

# Food for Thought: Worth the Wait --- Nobu's Sublime Cuisine Evokes Tokyo, Lima; Next in Southeast Asia?

By Robert Templer

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## ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

The key to some of the best, most innovative Japanese food in the world is an auto-dialer on your telephone. Or prepare yourself to grind your dialing finger to a bloody stump calling the reservations line at Nobu in Tokyo or New York or any of the other cities where Nobuyuki Matsuhisa has opened his eponymous restaurants. After two hours of dialing the New York number, I finally got through to a sneering Harpy who offered a range of inconvenient dining times in a voice that suggested I was wasting her time. After a further interrogation I was told in menacing tones to call back the day before my booking or they'd cancel the table.

By the time I was done with the credit report, the FBI background check, a full cavity search and all the other ritual humiliations needed to get a table -- and a bad one at that, next to a busy kitchen doorway -- I was primed to loathe Nobu. I imagined crowds of sycophants talking loudly about "Bobby" -- that's Robert De Niro to the rest of us. He's a part owner along with New York restaurant impresario Drew Nieporent. I pictured star-struck gawkers eating monstrously overpriced dishes served by a languid, hipper-than-thou staff. Was this just Benihana for the age of mindless celebrity? I suspected that my burning rage at a morning wasted on the telephone would leave the sushi tasting of ashes.

Now there may be a Nobu coming to a city near you. Mr. Matsuhisa already has nine restaurants, mostly in the United States. In New York there is Nobu and Nobu Next Door (a cheaper version that doesn't take reservations -- be prepared for a long wait). In Los Angeles there is his first restaurant in the United States, Matsuhisa, and a noodle shop called Ubon (Nobu backwards). Matsuhisa has been cloned in Aspen and there are branches of Nobu in Las Vegas, Malibu, London and Tokyo. This year new restaurants will open in South Beach in Miami and in Milan, the latter in a venture with Giorgio Armani.

## FULL TEXT

The key to some of the best, most innovative Japanese food in the world is an auto-dialer on your telephone. Or prepare yourself to grind your dialing finger to a bloody stump calling the reservations line at Nobu in Tokyo or New York or any of the other cities where Nobuyuki Matsuhisa has opened his eponymous restaurants. After two hours of dialing the New York number, I finally got through to a sneering Harpy who offered a range of inconvenient dining times in a voice that suggested I was wasting her time. After a further interrogation I was told in menacing tones to call back the day before my booking or they'd cancel the table.

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tasting of ashes.

A first taste of salmon tartare with its heady blast of wasabi and top note of chili and the sudden shift in taste from a sweet mountain plum assuaged some of my irritation. The tangy velvet of half-cooked tuna sashimi -- a Nobu signature dish -- erased any lingering anger. By the time I reached to the sublime blue point oysters with their layers of briny, coppery tastes, I had reached a state of oneness with the universe that a Zen monk might envy. For food this good, I'd crawl across broken glass.

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"This year, I may consider something in either Singapore or Hong Kong," says Mr. Matsuhisa, who is based in Los Angeles but tries to visit each outpost of his far-flung empire every month. Even in Tokyo, where his restaurant received only mixed reviews, it has been packed every night in the year since it opened. ("People said it wasn't Japanese food," he says, "but I don't care.")

The appeal goes much deeper than the style of the restaurants -- a combination of sleek minimalism and updated Japanese rusticity -- or the celebrity quotient that prompted the New York Post to print a map of the favorite seats of the stars. Mr. Matsuhisa has retooled traditions to create a global Japanese cuisine that is tethered lightly to the past so it can float off in new directions.

At the core of the food are the highest-quality ingredients, particularly fish, served in a manner that carefully balances taste and texture. The fact that there are Nobu restaurants around the world serving essentially the same menu is testament to the incredible global spread of Japanese cuisine. "The situation is very different from what it was 10 years ago," he says. "You can now get almost every ingredient anywhere -- you can even get Kobe beef in the United States." Only a handful of Japanese ingredients -- the very sweet sugar tomatoes, for example -- elude the Japanese cook outside the country now.

Mr. Matsuhisa began his career in the age-old Japanese manner. Starting at 18 as a delivery boy and cleaner, he worked for three years before he began to cook. Another two years of preparation work passed before he made his first sushi. "I didn't touch a fish for years," he says. "In Japan you learn step by tiny step."

After seven years in Tokyo, he moved to Lima, Peru, to open a Japanese restaurant. It was there that his food began to change direction, influenced by the tastes of his new home. "They have a long history of using a large range of spices -- garlic, fresh chilies, chili paste, cilantro. They also eat raw fish like the Japanese although they eat it as ceviche -- they use lime juice, sea salt and spices."

After some time in Buenos Aires, where he absorbed more Latin influences, he moved to Alaska and back to Japan before landing in Los Angeles, where 13 years ago he opened Matsuhisa. It was there that he made his name combining Japanese techniques with South American inflections. For Americans fearful of eating raw fish, he created his half-cooked sashimi: fish topped with garlic, scallions and ginger, then doused in hot olive oil for a moment so that the texture is changed while retaining the light taste of raw fish. His salads were not the dismal mayonnaise-shrouded piles of cabbage found in so many Japanese restaurants, but the best greens and sashimi

dressed with olive oil, wasabi, soy sauce, rice vinegar and garlic.

Yellowtail tuna comes with jalapeno pepper, black cod is baked in miso, and pasta is fashioned out of thin strips of squid and served in a light garlic sauce. In the Nobu restaurants the best way to eat is by saying "omakase" -- that is, leaving it up to the chef to decide what to bring you within a price range you set. (This option starts at a hefty \$70 a head). The dishes, particularly the types of fish, vary by season and what is available in the market, but they have a common theme of direct, clear tastes and fresh textures. Even the miso soup seems elevated from the normal.

Mr. Matsuhisa spends only 10 days a month in Los Angeles. The rest of the time he is training cooks and coming up with new dishes. Chefs move from restaurant to restaurant to ensure that any new branch has experienced staff. Most of the sushi chefs are Japanese, but he now has Portuguese, Chinese, French, Austrian and American chefs. Reports from his restaurants indicate that he has been able to keep up the high standards and sense of innovation he pioneered at his first restaurant. Now all he has to do is introduce a reservation system that doesn't make you want to hate the place before you've stepped in the door.

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Nobu Near You
You can look at the menu and wine list for Nobu New York at the
company Web site ( <a href="http://www.myriadrestaurantgroup.com">www.myriadrestaurantgroup.com</a> ). The "omakase" menu
starts at \$70 a person. Other dishes range from \$3.50 to about \$30.
Nobu Tokyo, 6-10-17 Minami-Aoyama Minato-ku. Tel: (81-3) 5467-0022
Nobu London, 19 Old Park Lane. Tel: (44-0171) 447-4747
Nobu New York, 105 Hudson St. Tel: (1-212) 219-0500
Matsuhisa, 129 North La Cienaga Blvd., Beverly Hills, California.
Tel: (1-310) 659-9639
Nobu Las Vegas, Hard Rock Hotel and Casino. Tel: (1-702) 693-5090

## DETAILS

**Business indexing term:** Subject: Restaurants; Industry: 72251 : Restaurants and Other Eating Places

<b>Subject:</b>	Restaurants; Celebrities; Taste; Chefs; Food
<b>Publication title:</b>	Asian Wall Street Journal; Victoria, Hong Kong
<b>Pages:</b>	P8
<b>Number of pages:</b>	0
<b>Publication year:</b>	2000
<b>Publication date:</b>	Jan 7, 2000
<b>Section:</b>	Personal Journal
<b>Publisher:</b>	Dow Jones & Company Inc.
<b>Place of publication:</b>	Victoria, Hong Kong
<b>Country of publication:</b>	United States, Victoria, Hong Kong
<b>Publication subject:</b>	Business And Economics--Banking And Finance
<b>ISSN:</b>	03779920
<b>Source type:</b>	Newspaper
<b>Language of publication:</b>	English
<b>Document type:</b>	NEWSPAPER
<b>ProQuest document ID:</b>	315480134
<b>Document URL:</b>	<a href="http://search.proquest.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/newspapers/food-thought-worth-wait-nobus-sublime-cuisine/docview/315480134/se-2?accountid=11311">http://search.proquest.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/newspapers/food-thought-worth-wait-nobus-sublime-cuisine/docview/315480134/se-2?accountid=11311</a>
<b>Copyright:</b>	Copyright Dow Jones & Company Inc Jan 7, 2000
<b>Last updated:</b>	2023-11-20
<b>Database:</b>	ProQuest One Business, ProQuest Central

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