

A photograph of a wooden table on a stone floor. In the foreground, a pair of dark brown wooden sandals with white laces is placed on the floor. The background shows the legs of the table and the stone tiles.

on the road to perfection

JAPAN'S FAMED KAISEKI CUISINE IS NOT JUST ABOUT THE FOOD, IT IS ALSO ABOUT A CONSTANT QUEST FOR PERFECTION THAT IS AT THE CORE OF THE JAPANESE CULTURE

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Sushi, teppanyaki, sashimi and shabu shabu have made their appearances at dining tables all over the world. These typical Japanese fare that most foodies know very well are easily exported and can be found in most cosmopolitan cities around the globe. Kaiseki, on the other hand, does not belong to the same category as these more straightforward meals that can be effortlessly reproduced. In fact, kaiseki is not only about the food, it is a culture and a dramatic culinary art form, one that is often interlaced with a story or recollection of experiences.

Originated from 16th century rituals of the Japanese tea ceremony (where light meals were traditionally served with tea), kaiseki today is a highly refined

meal composed of a succession of artistic dishes that uses only the freshest seasonal Japanese ingredients. Traditional kaiseki is strictly vegetarian, but these days, meat, fish and seafood are included in a parade of about eight to 10 courses.

An unabashedly visual and elaborate cuisine, kaiseki places as much emphasis on aesthetics as the freshness of the ingredients. The beautiful morsels are meticulously garnished and arranged on fine handcrafted lacquer and ceramic ware, culminating in intricately edible artwork — all this for the sole purpose of enhancing the appearance of food and of course, our senses. The fastidiously presented dishes are then served at intervals that are carefully timed to create two moods — the anticipation of the dish and the satisfaction gained from it. In a nutshell, you cannot possibly rush through a kaiseki meal.

When I found out that I had the opportunity to dine at Tokyo's famous

two-Michelin starred Kikunoi restaurant (Akasaka 6-13-8. Tel: +(81) 3-568-6055), I was elated. It was my first taste of a traditional kaiseki meal in Japan, and my first time meeting world-renowned owner-chef Yoshihiro Murata. The chef is known for enlivening this centuries-old art of kaiseki and injecting it with his own flair. In the hands of a maestro like him, kaiseki is not just the zenith of Japanese cuisine, but of Japanese culture. Indeed, Times writer Aryn Baker calls Kikunoi 'a temple to authentic Japanese cuisine'.

A native Kyoto resident, he is a third generation kaiseki chef who has proudly continued his family's culinary heritage. Surprisingly, Murata says that he never really studied from his father and considers himself a 'self-taught' chef. Murata, who has appeared on numerous Japanese TV shows, is also Chairman of the Japanese Culinary Academy. To date, he has penned 15 cookbooks including the award-winning *Kaiseki: The Exquisite*

HAUTE CUISINE

Kaiseki restaurants generally require reservations, and are very formal venues [children are not permitted to some of them]. The following Tokyo restaurants featuring traditional kaiseki meals are well worth checking out.

NADAMAN

**Hotel New Otani 4-1 Kioi-Cho, Chiyoda-Ku.
Tel: +(81) 3-3264-7921**

Nadaman Sazanka-so features a rich history of exquisite Japanese kaiseki cuisine crafted by Master Chef Nobutoshi Kiura and his team. It was established by Nadaya Mansuke in 1830 and was the first to be operated by the Nadaman group.

This exclusive ryotei Japanese restaurant is popular among top leaders from the Japanese political and economic arenas. Built by late master architect Togo Murano, the restaurant is located in a tranquil spot flanked by trees and foliage of the hotel's 400-year-old Japanese Garden.

KAKIDEN

**8th floor, 3-37-11 Shinjuku.
Tel: +(81) 3-3352-5121**

Kakiden exudes a relaxing Japanese teahouse atmosphere. A sister restaurant to the one in Kyoto, which was founded more than 260 years ago, this kaiseki restaurant showcases set meals that are modelled on the four seasons. The meals are based on what's fresh and available, and set dinners include box kaiseki, mini-kaiseki, and kaiseki courses.

TSURUYA

**The Peninsula Tokyo, 1-8-1 Yurakucho,
Chiyoda-ku. Tel: +(81) 3-6270- 2715**

Sister to the lavish kaiseki restaurant in Kyoto, Tsuruya serves Japanese delicacies meticulously prepared using seasonal ingredients. Designed by Nomura Koge, the 60-seater restaurant has a pleasant, contemporary setting and blends in perfectly with the hotel's stylish interiors.

KAZAHANA

**Conrad Tokyo, 1-9-1, Higashi-Shinbashi,
Minato-Ku. Tel: +(81) 3-6388-8000**

Kazahana, which means 'flowers blown in the wind', offers floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the beautiful Royal Hamarikyu Gardens and Tokyo Bay. It is designed as a modern interpretation of a traditional Japanese 'kura' or cellar featuring a traditional Japanese Sumie painting as its motif. The restaurant is divided into five areas: kaiseki, sushi, teppan, lounge and private rooms. Helming the kitchen is Chef Akio Saito who prepares some of the finest kaiseki fare for guests — his Japanese 'degustation' meal will decidedly leave a lasting impression.





Cuisine of Kyoto's Kikunoi Restaurant. In his tome, Murata points out that the work of the chef is 'to coax out the fundamental taste that is innate to any ingredient'. To him, everything must be of top quality and in season. Every ingredient is locally sourced and all things must blend harmoniously. 'Kaiseki is hard to replicate and is the most complicated cuisine,' he writes. Alongside his many achievements, Michelin's highest honour seems to have left him 'unaffected'. 'Life just goes on as usual here,' he humbly declares when asked how the prestigious stars have influenced his restaurant.

Murata graduated from Ritsumeikan University, Kyoto in 1973. Thereafter, he embarked on a six-month stint in Paris. After learning the ropes from the French chefs, he travelled around Europe to garner more knowledge about European cuisine before returning to Kyoto with a

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renewed mindset. In 1989, he opened his own restaurant Kikunoi Kiamachi in the city. Meanwhile, he also manages his family's 'eating inn', which was founded by his grandfather a century ago at the site of a 'chrysanthemum well' (which translates as 'kikunoi' in Japanese). To this day, the restaurant uses water from this

450-year-old underground source that was built by a shogun for his loved one. 'The soft water from this well is very historic and exclusive,' says Murata, who also ships the water to his Tokyo restaurant so that the taste of the stocks and soups are just as good.

Every month, Murata comes to his Tokyo branch to meet guests and check on the quality of his restaurant. He stays for at least a week to do so. For him, kaiseki is a culture, and as its showcase, the restaurant is not just a restaurant. His philosophy is to show people what genuine kaiseki culture is, and to maintain the restaurant's high standards. 'Chefs need time to learn the techniques. It is difficult to be precise. It is a must to follow tradition,' he shares, adding that it is not easy for Western chefs to learn kaiseki techniques, which are extremely intricate.



China Blue



A heady blend of the old and the new, Tokyo offers the intrepid urban traveller much adventure, whether in the form of larger-than-life tourist attractions or cultural icons. Then there is the mind-boggling variety of shops and goods available, which invariably spells danger for the cash-strapped and shopping-inclined. Last but not least, Tokyo offers extremely good dining, a fact that many foodies rejoice in. After all, this Japanese city is the first in Asia to boast its own Michelin Guide. So bring your camera (and the gold card), buy a pocket translator, and enjoy!

VISIT...

Tokyo Tower The 333-metre high Tokyo Tower is the world's tallest self-supporting steel tower and 13 m taller than its model, Paris' Eiffel Tower. Visit the observatory to enjoy a bird's eye view of Tokyo. During favourable weather conditions, Mount Fuji can be seen in a distance.

Tsukiji The world-famous Tsukiji fish market is a must-visit for any foodie curious about behind-the-scene goings-on that deliver prime cuts of tuna belly to the sushi counter. Most of the activities here take place pre-dawn and the best time to go is between 5 and 6am. The inner market is filled with more than 1,000 licensed wholesalers selling a tremendous variety and volume of fish and seafood. The outer market, meanwhile, is a great place to have sushi breakfast or slurp piping hot noodles topped with tempura.

Harajuku Walk around **Harajuku** and you will experience a world of wacky street fashion. It's an eye-opener to see teenagers

dressed in Little Bo Bop dresses or gothic-looking outfits. For a requisite dose of tranquility, venture to the nearby wooded park to visit the famous **Meiji Jingu** Shinto shrine.

STAY AT...

Mitsui Garden Hotel Ginza (8-13-1 Ginza, Chuo-ku. Tel: +[81] 3-3543-1131) is a stylish boutique hotel designed by renowned Italian designer Piero Lissoni. The hotel's 45 guest rooms feature expansive windows overlooking Ginza and downtown Tokyo, and spacious bathrooms with large windows affording excellent views.

DINE AT...

The popular **Roku Roku** at Grand Hyatt Tokyo (6-10-3 Roponggi, Minato-ku. Tel: +[81] 3-4333-8800) or **Gonpachi** (1-13-11 Nishi-Azabu, Minato-ku. Tel: +[81] 3-5771-0170). The 60-seater Roku Roku serves up top-notch seafood and sushi, and a wide selection of sake from boutique distilleries.

The famed **Gonpachi**, meanwhile, is sleek and very stylish, with a boisterous atmosphere that inspired director Quentin Tarantino to re-create a similar setting in the movie Kill Bill. It is very popular for its homemade soba noodles and skewered meats, and also boasts a suitably swish sushi bar on the upper floor.

For a taste of fine French food, the two Michelin-starred **Twenty One** at Hilton Tokyo (6-6-2 Nishi Shinjuku, Shinjuku. Tel: +[81] 3-3344-5111) is highly recommended. The ultra-talented Chef Sebastien Lefort who helms the kitchen here was appointed by his mentor, the well-known Michelin-starred Chef Stephane Gaborieau. The service standard here is also flawless, thanks to manager Tadao Akiba.

Another restaurant that was awarded one Michelin star is Conrad Tokyo's **China Blue** (1-9-1, Higashi-Shinbashi, Minato-Ku. Tel: +[81] 3-6388-8000). The restaurant serves impressive modern Cantonese cuisine created by Chef Albert Tse, formerly of Singapore's Tung Lok Group.



TOKYO FACTS

\$\$ EXCHANGE RATE S\$1.00 = ¥75.63

VISAS Singaporeans do not need a visa if they are staying for less than three months. For full details, please log on to www.mofa.go.jp

TRAVEL All major airlines fly into Tokyo's Narita Airport. Travel time from Singapore to Tokyo is approximately seven hours

CLIMATE There are four distinct seasons in Tokyo. Both spring and autumn are typically mild, while temperatures can soar in the summer and winter can bring some snowfall. In Tokyo, the cherry blossom season usually takes place towards the end of March and beginning of April

TIME Tokyo is one hour ahead of Singapore



It was a chilly December day and I was looking forward to sampling some of Kikunoi's winter dishes. Steamed turnips or kabura mushi is a typical Kyoto winter dish according to the chef. This version is different from Murata's father and grandfather's dish as it has a lighter touch. Egg whites are used to make an airy soufflé of turnips, then they are complemented by tilefish for flavour, and cloud ear mushrooms, ginkgo and

lily bulbs for texture. The dish is finally crowned with a dollop of sea urchin roe before serving. The delicate and fluffy combination was comforting yet refined.

I was then presented with a rectangular lacquer box filled with artfully crafted gems. In his book, Murata recalled seeing pink camellias peeking through a fence when he was on his way to school. To capture this memory, he created a 'camellia sushi' that comprises smoked salmon shaped into a camellia flower. This was complemented by items like dried mullet roe rolled with squid and pickled in sake lees; cod roe simmered in lightly seasoned dashi; rapini with Japanese mustard dressing; sea cucumber tenderised in bon cha tea and soaked in vinegar, then mixed with turnips, daikon and yuzu, as well as

fried lotus root with Japanese mustard. To prepare the lotus root, the chef explains that the holes are stuffed with white miso paste, minced meat and Japanese mustard. The root is coated with dried bonito flakes, then deep-fried.

Another one-of-a-kind dish is the abalone cooked in a salt dome and stuffed with sea urchin. Murata came up with the isoyaki baking method some 20 years ago. He wanted to cook abalone until it was tender without sacrificing the sea aroma. So he wrapped the shellfish with wakame seaweed, covered it with salt and baked everything in big ceramic pot — this method rendered an almost airtight seal and retained heat. Although the abalone was tender, the pot took up too much space, so these days he steams the abalone first, wrap it with wakame, then top with salt and bake. It was undoubtedly one of the best abalone dishes I've ever had.

To complement tradition, Murata continues to carve out new dishes. Every month he will experiment with new ideas. In Baker's Times report, Murata highlights: 'Tradition is something you break and rebuild at the same time. If cuisine doesn't change, it won't be alive.' Besides his grueling schedule, this culinary heavyweight still finds time to cook at home for his two daughters and wife. 'They enjoy my pasta dishes,' says the affable chef with a smile. In the meantime, his restaurants continue to be perpetually filled with patrons waiting to sample some of his timeless meals. I certainly felt honoured to be one of them. **a**