounded by mock houses and secret corridors. Opt for his *kaiseki* menu and you would be in for an engaging, multi-sensorial Japanese dining experience; one that marries the chef's artistic flair with refined presentation and gastronomic sophistication in a striking setting.

Only the freshest seasonal ingredients, air-flown from Japan twice weekly, are selected by the chef and meticulously prepared according to the strictest traditional methods. A *kaiseki* meal at Fukuya will customarily commence with a platter of delicate

Japanese appetisers, followed by several courses that may include a serving of Ando's famed dragon roll (*sushi* rice rolled with tiger prawn and avocado) and perfectly grilled Wagyu beef – each dish sumptuously designed to leave an indelible impression.

The debut of Gonbei San at the upmarket Starhill Gallery also pushed the standards of fine Japanese cuisine to new heights. An arch of golden bamboo at the restaurant entrance leads into a dramatic yet rustic enclave where ultra-fresh ingredients flown directly from Japan take centre stage. Seating is available at the different cooking counters – *sashimi*, *tempura*, *teppanyaki* and *robatayaki* (Japanese grill) where gourmands can enjoy first-hand glimpses of the resident chefs' kitchen theatrics.

Now into its 40th year, Malaysia's bastion of fine Japanese cuisine Kampachi remains ahead of the game; its new flagship restaurant was unveiled at The Troika in December last year. To reinforce its unassailable lead position among the city's elite and cuisine connoisseurs, the acclaimed restaurant counts exclusive artisanal *sake* and *sochu*, hand-made *soba*, and an eclectic variety of seasonal Japanese specialities as its top draw cards.

The *omakase* (Japanese for 'entrust') menu is fast gaining traction with regulars who readily entrust the chefs at Kampachi to surprise them. Similar to *menu dégustation*, an *omakase* meal often features esoteric fare such as flying fish, Japanese bamboo shoots, rape blossoms and beak perch; all at their prime seasonal best, prepared with ingenuity and the chefs' wealth of expertise.

Despite being late bloomers in Klang Valley's fine-dining

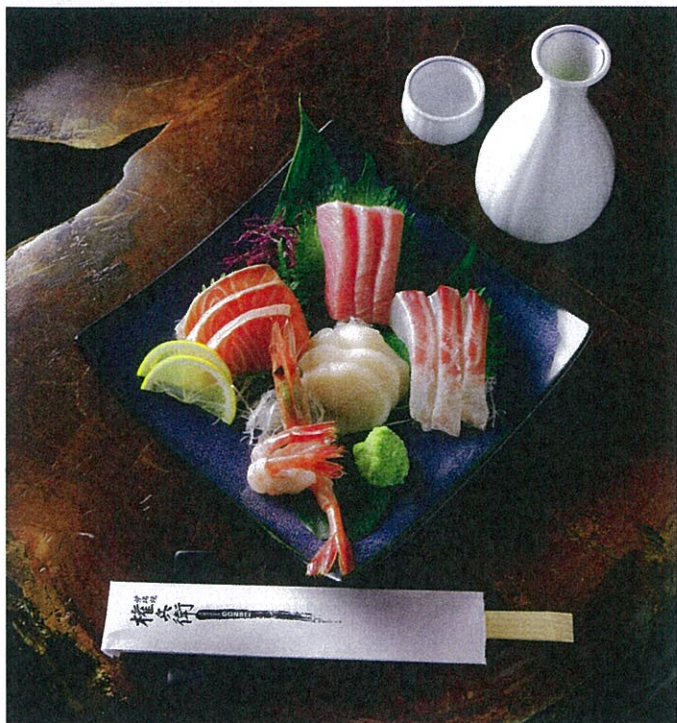
scene, both Ten Japanese Fine Dining at Marc Residences and Hanare at The Intermark have cut quite a swathe with the upper crust for their classy ambience, polished service and sophisticated menus. Again, *omakase* is the most ideal way to differentiate each restaurant's unique characteristics.

Hanare takes great pride in serving an ever-changing plethora of the freshest Japanese seasonal produce, deftly prepared by executive chef Kenny Yew. Trained by several Japanese master chefs in the past, Yew now commands his own loyal following who return time and again for his refined creations such as marinated Japanese snails, Japanese corn *tempura*, smoked duck with leek, and shark's fin with *ume* (preserved Japanese plum) and cucumber, among others.

Ten Japanese Fine Dining, the latest entrant from Gold Coast, Australia is another notable haute spot where Japanese delicacies are served with finesse. Relocated from Solaris Dutamas, its glossy, spatial confines at the Marc Residences are matched by carefully composed specialities that tread that fine line between traditional norms and flights of modern fancy. The signature grilled *foie gras*, eel with *sansyo* (Japanese pepper) and Australian lamb chop with red *miso* sauce served as ample proof that the chefs possess a strong understanding of diners' needs for something new, without straying too far from the cuisine's original roots.

The Japanese has a saying for this – *aji wo shimeru* which means "having tasted something really good, a person comes back to it expecting the same tastiness". You would do the same once you dine at these top flight Japanese restaurants.





LISTINGS

Kampachi Restaurant

Lot G-3, The Troika,
19, Persiaran KLCC, Kuala Lumpur
Tel: 03-2181 2282
www.kampachi.com.my

Ten Japanese Fine Dining

A-G-1, Ground Floor,
Marc Residence,
3, Jalan Pinang, Kuala Lumpur
Tel: 03-2161 5999
www.tenrestaurant.com.my

Hanare

Lot G6, Ground Floor,
The Intermark,
Jalan Tun Razak, Kuala Lumpur
Tel: 03-2164 2133
www.globalfoods.com.my

Gonbei San

#T2, Relish Floor,
Starhill Gallery,
Jalan Bukit Bintang, Kuala Lumpur
Tel: 03-2782 3801
www.starhillgallery.com

Fukuya

9, Jalan Delima, Kuala Lumpur
Tel: 03-2144 1022 / 77
www.fukuya.com.my