

Japanese with a twist

YOU WILL be wanting to know about **NOBU**. My dear, in four London has been talking about it before it opened, exactly a week ago, on the first floor of the new Metropolitan Hotel (previously The Londoner) owned by the fabulously rich Singaporean Mr and Mrs Ong (a story in their own right, articles in the press alerted us to the restaurant's glamorous backers — one of whom is Robert De Niro — its illustrious antecedents, successful restaurants in LA and New York, its decor, uniforms by Izy Miyake, its contemporary look (inspired by the people who give you Vogue), its abundant, here-and-there-and-there, of course, the above, the impossibility of getting a table at Nobu on a busy night, its out-catering of trading via a mobile phone, its company book and its event book, thought it was a bit over the top when we arrived. The dapper little American manager in his ivory coat suit shouted in a loud and carry-on "hello, Maschler!" Starred and rather embarrassed, I suggested to my friends that we should hurry over to our table.

As we left the bar area and entered the main restaurant, the manager screamed the phrase again. Pundamentally as he continued in this way for each new arrival and so when he passed by asked him what it was he kept shouting. He said that he was giving a traditional Japanese greeting which combined an expression of welcome with a warning to the staff that customers were needing attention. I later discovered that this utterance is actually transliterated as "irassaimasé" so much for recognition.

However, in that exchange I had learned something new. The management and waiting staff were clearly under the impression that absolutely everything about this hot-licked, Japanese



FAY MASCHLER

restaurant would be a revelation to British customers. Given that according to the American magazines, Newweek and Vanity Fair, London is now the coolest city on the planet, it seems strange that an American restaurant company needs the need to train its staff to look like such a fruit as a lychee. Being served by our clearly attentive, graceful, liquidous waiter, pretty in his black outfit with white surprise-style pinstriped shirt, to telling you much, much more than you want to hear about the drugs and the pop-codices which are proposed.

So time-consuming were his descriptions, testimonials, salutations, warnings, mild chiding and observations to enjoy and so I left the arrival and departure of dozens of dishes, that he kept trying to make me talk. The food though, in for the most part, as impressive and delectable as the reports coming out of New York and Beverly Hills from those fortunate to dine at Nobu and Maschler's respectively, have suggested.

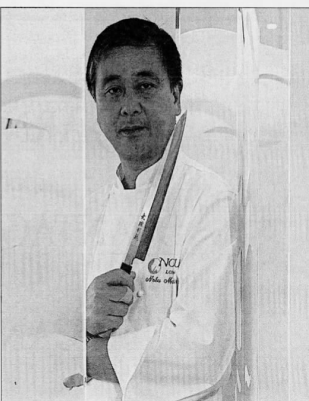
Chief Nobuyuki Matsuhisa, who trained in Japan as a sushi chef, subsequently travelled and worked in South America, setting up a restaurant in Lima — how the Japanese business in the ambassador's mansion, who are apparently having sushi sent in, must wish he was still there. He then took a route via Japan and Alaska to his California restaurant at Nobu in New York.

His style of cuisine remains, essentially Japanese but he has let his eye and imagination wander so that, for example, the use of a wide range of chilies adds vitality, a spoonful of oysters cavari is particularly luscious manifestation of ash, slices of black scallops to produce the gastronomic equivalent of black pearls, olive oil is mixed with pure, Japanese citrus fruit, to effect a singular and, in the end, a sense of taming rawness in what the menu calls "raw steaks sashimi".

Nobu London's menu does not waste much space with options encompasses lists of appetizers, seafood, special dishes, sushi and sashimi, tempura, and main dishes from which the customer must try to compose a fulfilling meal. One way round this — the way we took — is to opt for the chef's choice expressed as omakase, a word implying trust in the abandonment of the decision-making process. The price is \$65 per person but as the many-coursed meal unfolds, it proves relatively good value, not least in the quality of ingredients.

Appetizers were an oyster with a sharp salsa, cubes of monkfish paté (ankimo) made from the kidneys of monkfish with its nicely peculiar flavour, some finely chopped ginger and what looked like tiny purple bean sprouts but packed a surprisingly spicy punch. The fish was soft-line. The skin was very much part of the pleasure. Our waiter had said we should try the skin but that if we didn't like it, we didn't have to finish it. I think the last time someone said that to me I was five years old.

THE cod was indeed the high point. After it came tempura — which I thought included a tragically explosive variety fish-broiled around sea urchin, rolled in shiso leaf and nori (dried seaweed) before being coated and fried, featured a lustrous butter oiled in insufficiently hot oil. Also green pepper — one of the three pieces offered — is not the best ingredient for tempura. An incredibly hot plate of sautéed steamed scallop, baby octopus and two kinds of mushrooms, one round disc, polking with the heat and a bunch of the delicate, scintillating emerald. Sushi, presented in a lovely red lacquer dish, seemed, heavy-handed and, in a sweet little piece



Letting his imagination wander: Nobuyuki Matsuhisa, chef at Nobu. Pictures by Danny Dews

NOBU **
19 Old Park Lane, W1 (0171 447 4141)
Cuisine: New style Japanese.
Price: A meal for two with sake, about £100.
Hours: Open every Mon-Sat 6pm-10.30pm.
Credit cards: The major cards.

in some of its compositions, adopted to American tastes. For example, the shrimp tempura hand-rolled wrapped in a corset of nori, contained an appetizing oyster and a dribble of pink mayo or, as we would say, sauce Marie Rose.

Deserts were exotic. Even the fresh fruit was exotic. Luckily there was an American waitress at hand to tell me what each fruit was. She got the translation wrong but managed to identify a strawberry (which I thought was the least juicy variety) where the least juicy variety is the one that the population believes the Book of Genesis to have had. This seems not a bad idea. Green tea ice cream in pineapple soup, presented in a jade green bowl, was a poem of presentation. Rice pudding served with banana and pepper-studded brandy snap and a salsa made with sake was a valiant try.

Some American relative of Jilly Gooden has written the wine list. One section of the list of reds is headed Complex and Well Structured, strawberries and cream, wild mushrooms, farmyard, much, mineral, cedar wood, cigar box, worn leather, dark chocolate, spices, liquorice, roasted coffee. It is as silly as it is pretentious, a charge that could be levelled at various aspects of the Nobu operation in London. But chef Matsuhisa's food is well worth trying and you can drink with it chilled sake in a chilled bamboo jug which comes complete with chilled bamboo sake cups.

Fashion note: In the run-up to swinging London's fashion week, every single female customer (including myself), nearly every male customer and the entire waiting staff were wearing black.

Rating: ** = among the best to be found in London; ** = notable; * = good; no star = adequate; X = Poor

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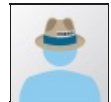
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