



# TOKYO'S RISING STARS

The Japanese take food very seriously indeed. Style and status are as important to the Japanese way of eating as they are to their way of shopping. Stroll through Tokyo's Midtown mall and sooner or later you will stop dead in your tracks outside Sadaharu Aoki's patisserie - a minimalist baker's utopia of exquisite green tea éclairs and similarly exquisite packaging with needle thin, monochrome, lower and upper case fonts. Aoki also has a bakery in the sixth arrondissement of Paris, as the packaging here makes a point of referencing (the Tokyo store is, in fact, 'pâtisserie Sadaharu AOKI paris'), but as Aoki himself admits, the Paris operation runs at a loss to give those all-important European credentials to the Tokyo business, a business which, judging by the queues in this Midtown boutique, cleans up.

## Starstruck

In similar fashion, Michelin's recent benediction of one, two or three-star ratings, upon 150 of Tokyo's restaurants, has caused a tsunami of excitement amongst local diners where before there was merely placid acceptance of quality, reliability and tradition. At Ryotei

restaurant, Hamadaya, and at the diminutive Sushi Mizutani, both of which were awarded three stars, the earliest booking for a table went from a 24 hour notice period to a month-long wait. But what, as the world's food critics have been asking, does it actually mean? Now that Tokyo has more stars than New York and Paris put together, does that mean it's really the food capital of the world or is it just a numbers game? With over 190,000 restaurants and 40



In November 2007, the Michelin Guide showered Tokyo's restaurants and chefs with an unprecedented number of stars, effortlessly surpassing London, Paris and New York. Does this genuinely mean that Tokyo offers the finest dining on the planet? Mark C O'Flaherty takes a closer look at the Japanese restaurant scene.



million residents, the sheer scale of Tokyo's dining scene dwarfs all other rivals. The Michelin Guide's director Jean-Luc Naret admits the latter, but also stands by the new Michelin Guide, asserting that it proves, 'Tokyo is the number one gastronomic city in the world.'

### Hidden gems

If nothing else the buzz ensured the first imprint of the new Michelin Guide was a total sell out. As Yasuo Terui, editor of Tokyo Good Food Restaurants says, 'I fully expected the book's sales to be on this scale. Japanese people have a weakness for brands.' Food writer Keiko Moriwaki is more critical: 'My impression is that they selected restaurants that are good for entertaining visitors from western countries.'

The unprecedented award of at least one star to every single restaurant included in the new guide has had many questioning the validity of Michelin in Tokyo, while the fact that only nine of Tokyo's 23 wards have been covered is an undeniable flaw. Tokyo is an incredibly 'closed' city in terms of its dining culture, the cityscape is Byzantine and many of the best places are virtually invisible and kept secret.

### Shining stars

All that said, few are questioning the brilliance of the chefs lucky enough to be based in those nine wards and the emphasis, with the predictable exception of a nod to international Michelin favourite Joel Robuchon and the likes of French restaurant Twenty One at the Hilton, is squarely on Japanese chefs and cuisine.

Ryotei, kaiseki and sushi restaurants are among the most praised. Tokyo's legendary sushi chef Jiro Ono of Sukiyabashi Jiro in Ginza made the three-star grade alongside seven other chefs, but accepted with typical Japanese modesty: 'I have done my best with what fish is available,' says Ono of his Michelin commendation, 'I've never dreamt of these stars and I feel I must keep studying.'

### Sushi masters

For many, awarding Michelin stars to something that seems as prosaic as the crafting of nigiri with raw fish may seem at odds with, say, the intricacy of traditional French cooking. The culture of sushi in Japan, however, is far removed from the conveyor belt



'robot sushi' of the west, where a master chef studies for ten years. The attention to detail, when selecting and preparing the right fish, along with perfecting the rice element, is what separates the likes of Jiro Ono from the kind of sushi restaurant you can arrive at sans reservation. There is also the matter of local produce. As well as having dining rooms in abundance, Tokyo has a wealth of the best sushi-grade fish in the world, thanks to the Tsukiji fish market.

### Perfectly particular

If anything, Japanese food lends itself more to the ideology of the Michelin inspectors than most other cuisines; the often stark Zen-like interiors of Japanese restaurants, such as low key Sushi Mizutani, shifts the emphasis entirely to what is on the plate, just as Michelin claims to judge only the food, not the presentation, the surroundings or the service. As Jean-Christophe Novelli, who has four Michelin stars has said of the Tokyo awards: 'The Japanese pay the most detail to food of anyone on the planet and they are the best in terms of sourcing ingredients.'

Of course, the obsession with food in Japan is both from the side of the chef and the consumer. In the basement of the Midtown mall, an escalator away from pâtisserie Sadaharu AOKI paris, there is a vast, beautifully-lit, picture-windowed emporium that looks like the most high-end kitchenware store imaginable. It is, in fact, a member's-only cookery school. Every hour classes begin and immaculate, Louis Vuitton-clad women stroll in to study and prepare dishes, while shoppers walk past on their way to Chanel and agnès b, pausing to observe what is as showy and detail attentive as any perfectly-formed green tea éclair. ■



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JEAN-LUC NARET

## TOKYO'S TOP TABLES

### Pâtisserie Sadaharu AOKI Paris

3-4-1 Marunouchi chiyoda-ku Tokyo  
Tel: 03 5413 7112

### Hamadaya

9-Chome, Akasaka, Minato-ku, Tokyo  
Tel: 03 5413 0204

### Sushi Mizutani

Ginza Seiwa Silver Bldg, B1F, 8-2-10 Ginza, Chuo-ku, Tokyo  
Tel: 03 3573 5258

### Twenty One - Hilton Tokyo Hotel

6-2 Nishi-Shinjuku 6-Chome, Shinjuku-ku, Tokyo  
Tel: 03 3344 5111

### Sukiyabashi Jiro

Tsukamoto Sogyo Bldg, B1F, 4-2-15, Ginza, Chuo-ku, Tokyo  
Tel: 03 3535 3600