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MY unforgettable Kampachi dining experience was tucking into *Kami Nabe* or Japanese paper hotpot. I was amazed at how the steaming stock with its contents in a paper funnel did not fall into the fire. That was years ago and even at that time, Kampachi, the Japanese restaurant at The Equatorial Hotel, Kuala Lumpur, was the talk of the town for its exquisite cuisine.

When the invitation to review Kampachi at The Troika in KL came, I could not believe my luck. A day earlier, a dear girlfriend suggested that I eat at the restaurant. As luck would have it, another old friend called up the following day, and off to Kampachi we went.

This third signature restaurant of the Hotel Equatorial group is ensconced in a prime corner lot of the luxurious property designed by "starchitect" Sir Norman Foster. The restaurant has a dramatic double-height ceiling above the main dining area, surrounded by picture windows on three sides. Its polished spatial confines flaunt linear and geometric aesthetics that deliver an elegant ambience in a contemporary setting.

With a seating capacity of 118, this restaurant has a sushi counter on the main floor and a more private space on the upper mezzanine level where the stylish, curved teppanyaki counter is located. With subdued lighting, it offers an elegant setting for personal and business entertainment.

Kampachi has been in Malaysia for nearly four decades and has become known for the finer aspects of Japanese food and beverages such as handmade soba noodles and a wider range of fine Japanese tea, *sake* and *sochu*, some of which are exclusive to Kampachi.

My visit was on the 11th day of the restaurant's opening. It was just past noon and the place was already filled close to full. After exchanging pleasantries with Donald Lim, vice president of Hotel Equatorial, and Chiharu Yabe, general manager of Kampachi Restaurants Sdn Bhd, my two lunch companions and I were ushered to a choice table in the heart of the restaurant. We were about to be pampered with an Omakase menu for lunch.

Kampachi has a diverse menu but with *omakase* (Japanese for "entrust"), the dining experience becomes more eclectic. Diners who opt for this menu simply entrust the chefs to create a multiple course meal for them. Each dish is meticulously prepared and artistically presented using the best and freshest seasonal ingredients.

Goma Dofu or Sesame Beancurd is made from *kuzu* (arrowroot starch) flavoured with ground sesame (*goma*). Its silky texture is similar to tofu and it grabs your attention with its unusual dollop of green paste sitting on it, which we found out was mint leaf *miso*. The yellow pea flower, *kingyoso*, was lovely to look and tempting to eat. The restaurant's executive chef How Yoke Seng said it was flown in from Japan.

Shashimi Okonomi Moni (meaning "to one's liking") was a "wow" platter of the chef's selection of sashimi. Not everyday fare, these are prized treats and I committed it all to memory as I lifted each morsel to savour. This was the freshest seafood I have tasted raw and it was good to hear that the premium quality sashimi comes direct from the

Reason to kanpai

The Kampachi brand has spread its wings with a third restaurant in Kuala Lumpur, offering gourmands and all who love Japanese cuisine a fine-dining experience.



What's not to like: Shashimi Okonomi Moni means 'to one's liking'.

KAMPACHI BY EQUATORIAL

Lot G-3, The Troika
19 Persiaran KLCC
Kuala Lumpur
Tel: 03-2181 2282
Open daily noon-3pm for lunch (11am-3pm on Sundays), 6-11pm for dinner.

renowned Tsukiji market in Tokyo.

I was coaxed to have my second piece of *toro* (RM70), the belly loin of the fatty big eye tuna. *O-toro* is one of the most prized and expensive parts of the tuna. It has a much higher fat content (like premium marbled meat), and you think you're biting into a very oily fish with fine, smooth flesh. *Maguro* (RM30) is another part of the same fish, which looks like red meat; it was smooth and tasty. I also had my first taste of scallop sashimi (RM26 for a third of the shell-fish) and it was as good as cooked scallop!

Kinki Saikyo Yaki (grilled rock fish marinated with miso paste) was a showpiece of elegance – a trio of fillet and pinkish pickled ginger shoots. Rock fish looks like red snapper but is far superior in taste and texture. From north of Suruga Bay, Japan, this is an oily fish and resembles cod but is tastier. The miso lightly flavoured the fish without masking its original taste.

Next, we were served Foie Gras Taugan Ankake (pan-fried foie gras and simmered winter melon with thick gravy), which was a marriage of Western and Eastern ingredients

but cooked in a Japanese style. The dish was a balance of "oily" and "light" flavours and most of us enjoyed the melon which still had bite to it. The gravy was a *dashi* broth of *mirin*, soya sauce, ginger and *sake*, and was overly sweet on its own.

If you've only ever eaten imitation crab sticks, the Tarabagani Tempura (deep-fried king crab in batter) will blow you away. As you sink your teeth into the chunky crab filaments made from real crab, you can taste its meatiness and succulence. The restaurant orders only crab legs for this dish to avoid wastage. And you must have the *shishito*, the Japanese green chillies – they taste like ladies fingers!

The next course was something I have seen on television and was thrilled to try at Kampachi: the soup of the day, *Asari Miso Shiru*, which is miso (Japanese fermented soya bean) soup with clams. If fresh clams could sing, it would be a sweet melody. This was your usual miso soup elevated to the next level in gastronomy! *Asari* clams are used to make the soup base which is further enriched with bonito flakes and miso. Every bit of it was slurped up. The chef told us that non-Japanese normally order *asari miso* while the Japanese prefer the stronger *akadashi miso*.

Dessert was Pancake Ice Cream. Vanilla ice cream is mixed with chopped groundnuts and cashew nuts and frozen solid, and upon order, it is quickly wrapped with a freshly-made pancake and etched with the Kampachi logo. By the time the dessert reaches the table, the ice cream has softened and is just nice to be eaten.



The Kampachi logo adorns the pancake wrapped around ice cream.



Attention-grabbing: The dollop of green paste atop the Goma Dofu is mint leaf miso.

This is complemented by strawberry slices, blueberries and refreshing mint leaves.

The Omakase menu starts from RM300++ and is available until the end of this month. Kampachi also has an a la carte menu with other fine Japanese delicacies.

Kampachi has won numerous accolades over the years, including awards from Tourism Malaysia and various publications. Recently voted as KL's best Japanese restaurant by *Time Out Kuala Lumpur* for two consecutive years, Kampachi is also listed in the *Miele Guide* as the best Japanese and among the top four restaurants overall in Malaysia for 2011/2012.

As I write out this review to the sweet serenade of Hikaru Utada, I must say, Kampachi has once again set my heart a-flutter and delighted me even more. Whenever I think of this visit, I crave for all things Japanese!



The real thing: Sink your teeth into the chunky crab filaments and taste its meatiness and succulence.



The rock fish looks like red snapper but is far superior in taste and texture.



Foie Gras Taugan Ankakea is a marriage of Western and Eastern ingredients but cooked in a Japanese style.