

Recruited by a Japanese cult

BY HELEN FIELDING

"IF THEY TELL us once more that what we want is not what we *really, really* want, this is all going to end very badly," said Tracey as, having ordered a beer and warm sake, we found ourselves persuaded that what we *really* wanted was a different beer and cold sake.

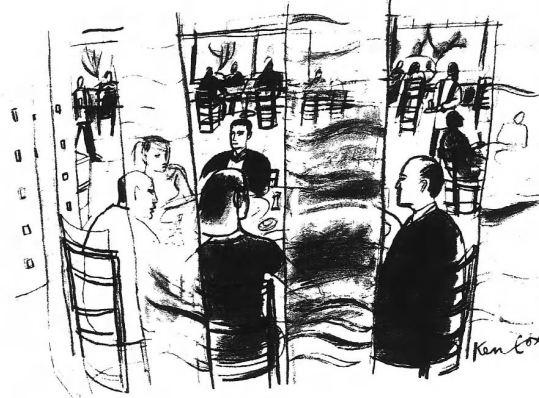
To say the waiters are very hands-on in Nobu – the Japanese restaurant in the astonishing new Metropolitan Hotel on Park Lane – is like saying you think the public could be beginning to suspect that Patsy Kensit and Liam Gallagher might be about to start an affair.

We began the evening convinced a good-looking man at the entrance wanted to have a relationship with us, only to discover he was a greeter, followed by an almost identical experience with a middle-aged man at reception who turned out to be a manager. On arrival in the first-floor Japanese restaurant the entire waiting staff delightedly chorused something unintelligible and as we sat down our waiter asked if we wanted to start a family. It turned out he was asking if we wanted to share each others' food, in a lovely positive way which suggested it wasn't so much a suggestion as an order.

The Metropolitan Hotel (owned by Christina Ong who also has the designery Halkin hotel) is astonishing because it is on Park Lane but modern: the first hotel to open there for two decades. Instead of a glitter of mirrors, gilt and bulbous oriental lamps, the foyer is white and airy with strange-shaped sofas and chunky white shelves dotted with coloured objects like the Conran Shop vase department. Upstairs, the Nobu restaurant and sushi bar is a big white space with halogen lighting, tiled floor, buff-coloured banquettes, and bits of etched glass but, apart from the surprise of its modernity, the real surprise is that it's surprisingly unsurprising.

What Nobu does have is a bloody amazing chef, Nobuyuki Matsuhisa, also of LA and New York, who specialises in "new style" Japanese cuisine. It's also massively name-droppy.

Opened in a partnership with Robert De Niro three days before we arrived, it was riddled with raddled commercials directors sporting breathtakingly beautiful giant girls in head-to-toe Prada. Here and there a rogue Luckybitch (orange-faced, lip-lined and dripping with fake gold) was at large and at the table next to ours was an international convention of



NOBU

The Metropolitan Hotel, 19 Old Park Lane, London W1Y 4LB. Tel: 0171 447 4747.
Open Monday to Saturday 6 to 10.15pm and from 1 April noon to 3pm. Chef's choice menu from £50 per person. Average à la carte price, £40. Credit cards accepted

Luckybitches, including a resplendent Japanese version swathed in a magenta cape festooned with black butterflies, and a Japanese Spice Girl hairdo. Tracey grew frankly overexcited by the presence of someone called Bunty Matthias who Sharon and I had never heard of and kept mixing up name-wise with Betty Boothroyd who is quite a different thing.

Sharon and Tracey had just returned from a mini-break in Iceland and Sharon had a very interesting anecdote about seven pairs of trousers for two days and almost getting banned from a bar for being underage, but she couldn't get to the punch line because the waiter kept

interrupting with more suggestions: in particular *Omakase* – the chef's selection – which started at £50 a head but could go up to any price (especially if you had gold sprinkled on it which is very good for the digestion) but which we rejected because it would have meant discussing our allergies with him. "Anyway..." restarted Shaz reaching for her drink, but he was back: "When you pour sake it's sometimes nice to raise your glasses to each other with a warming toast." "He'll be telling us what to talk about next," Shazzer muttered, "He's like a tour guide who makes you look out the coach window whenever you start enjoying yourself."

The meal, though, was absolutely fantastic. Japanese food tends to be delicious in a samey sort of way and it's a joy to taste some which has so many exquisite and complicated flavours apart from soy sauce and fish. Favourites were mussels with Matsuhisa sauce, and black cod with miso so rich and warm that it seemed more like a delicious pudding than a fish.

It would have been nice, though, to eat it all in peace. "So we are standing at the entrance and the woman said..." re-began Shazzer, only to be interrupted by the waiter explaining: "Now I'm going to leave you alone for a while to give you some time to chat."

We had almost got to the key anecdote moment while tucking into a truly great sushi selection with our chopsticks (sometimes it's nice not to eat your sushi until after the main courses because the rice soaks up the digestive juices or some such gobbledegook) when he was back. "Sometimes it's nice to pick up the sushi with your fingers..."

"Look," Tracey exploded, "We're suffering from an overload of information," at which, instead of going away, he began to explain why he was giving us so many explanations. "I think what it is – there's a lot of enthusiasm, everyone's been told what the origin of all the courses are. Nobu's history, and sometimes it's nice..."

Desperate, we paid the bill (£140 for three including drinks and service) and headed down to the bar which was taken over by a private party of unimaginable coolness, so we sat outside in the foyer (next to famous actress Miranda Richardson), and gaped at everyone coming and going from the toilets.

As we were leaving a divine whippersnapper approached and asked if we'd like to take him home and let him chase us round the bedroom. We assumed it was another aspect of Japanese culture we had to learn about: "Sometimes it's nice for foyer greeters to pretend to pick up guests." Then, halfway home, we realised that he was too drunk to be staff and started furiously kicking ourselves. "Nobu is my favourite restaurant," said Tracey wistfully and we all agreed it was the New-Swinging-London-Vanity-Fair-Patsy-and-Liam place to go, if only the waiters would stop behaving like Japanese-culture Moonies who were about to offer you a free personality test on Tottenham Court Road.

Nobu Fielding Indy



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Sat, Nov 19, 2022