KODAWARI

by

OMAKASE ROOM

Written by Jenny Dorsey

お任せ

The art of sushi is an endless pursuit, a lifelong path chosen only by the chefs who can fully appreciate the journey as much as the final destination. Kodawari by Omakase Room features Sushi Master Chef Tatsuya Sekiguchi, a fourth-generation sushi chef whose story begins at a 100-year-plus sushi institution in Saitama, Japan and unfolds through the rise of omakase in New York City. His unique approach to sushi is reflected within Omakase Room's serene ambiance, tastefully simple menu and careful focus on an individualized guest experience.

This book explores Omakase Room’s philosophy through the Japanese principles of harmony, gratitude and kodawari (dedication). Omakase means “to entrust”, and this book asks readers to allow it to take them on tour within the world of sushi: from the details of rice cookery and fish aging, through the 18-piece tasting arc, to the subtleties of Japanese hospitality. For Sushi Master Tatsu, the craft of making sushi is not just his passion, but a guiding force in his life and psyche. Similarly, this book aims to not only explain the traditions of edomae sushi and technique, but also set a thoughtful foundation for guests to fully appreciate the art of sushi.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

目次

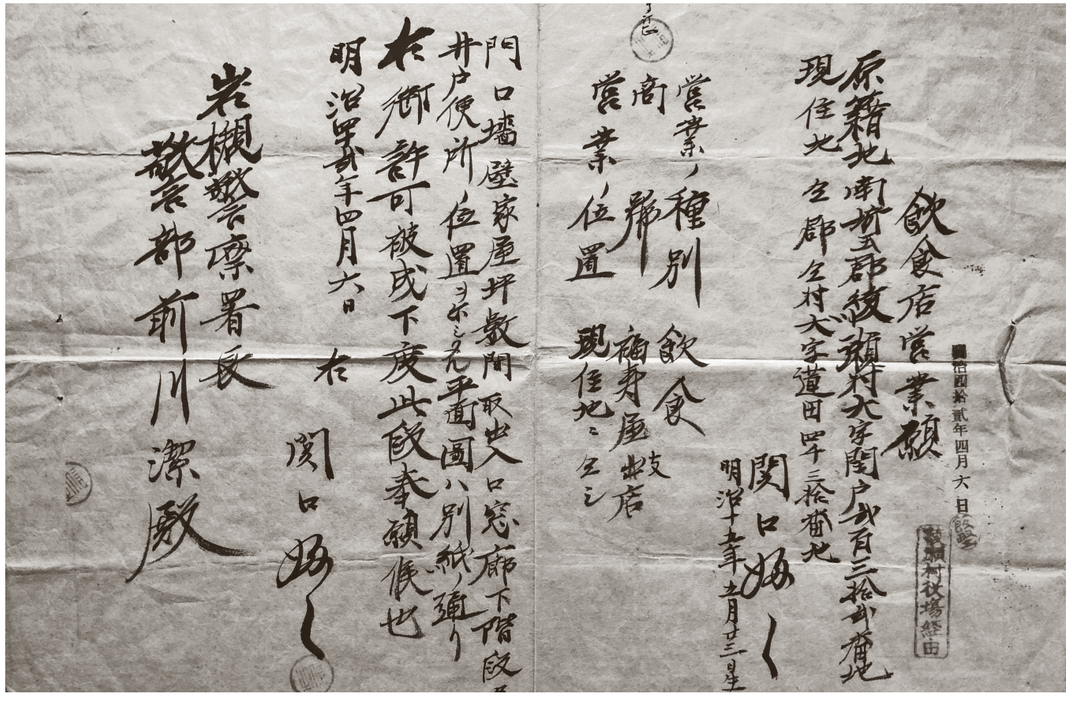
INTRODUCTION,
CHEF TATSU'S JOURNEY
TO OMAKASE ROOM

こだわり
シェフ・タツの鮨への思い

Chef Tatsuya Sekiguchi will be the first to say he never anticipated being a sushi master. As the youngest of the family, he assumed his oldest brother would be taking over the family restaurant, Fukuju-ya. Instead, he planned on becoming a schoolteacher after studying social studies at Kokushikan University. However, things changed dramatically when Chef Tatsu's brother unexpectedly passed away. He and his entire family was shocked and devastated, and the future of the restaurant suddenly uncertain. Chef Tatsu was only 24 at the time, but he knew he had to come home and take over the family legacy.

Fukuju-ya, which means "good luck" in Japanese, is a 100 plus year institution in Hasuda City, located in the Saitama prefecture roughly 15 miles north of Tokyo. The matriarch of the family, Chef Tatsu's great-grandmother, started the restaurant serving mostly soba and udon noodles and rice bowls – not sushi. As edomae sushi – sushi prepared in nigiri style of just fish and rice – became more popular, her husband traveled to Tokyo's Matsunozushi to develop his craft and serve sushi back at the family restaurant. Over the years Fukuju-ya had become both a family gem and gathering place, with the next generation growing up above the restaurant and learning the cooking techniques of their predecessors. Although the 2nd floor has since been converted into a private banquet hall – a significant expansion from the restaurant's primary 25 seats – it still holds fond memories for Chef Tatsu. It was there he first saw his father's chef uniform, a hanten (kimono style) jacket vigilantly ironed, whitened, and starched daily for service. Today, he still wears the same style of chef jacket at Omakase Room.

Growing into the role of a fourth-generation sushi chef required Chef Tatsu's complete and utter dedication. Starting in 1994, he studied under his father for six years at Fukuju-ya before transferring to Tokyo's Nihonbashi-Aoi to learn kaiseki (traditional Japanese multi-course dinner), a complementary skill set to his sushi knowledge. Kaiseki typically offers a mix of both hot and cold items reflective of the weather and seasons, with a focus on sashimi instead of sushi. It is from kaiseki Chef Tatsu absorbed much of his worldly principles of balance and harmony he now interjects into the Omakase Room experience.



In 2001, Chef Tatsu took a leap of faith and left Japan. A relative of his owned Yama, a mainstream sushi restaurant located New York City's Union Square, and had offered him a job in the United States. He saw it as an opportunity to see an entirely new part of the world and begin his journey through sushi. The transition was a complete 180 from everything he knew; instead of nigiri, he was making over 100 sushi rolls a day. On weekends, lines would form around the block, full of customers with eager appetites. "What I realized is how much I liked seeing my guests happy," Chef Tatsu explains with a smile.

After four years at Yama, Chef Tatsu migrated to Sushi Yasuda, a post he would eventually hold for a decade. He knew this was the restaurant where he wanted to stay. The sushi preparation was authentic and, most importantly, "the rice was good," Chef Tatsu says appreciatively. The quiet atmosphere and unwavering focus on food was the stage he needed to start finding his rhythm with both sushi and his guests. He was mesmerized by the idea of creating the perfect guest experience, using his relationship with each guest to better inform his omakase choices. "I only planned to stay two years, then I would go home," Chef Tatsu confides, but the ever-changing clientele kept him so challenged and engaged he couldn't leave. As his tenure at Yasuda grew longer, so did his list of loyal patrons, many who proclaimed they had simply "fallen with love."

Chef Tatsu eventually became Chef Yasuda's chosen protégé, taking over the helm of Yasuda's New York City location after Chef Yasuda returned to Japan in 2011. Shortly after, the New York Times visited him and declared that the restaurant "continues to meet its high standards" with a stellar three-star rating. Despite the temptation to stay at the established Yasuda, there was an idea at the back of Chef Tatsu's mind that kept him searching for his next move. His philosophy had always been in line with the origins of edomae sushi – simple, local, affordable – and he wanted to recreate that idea in his space. As he began to dig deeper into his restaurant concept, foundational aspects of Omakase Room formed naturally: a small sushi bar, where he could visually see and interact with each guest; three seatings a night, for enough volume to keep prices in-check; and a focus on nigiri sushi, with quality local fish being the star.

Chef Tatsu was still searching for a home for his idea when the owner of Omakase Room asked him for a meeting to discuss an Executive Chef role. “I said, ‘I have an idea, a proposal,’” Chef Tatsu beams, “and we met the next day.” After discussing his proposal, the two agreed on mutual terms and an official toast with Nikka whiskey sealed the deal.

At first, Omakase Room existed as an experiment: a six-month popup to gauge customer interest. July 10th, 2017 marked the soft opening and, two days later, the official opening. The response was swift and enthusiastic, with full seatings booking out weeks in advance. Surprised and delighted, Chef Tatsu brought on an assistant for the kitchen, and General Manager Hiroko Hidaka – also a Sushi Yasuda alum – hired an additional server. Six months was extended indefinitely, with Omakase Room bearing Chef Tatsu’s name for the foreseeable future.

“Everything has a purpose” is a value that Omakase Room espouses, whether it is in a piece of sushi or a movement within the kitchen. The bamboo walls and cypress table are nods to Sushi Yasuda’s aesthetic, the ceramics collection an expression of different Japanese artists, the cool-toned lights and quiet atmosphere a gentle reminder of the restaurant’s emphasis on sushi and sushi alone. Even toothpicks are presented in tiny origami sleeves, almost too endearing to use. After decades of training, learning, growing and finally becoming a sushi master, Chef Tatsu can reflect thoughtfully on his purpose. “I never thought I would be doing this, but I don’t think I would’ve been nearly as happy doing anything else.”

CHAPTER I

THE JAPANESE WAY,
GRATITUDE AS A CULTURE

シェフ・タツの鮨へのこだわり

"Being Japanese, to me, is to be thankful to every grain of rice."

This foundation of gratitude has been ever-present in the backdrop of Chef Tatsu's family restaurant and inner relationships. Holistic appreciation for each aspect of the supply chain was practiced daily, appreciative affirmations for every person who played a part in ushering each meal to the table. The chef, the distributor, the farmer, the fishermen – but most importantly, the animal and plant products themselves. The phrase ita daki masu is saying thank you for its sacrifice, Chef Tatsu explains, and promising to use it to its best, its fullest.

This ode bears fruit in two distinct ways. First, it is a standard against unnecessary waste: every piece of the product must be used, even by-products such as wasabi leaves or sake lees that require significant coaxing to be made into something oishii (delicious). There is a sense of pride in producing the very least amount of garbage possible. Secondly, it fine-tunes the interpretation of respect, which is to showcase the product in its perfect simplicity. Too many adjacent ingredients may muddy a delicate flavor; thus dishes are served with purposeful restraint.

Honoring the cycle of life is a custom not only for private quarters but public ones as well. In Japan, schools teach children as young as Kindergarteners the importance of eating everything served at lunch. The children receive vocal affirmations before the meal, and only upon evidence of a clean plate would a child be allowed into recess. This interaction between teacher and student is not meant to be restrictive, Chef Tatsu says, because what the teacher serves should be reflective of what the student wants to – and can – eat without wasting food.

"BEING JAPANESE, TO ME, IS TO BE THANKFUL TO EVERY GRAIN OF RICE."

Striking this balance is something Chef Tatsu believes can be achieved through transparency: explaining to customers what they are eating, teaching younger sushi chefs his techniques, ultimately strumming up an appreciation for oft-discarded ingredients. In the case of shima aji (striped jack), its neck meat is frequently discarded due to its tougher texture, but when sliced paper-thin it transforms into something umami-rich and desirable. Wasabi leaves can be pickled and used in sushi rolls; squid tentacles marinated in miso and sake lees for sweetness and depth, then served charred from the grill. Fish heads and other parts that cannot be served to guests are kept to be eaten at home, closing the loop from animal to restaurant to chef.

While these principles of gratitude, simplicity and balance are founded in food, they permeate the entirety of Chef Tatsu's life. He opts for neutral colors for everything from his wardrobe to his car; he will pay handsomely for thoughtfully crafted products irrespective of the brand name; he looks for strength of character, not at resumes, when hiring his staff. But he does not impose his thoughts on others, because he does not see any one way as correct. As he explains, the way each person practices gratitude is like a sushi chef's style: individual, representative of an important facet of an overall cultural whole.

CHAPTER II

KODAWARI,
EVOLUTION FROM OBSESSION
TO DEDICATION

こだわり
シェフ・タツの鮨への思い

Kodawari is a word without direct translation into English. Its original interpretation was tinted with distinct negativity, implying the subject of its description was “one-sided,” focused on the verge of tunnel vision, lacking a broader perspective. Over the years, the term has taken an optimistic turn to indicate an individual’s pursuit, something one cares about so deeply and fervently there is no room for compromise. It is an individual’s entire belief system encapsulated in a variety of telling practices – a way to express yourself that can’t entirely be described and certainly not replicated.

At Omakase Room, Chef Tatsu's acts of kodawari range from stylistic choices that differ from the norm to extremely time-consuming, laborious details the vast majority of fellow sushi chefs would never even consider. He is extremely cognizant of the original intention of edomae sushi, the nigiri (fish and rice) style of sushi that now characterizes omakase sushi. Edomae translates literally to "in front of the bay of Edo [Tokyo]," harkening back to the days where fishermen sold their daily catch to small stands at the bayfront to be made into snacks of fish and rice. Only local fish were used, and each piece was prepared modestly to keep prices affordable for the masses. Chef Tatsu takes a similar approach to his supply chain. He uses roughly 60% local fish, evaluating each species independent of brand name or the prestige of its Japanese counterparts. Bonito, squid, scallops and Spanish mackerel are all varieties Chef Tatsu prefers from the East Coast. But his kodawari to local fish is tempered by a fierce dedication to quality. As a result, it took five long years to finally find a fish supplier – Mr. Ishida of Apollo Fish Co. – with standards to meet his expectations. Even still, the fish source can be as fickle as each season; this year's prime catches are no indication for what will be best next year.

The processes around preparing each fish for service comprises of many different kodawari. First, the equipment must be in order. Chef Tatsu's knives are from a fourth-generation knife shop in Tokyo, where the bladesmith will only take on a customer after he evaluates their personality and finds them deserving. Despite the shop's small size, it is filled with glass-paneled displays of knives from sushi greats, who return used knives as a sign of gratitude and proof the knife had been lovingly cared for over the years. Chef Tatsu was introduced to this specialty shop from his mentor Chef Yasuda, and he takes the privilege of welding these knives very seriously. His primary knife, a sharp and thin blade used for slicing neta (the fish half of nigiri) during service, must be sharpened every day on a specific whetstone. This natural stone is carved directly from the mountains of Kyoto. Compared to its factory-made counterparts, natural stones last longer, sharpen better and cost over ten times as much. When asked about the stone's $800 price point, Chef Tatsu merely smiles and murmurs "Kodawari."

One of the strongest examples of Chef Tatsu's dedication is his kodawari to tuna. Tuna is the prized possession of any sushi chef and requires both patience and skill to master. The way each muscle moves in the tuna has implications for taste and texture of the surrounding flesh. The standard practice for preparing toro (fatty tuna) is to slice across multiple sections of meat from a square piece of the tuna belly. This is the only area where the suji (white tendon) weaving between the layers of toro flesh is soft enough to be consumed. However, toro can be harvested from all parts of the tuna – if the sushi chef is skilled enough to tackle the removal of suji. Chef Tatsu takes on this challenge through hagashi, the delicate method of peeling each layer of flesh away from the surrounding muscles, tendons, and sinews. This results in a harmonious texture from a single strip of tuna flesh. The ha- gashi process is unbelievably painstaking, yet must be performed quickly to ensure the unctuous toro is not exposed to too much oxygen. There is little room for error: one wrong move, and the most expensive bluefin tuna could be ruined. Now, after years of hagashi, Chef Tatsu can pinpoint by sight alone which part of the tuna a single piece of toro came from.

Showcasing the sublime qualities of every ingredient is a point of pride for Chef Tatsu. In many instances, it is exactness of timing that distinguishes a master from the rest. White shrimp gives the perfect flavor immediately after being blanched; thus Chef Tatsu steadfastly performs the arduous kodawari of shelling and blanching each piece of shrimp – for precisely two minutes – to order for each guest. The molding of fish and rice into nigiri must also be done on a strict timeline – just seven seconds. This is fast enough to minimize heat transfer to the fish but patient enough to ensure consistency. Topping each sushi with a squint of mazuma variety wasabi is also done a la minute on a copper grater, a material Chef Tatsu finds to perform better than the standard shark skin.

These individual requirements are not easy, yet watching Chef Tatsu perform them with a cheerful smile and calm, deft movements may lure the guest into the illusion of simplicity. After all, one of Chef Tatsu's main kodawari to his guests is making sure they are comfortable. He maintains that despite the rigor of his practice, he does not want guests to feel intimidated by him, the sushi or the atmosphere – that way, they can truly relax and focus on the food.

CHAPTER III

OMAKASE STYLE,
INSPIRATION AND PHILOSOPHY

こだわり

シェフ・タツの鮨への思い

Omakase is a Japanese phrase meaning “to entrust,” a fitting description of the entire dining experience. Guests do not order from a set menu or are even given privy to what courses may lie ahead; instead, the act of asking for omakase symbolizes trust in the chef to understand the customer’s wants while preparing what fish is best that day.

Serving guests this way is no small task, as customer preferences range dramatically from country to country, city to city, person to person. When Chef Tatsu first moved to the United States from Japan in 2001, he found himself recalibrating his understanding of customer expectations, general likes and dislikes, facial and bodily expressions and baseline knowledge of sushi. “In Japan, everyone knows about sushi. But here there are guests from many different cultures, so I had to learn how to read them, sense what they are feeling.” Chef Tatsu confides that even when customers are too shy to share their opinions directly with him, he knows what they are thinking. “I look at their eyebrows because many times their words are the same.”

Omakase Room is deliberately small, so Chef Tatsu can watch the reactions of every guest and intuitively decide what to serve next. If a guest seems unsure about their comfort level with a full-bod- ied fish like mackerel, he may start them with a piece of sawara (Spanish mackerel), typically subtler in flavor, before determining if he should proceed with planned pieces of aji (Japanese horse mackerel) or kohada (gizzard shad) – or opt for a different path. "Every guest is different, so every omakase must be different," Chef Tatsu explains, "If I can understand the guest well, then I can create a memorable experience for them."

For repeat visitors, each omakase takes on an additional require- ment of being both familiar enough to complement the last meal but varied enough to keep guests intrigued. Chef Tatsu achieves this by playing off what he already knows the guest likes, but challenging them with more atypical pieces. If a guest showed a marked interest in a white fish like hirame (fluke), he might offer the fin of the fluke during a subsequent visit, or a piece of sayori (needlefish), which has a similarly firm texture but more oceanic flavor. For those very well-acquainted with Chef Tatsu's traditional omakase progression, he may substitute a new part of an otherwise familiar species, such as squid fin – blanched, then crosshatched – or himo, the wiggly fringe muscles of a clam.

While most of Chef Tatsu's fans dine on an almost monthly schedule, even those who have not seen him in years will find themselves treated with the familiarity of return patrons. One couple recently came to visit Omakase Room with the nostalgic memory of Chef Tatsu being the first chef who ever served them sushi – back at his post at Yama restaurant over 15 years ago. "I remembered him instantly," Chef Tatsu recalls, "that man, he loves squid –his eyes roll to the back in the back of his head when he eats it." Chef Tatsu's seemingly eidetic memory is in part aided by his meticulous journal. He writes down guest names every day, taking careful note of special dates like birthdays or anniversaries in addition to eating expressions to record their likes and dislikes. One regular, Chef Tatsu remembers fondly, will clutch his forehead and utter "so good!" when having oysters.

"IF I CAN UNDERSTAND THE GUEST WELL, THEN I CAN CREATE A MEMORABLE EXPERIENCE FOR THEM."

This attention to detail is a major part of what makes Chef Tatsu's omakase so special. The singularities of each fish are extremely elusive, and every action taken upon it can make rippling impacts on the final flavor. "That is why my work is so fun," Chef Tatsu says with a smile, "every day there are small changes I can make and observe." No day is the same, so Chef Tatsu notates everything: the humidity outside in the city, the thawing temperature inside the restaurant, the size of each fish brought in. He makes adjustments over long periods of time – flexing a millimeter of thickness in his final cuts, perhaps, or lengthening the aging time for a specific fillet. However, these changes require other variables to be held constant. Thus he routinely tastes his miso soup at noon, the sushi rice immediately after the cook cycle and after the last service, his fish at the beginning of the day's prep. He even keeps his mood consistent, lest it contributes a slightly saltier hand to his food.

The effects of his small experiments may not pay off for years, but there is a deep sense of satisfaction when he implements a new change. Recently, he began to add a touch more vinegar in the second batch of rice after noticing some of its tang had evaporated during the first service. To Chef Tatsu, good sushi is not just about good fish, but the equilibrium struck between fish and rice. “When a guest is eating sushi, there should be just enough fish for the rice and just enough rice for the fish,” Chef Tatsu explains. The two should melt in the mouth simultaneously, so no flavor lingers long after the other. To achieve this, the textures must match. Chef Tatsu ages and tenderizes each piece of fish for this purpose, an especially monumental feat for certain varieties like squid, which has four layers of muscle that must be individually cross-hatched to maximize softness. For the rice to suitably stand up to the fish, it requires just the right amount of acidity. Chef Tatsu uses only red vinegar, a milder vinegar made from sake lees, for his sushi rice to find the optimal tartness. A touch less or more and the subtlety of the fish and rice together is gone.

When asked to define his omakase style, Chef Tatsu describes it as a “sense of self” tying who he is to what he creates. While he has experimented and made a variety of sushi, the elusive mastery of ultra-simple sushi has always drawn him back to a more traditional style. One of his mid-meal pieces, a plump oyster from Seattle with just a flake of charcoal salt from Cypress, is a perfect example. That speckle may be small, but its presence is no accident. The variety, crystal size and the portion of salt were all deliberate choices after months of testing. It is these small gestures that reveal Chef Tatsu’s omakase philosophy: to showcase the epitome of each fish and leave nothing to chance, but not overly manipulate it. “My sushi is about balance,“ Chef Tatsu says, “it is important each piece does not have too much of anything.”

CHAPTER IV

CHEF TATSU'S OMAKASE, THE STORY ARC

こだわり

シェフ・タツの鮨への思い

There are three essential narratives to every omakase, somewhat akin to an appetizer, entrée, and dessert. How each piece of sushi contrasts or complements the piece before and after is critical – some chefs model their omakase after a thriller, each sushi adding to the story's climb towards the climax of the meal. Chef Tatsu's approach at Omakase Room is better described as a musical, with many highlights and breakout songs nestled fittingly within three larger acts.

The first few pieces are some of the most important as it sets the mood for the meal. For the first piece specifically, the weather is a significant point of consideration. On a cold winter day, Chef Tatsu would opt for a more unctuous fish, like kanpachi (amberjack), brushed with soy and served closer to room temperature. For a hot summer day, he'd likely begin with a milder fish like madai (Japanese seabream), served very cold, topped with a squeeze of organic lemon and Japanese sea salt. Warm yet rainy or cloudy days are the most difficult as there are many directions he could take. "I'd want to use a lighter fish, but one that is still fatty," Chef Tatsu describes. While outside fluctuations may change the type of fish he uses or the amount of soy or lemon garnish, the most important thing is still to keep each preparation method complementary with the selected fish.

"I LOVE WATCHING THE GUESTS' FACES"

If each fish was a character, the next few pieces in the omakase are meant to show multiple facets of its personality. If jack mackerel is presented first in pure form – with fine chives and ginger – the following piece may very well be Chef Tatsu's local Spanish mackerel. Only this version is cold-smoked with hickory for 30 seconds to reveal a new sweetness in the fish. This mid-service display is one of Chef Tatsu's few flashy techniques; he uses a smoking gun to pump a bamboo box full of smoke, then opens the lid with great fanfare. "I love watching the guests' faces," he says enthusiastically. Traditionally, only bonito is served smoked (with hay smoke over a gas stove), but Chef Tatsu was so enamored with the smoking gun after seeing it used for mixology he decided to give it a try. "Guests are always so surprised to see it's mackerel, not salmon. The reaction is usually 'wow!'"

As the omakase story is unfolding, Chef Tatsu is also mentally recording the guests' facial expressions to determine which pieces to serve next. For instance, the moments after the sea scallop – a plump catch from Massachusetts – and the squid are very important, as he is assuaging the guest's affinity for shellfish. Certain delicacies are available only by request, like the exceptionally crunchy mirugai (giant clam), or very seasonally, like the restricted amaebi (sweet shrimp) which was only available for four days this year. Chef Tatsu takes care to keep a wide selection of a la carte fish available, giving both him and his guests flexibility to personalize each omakase with endless permutations.

The middle act is the meat of the meal, where chefs serve some of their most prized cuts of fish. Specifically, tuna. A significant percentage of Chef Tatsu's preparation work centers around perfecting his tuna offerings for the day. Chef Tatsu typically purchases the bottom third of the whole tuna, where he can extract tuna flesh ranging across the fat spectrum. Lean cuts of bluefin tuna, which are closer to the bones and have a sharper flavor, are blanched for a few seconds before being marinated in his special nikiri (soy sauce mixture). Fatty cuts are processed with careful hagashi, as the prevalence of suji increases towards the tail. The highlight of these cuts come in the form of otoro (super fatty tuna), which has intensely rich marbling. The term toro comes from the Japanese verb "to melt," so each piece must be constructed in the perfect size and with the right fat structure to melt away in the guest's mouth.

While there is no mistaking tuna's prominence in this arena, Chef Tatsu has also absorbed other favorites into his repertoire, such as freshly shucked Miyagi oyster topped with Cypress charcoal salt or kombujime (kombu-cured fluke). Chef Tatsu opts for local fluke from Montauk, then cures it lightly by wrapping the fillets in kombu seaweed with a touch of Yamagata salt. Humble white shrimp is another darling in his omakase. It is a piece he processes beginning to end – from peeling to blanching to seasoning – immediately before serving. The finished shrimp is dusted with sea salt from Wales and nothing else. In recent decades, ikura (salmon roe) and uni (sea urchin) have also become favorites after Restaurant Kyubei in Tokyo began serving them together in maki (roll) form. Chef Tatsu's take on ikura is deceptively simple, marinating it only in his nikiri and Yamagata seaweed salt. The uni is served raw, untouched. Currently the omakase uni is from Santa Barbara, where the water temperature has been more consistent than around Hokkaido, but Chef Tatsu is also intrigued by Canadian uni from Vancouver B.C., which has a delightfully clean taste. Both ikura and uni are served as independent pieces, however, because Chef Tatsu believes firmly in keeping every flavor distinct from the rest.

The omakase story arc concludes with a few touches of sweet. The more typical progression is maki, traditionally stuffed with kanpyo (dried calabash gourd), then unagi (freshwater eel) and finally tamago (Japanese egg omelet). But the omakase genre is still comparatively young – approximately 200 years old – and there are no hard or fast rules. Chef Tatsu stays true to his fish-forward approach by using toro in his ending maki, occasionally substituting it for ume (Japanese plum) or saba (mackerel) if he knows particular guest preferences. Next, a red miso soup made with miso from Kyoto and topped with soft tofu and chives. “Soup is a nice way to end a meal,” Chef Tatsu explains, “it warms your body, so you feel comfortable.”

Every day he also prepares tamago, but it is only served by request, giving him a final platform for a piece of seafood: eel. Chef Tatsu chooses Kyushu island anago (saltwater eel), the saltwater counterpart to unagi, for its natural sweetness and softness. His closing piece famously does not come with any of the classic barbeque-style sauce. Instead, his eel is slow-cooked in a bath of sugar, water, and sake to achieve a texture so light and fluffy; it seems sous-vide’d. He buys larger eels that have more bones but sweeter flesh, cooking them long enough the bones become edible. The garnish for the eel is a sprinkle of pink Australian angel salt harvested from Murray River, a water source with similar terroir as the anago’s estuaries. “I want my guests to taste the eel’s natural sweetness. That is my version of dessert.”

CHAPTER V

PREPARATIONS & TECHNIQUE FOR OMAKASE, PART I: RICE, FISH AND MISO SOUP

こだわり

シェフ・タツの鮨への思い

Transparency is a concept Chef Tatsu firmly believes in. “I do not hide anything,” he says, “I want to teach others, so they can make wonderful sushi anywhere in the world.” He is well-suited for the role, having studied to be a schoolteacher. He welcomes questions, offers thorough explanations for every step of his process, even records tutorials for distribution on channels like Instagram or YouTube. Unlike his predecessors, he does not believe in nusumu, a Japanese term describing learning through watching and copying, likening it to “stealing,” but rather open communication between teacher and student. Chef Tatsu knows firsthand how difficult it is to learn in silence and how much time is lost in such a method. His promise to his fans and students is direct and genuine: “I will teach you if you are willing to learn.”

RICE

At Omakase Room, the rice is the most critical part of the sushi. Chef Tatsu uses Akita Komachi brand rice from Akita prefecture, a northern region of Japan famous for that product. When evaluating sushi rice in particular, he looks for clarity of flavor and firm structure. This way, the rice can maintain its distinct taste and stand up to the texture of the fish when served in nigiri. Compared to regular eating rice, sushi rice requires less moisture content per grain; otherwise, the final cooked product will be too soft. Chasing this perfect bite of rice is something sushi houses have been doing for decades. Some will even age rice for a year before mixing it with the new crop to tighten up the texture.

Rice must be washed before being cooked. Chef Tatsu rinses the rice for five to seven minutes with filtered water, patiently waiting until the water runoff is completely clear. He measures the rice to cooking water ratio by weight, not volume, because every rice crop is a little different and the moisture of the room can impact how each grain swells in the measuring cup. The ratio is approximately one-to-one, with just a touch less water to ensure the rice is firm after cooking. Traditionally rice will be cooked in a large metal pot over a gas fire, but because Omakase Room is an electric-only establishment, Chef Tatsu uses two high-end rice cookers from Zojirushi instead. He settled on his current version, a high pressure and high heat model, after testing three different rice cookers, each at a $1,000 price point.

After the cook cycle, the rice is transferred to a wooden hangiri, a flat-bottomed barrel made from cypress and bound with copper. The hangiri is often larger than the cooking pot, as its broad, round base allows the rice to cool appropriately. Chef Tatsu adds a precise mixture of red vinegar, cane sugar, Hakata sea salt and Yamagata kombu salt to his sushi rice, a ratio that took him two years to finalize. “I have many, many ratios of vinegar and salts on my fridge at home,” he laughs. He uses red vinegar, made from sake lees, because it is milder than the more-common white rice vinegar. The seasonings are folded gently into the rice with a shamoji (wooden rice paddle) to prevent any grains from breaking. The Japanese term for this motion translates roughly to “cutting,” as the motion passes through the rice in even lines instead of mixing in a circular motion, which would result in sticky and mushy rice. It is essential to finish this process quickly – Chef Tatsu takes about two and a half minutes – as the rice will become messier and more difficult to work with over time. He tastes each batch of rice to ensure the flavor is correct, then covers the hangiri with a damp, linen-like towel to keep the moisture and temperature of the rice steady. Folding the rice throughout the night’s service is also necessary to keep the rice at all corners of the hangiri equally moist.

After repeated experiments, Chef Tatsu has found the ideal waiting time between finishing the seasoning and serving the rice to be 40 minutes. If keeping to such a schedule is not possible, he will taste and adjust the rice’s seasoning as the night wears on, adding vinegar if necessary as the acidity will lessen over time. However, he does not add salt or sugar as that will negatively impact the taste of the fish. The rice is very much a living, and breathing thing tended to everyday; Chef Tatsu still tastes his rice at the end of every service to ensure consistency all year round.

FISH & SHELLFISH

The techniques behind preparing fish for sushi takes years to develop, and potentially can never be mastered. Chef Tatsu will often say he is always still learning, searching for the pinnacle of sushi making. Every weekday, Mr. Ishida of Apollo Fish Company will deliver his hand-picked choices from the morning's fish market to Omakase Room based on Chef Tatsu's order from the night before. The fish is subject to change, as Mr. Ishida will not buy any fish he deems substandard, even if it is the pieces asked for. It is this reason Chef Tatsu trusts Mr. Ishida so thoroughly, but also why many times it is a surprise when he opens up his fish cooler for the day.

Chef Tatsu works almost exclusively with whole fish, with a few exceptions for large catches such as bluefin tuna. He wants each fish as untouched as possible before it reaches him, so even with tuna, he buys the entire back third of the fish to break down in-house. The first steps are straightforward: scaling, gutting, cutting off the head, washing the blood. These steps must be done quickly to minimize the fish sitting too long at room temperature, and very thoroughly as leftover blood results in the infamous "fishy" flavor. At Omakase Room, this entire process takes less than five minutes per fish.

Determining which fish should be served immediately, aged, or frozen is an art in and of itself. Fish meant for the same-day service will be filleted and placed in cedar wood holding boxes in the refrigerator. While buying fresh fish is always a requirement, not all fish is meant to be used freshly-caught. It may be counterintuitive, but certain fish lack nuance when it is too fresh and instead need to be aged for days – or even weeks – before being served. "Fresh fish is about texture, not taste," Chef Tatsu explains, "for fish's umami to come out, it needs time." Scientifically, he is referring to the inosinic and glutamic acids that are released in the fish's flesh with age, which contribute the sensation of umami when eating.

Age is also the primary difference between fish used for sashimi versus sushi. The goal for sashimi style fish is freshness and texture, so sashimi chefs hone their knife skills, not their aging techniques. "The quality of sashimi comes down to the knife," Chef Tatsu explains, "how sharp the knife is, how smoothly the chef cuts the fish." If the fish is sliced on too dull a knife, tiny micro abrasions pepper the surface and allow excess soy sauce to be absorbed. The thickness of each slice is also different – generally speaking, sashimi slices are thicker than those for nigiri. Although the two may seem similar, to a trained palate the difference is night and day. "That is why when guests ask for sashimi, even though I want to make them happy, I have to tell them 'fish prepared for sushi cannot accommodate sashimi'."

"HOW SHARP THE KNIFE IS, HOW SMOOTHLY THE CHEF CUTS THE FISH."

To age each piece of fish, Chef Tatsu wraps each fillet with Bounty paper towels and plastic wrap so no air can penetrate the fish. It is then placed in the refrigerator and monitored closely, with periodic tasting checks for progression of flavor. Finally, certain fish are frozen to be served or aged at a later time. This is done only in a super freezer, a kitchen essential among sushi chefs. Chef Tatsu uses the standard variety, which cools foods to -61F (compared to a maximum -20F for most commercial freezers), to preserve the majority of his fish. Tuna is the only species given the special treatment in the medical super freezer, which can chill items to -90F. Under these circumstances, fish can be frozen for up to two years without any negative impact on quality. While it may be tempting to begin buying in bulk and freeze all incoming fish, Chef Tatsu recommends only freezing what needs to be frozen. It is best to develop a consistent system of supply and demand, so no fish sits unnecessarily long in the freezer, fridge, or sushi counter.

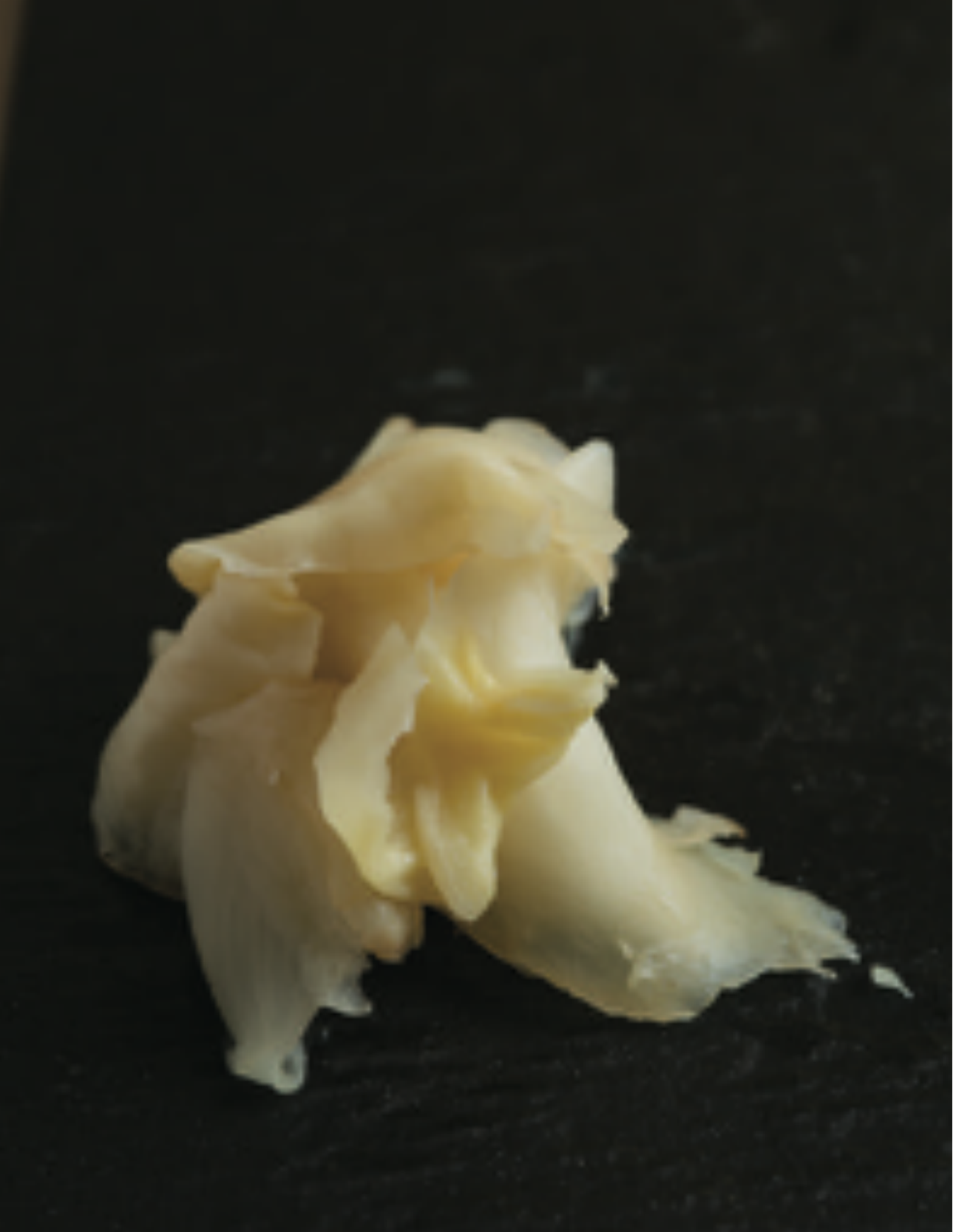
Shellfish and eel are the few items that deviate from this course. Chef Tatsu generally does not age his shellfish, treating his squid, octopus, shrimp, clams, oysters and scallops day-of. Some processes are straightforward: Chef Tatsu's cherished Miyagi oysters and sea scallops are shucked, washed in salt water to remove any shell particles, then washed again in fresh water before being served fleshy and raw. Ika (squid) has its fin and tentacles separated out and its quill and ink sac removed before Chef Tatsu peels away the outer skin to reveal a pearly white body. The most time-consuming of the group is tako (octopus), which must be massaged in salt to tenderize the meat and remove small particles of dirt inside its suction cups, then blanched in hojicha (roasted green tea) to naturally brighten its cooked color from brown to red. After cooling, its arms are sliced in a wavy pattern to ensure proper molding for nigiri and allow necessary surface area for the nikiri to stay put. Sea scallops are presented with cross-hatches for a similar reason – so a brush of nikiri can adequately seep through. On the other hand, squid requires crosshatching for a different reason. The miniscule cuts on each of its four muscle layers transform an otherwise chewy bite into something that is melt-in-the-mouth tender.

Chef Tatsu uses only one knife, his fuguhiki, to cut fish during service. Its long, slender shape and sharp blade allows for even the thinnest of cuts. Each piece of fish receives a small dab of freshly grated wasabi before its finishing treatment, usually a brush of nikiri or sprinkling of specialty salt. Finding the right pairing of seasoning or accompaniments for each fish and grounding it with the perfect pillow of rice is a continual quest – something Chef Tatsu describes wistfully as the "endless pursuit."

MISO SOUP

Omakase Room's miso soup is served near the end of the omakase to finish the dinner and warm up the guest's body. It is the only hot item served at Omakase Room, and Chef Tatsu treats it with the same level of scrutiny as each course of sushi. He starts the process at a consistent time each morning with the ritual of dashi (fish stock). Large strips of Japanese kombu (edible kelp) are hydrated in cold water for an hour, then heated in hot water for five to six minutes right up until the boiling point. The kombu is never boiled, for that changes its scent and adds a bitter quality to the stock. Once the kombu has offered its flavor, it is removed from the stock and bonito flakes take its place. The bonito flakes are added to the stock very briefly – a mere 15 seconds – before being strained out.

The soup's main color and flavor is derived from Kyo Sakura red miso from Kyoto. Every region in Japan has its type of miso, ranging anywhere from sweet white miso to dark red varieties. Although the Aichi prefecture is more well-known for red miso, Chef Tatsu found he preferred the Kyoto-based version for its richness and deep aroma. He whisks the miso paste into the hot water through a strainer, a trick he learned when he was working at the kaiseki restaurant Nihonbashi-Aoi in Tokyo. The amount of miso added to the soup is variable, so Chef Tatsu tastes the soup after each addition. "The bowl must be warm to taste the soup properly," he instructs, rinsing the bowl with hot soup a few times before portioning a small taste for himself. The final touch is a few pieces of diced soft tofu and thinly sliced chives. "The chives are subtler in flavor than scallions," Chef Tatsu explains, "I prefer them – but every chef is different."



PART II: SUSHI ACCOMPANIMENTS & EQUIPMENT

The stars of omakase are fish and rice, but they can't shine without a well of other ingredients, aided with equipment. At Omakase Room, Chef Tatsu samples and selects each piece of the supporting party thoughtfully, and keeps his mind open for enticing changes or additions in the future.

EGGS

Tamago translates to “egg” in Japanese, but more often refers to a Japanese sweet egg omelet. It is one of the only pieces of an omakase not from the ocean, typically served last as a dessert of sorts. Sushi Master Jiro of Jiro Dreams of Sushi popularized the custard-like tamago, a version akin to a sponge cake, stuffed with shrimp and fluffed with Japanese mountain yam. After years of preparing this style of tamago at Sushi Yasuda, Chef Tatsu has purposefully reverted to the classic omelet-like tamago, a simpler style composed of only eggs and seasonings. The two are very different in almost every way, starting with the preparation method. The custard-like tamago has its ingredients mixed; then the batter is grilled lightly to create a final appearance similar to a castella cake. The omelet-like tamago is combined with seasonings, poured into a copper makiyakinabe (rectangular omelet pan specifically for tamago), and cooked in several steps with each layer tamago continuously rolled onto the next. Rolling the tamago like so forms concentric rings within the omelet that can be examined when sliced, an easy testament to the sushi chef’s tamago folding abilities.

Tatsu's tamago is comprised of organic, cage-free, vege- tarian-fed, fertile brown eggs, boasting luscious orange yolks. "$24 for a dozen eggs is expensive," he acknowledges, "but they are special. The egg whites are delicious. Even the density is different." He uses a paring knife to cut the eggs with sake, sugar, salt, soy sauce and bonito-only dashi. The motion is not a whip or whisk, but rather a cut-and-fold to keep the yolks and whites from separating. The makiyakinabe is evenly greased with vegetable oil and heated over high heat for three to four minutes before the first ladle of egg base is added. The thin layer cooks quickly; Chef Tatsu diffuses any bubbles with wooden chopsticks before rolling the omelet onto itself three times and pushing it to the back of the pan. Another ladle of egg base and the process is repeated, bringing the first batch further into the center of the omelet. After four cycles, Chef Tatsu uses a square bamboo lid to define each edge of the omelet, including flipping it over and pressing the bottom sides.

"There should still be moisture inside the omelet," Chef Tatsu explains, slicing a piece of tamago and squeezing it gently. A few beads emerge from the center to illustrate his point. "You cannot touch it when it is hot; it must cool completely." Tamago is prepared a day in advance, wrapped carefully and sliced to order. While it is not usually part of the omakase line-up due to dietary restrictions, when requested it is the only piece where guests can dictate its serving style. Tamago is typically served as nigiri with a small belt of nori at the waist, but Chef Tatsu also offers it plain, with just seaweed, or even with wasabi. For tamago enthusiasts, this egg piece is the culmination of a great omakase

SALT

Chef Tatsu uses six different kinds of salt at Omakase Room. Every salt has a distinct application, with particular salts paired solely with one or two pieces of fish. His staple is sea salt from Hakata, in Fukuoka prefecture, a finely ground salt used to season the sushi rice. From the opposite side of the country, the Japanese salt from Kochi prefecture tops pieces of squid and white fish. Chef Tatsu loves the flavor but found the crystals just a tad too moist, so he dehydrates then grinds the salt in a suri bachi (Japanese mortar). The last white salt is from Wales, with a sublime salinity that pairs well with shrimp and clam.

There is only one blended salt in his repertoire, a seaweed salt from Yamagata prefecture, mixed with dried kombu powder for a mineral-forward taste and smell. The mixture is used for the sushi rice alongside the sea salt. The salt exclusively for anago is a light pastel pink, harvested from the Murray River in Australia, chosen for its matching terroir to the eel. Finally, the black salt from Cypress is the most ostentatious of the group, with a triangular crystalline structure and sleek shine. One deliberate piece tops the mid-meal Miyagi oyster, delivering both crunch and salinity.

WASABI

Wasabi may be ubiquitous among sushi joints, but they are far from being the same. The more common misho variety grows easily and quickly, making it an affordable choice for many restaurants. The mazuma species, on the other hand, is a complicated plant requiring a precise environment and longer growing times, thereby making it more expensive and difficult to procure. Chef Tatsu's mazuma hails from the Shizuoka prefecture, along the Pacific coast of Japan and home to Mt. Fuji. It looks almost identical to misho, but its differing personality is evident upon the first sniff. It also tastes very different, with its lower water content giving it a more concentrated heat and subtle sweetness.

Chef Tatsu grates his mazuma on a copper grater instead of the more prevalent sharkskin graters. "I think it brings out the taste more," he explains. The grater is not a specific brand, found easily in Tokyo's Kappabashi (Kitchen Town) neighborhood, but used with precision. Wasabi must be grated right before use, as oxidation dulls its spiciness and aroma. Chef Tatsu grinds a small mound of mazuma twice during every service. Every piece of nigiri receives a dab of wasabi where the fish adheres to the rice, but fattier species will be given a touch more to help cut through its oilier taste and mouthfeel.

GARI (PICKLED GINGER)

The quintessential palate cleanser during an omakase is the gari. “We go through mounds of it every night,” Ms. Hidaka says with a chuckle. The young ginger comes to Omakase Room from Japan, sliced and held in a light brine. Chef Tatsu washes it for three hours, stripping it of any flavors added to its original form. “I only want the guests to taste the ginger,” Chef Tatsu says. He only adds two ingredients to his pickled ginger – Japanese cane sugar and white rice vinegar – and lets the mixture sit for two days. The resulting ginger is crisp and elegant, just sweet enough to temper the tingle of heat. How much ginger is suitable for omakase depends on the guest, but Chef Tatsu implores, “please eat it only between pieces of sushi.”

NIKIRI (SOY SAUCE MIXTURE)

Nikiri has the complicated task of being unassuming enough to play the supporting role for various pieces of nigiri, yet noteworthy enough to be a sushi chef’s signature seasoning. Chef Tatsu’s nikiri is straightforward: a blend of soy sauce, sake, kombu and bonito that marinates for two to three days. He boils only the sake – to remove alcohol – and lets it cool to room temperature before adding soy sauce in a four-to-one ratio of soy to sake. He then adds three pieces of kombu, resized from one large strip into three-inch squares, and bonito flakes. The bonito is wrapped akin to a bouquet garni for easy removal after the procedure is complete and the nikiri tastes to Chef Tatsu’s liking. He then glazes each piece of fish with just one stroke of nikiri before presenting it to the guest.

NORI

Nori (dried seaweed sheets) is used in a few select pieces at Omakase Room: ikura, temaki (hand roll) and tamago. Unbeknownst to most, Japanese nori – the majority hailing from Ariake Bay in the Saga prefecture – is inspected and graded, with its final ranking determining its use. The process turning seaweed into nori is similar to papermaking: the susabi variety of seaweed is harvested, chopped, molded into sheets about the size of a door and heated to dry. Susabi is then divided into 15 distinct classes, with only the top five designated acceptable for sushi making. Anything below ten is reserved for seaweed snacks. When selecting nori for Omakase Room, Chef Tatsu tasted all top five and ultimately picked number two. The most important thing to him was the guarantee of no acid treatment of the nori at any stage in the cycle. "The taste is very different – astringent," Chef Tatsu describes, and on a holistic level the acid runoff will contaminate the water and harm the ecosystem.

KNIVES

Chef Tatsu has three special knives for regular use. His fuguhiki is his prized possession; a thin, narrow blade only used to slice neta during service. While the fuguhiki was traditionally used for blowfish sashimi, as blowfish requires ultra-thin slices to be appetizing, Chef Tatsu has repurposed it as his essential tool for all neta. The fuguhiki is similar in shape to its larger cousin the yanagi, or willow knife – named after its resemblance to a willow leaf – more frequently wielded by sushi and sashimi chefs to slice fish. In comparison, Chef Tatsu's fuguhiki is slimmer at the hilt and smaller in shape, spanning only eight to nine inches versus a yanagi's 10 to 12. Even the bladesmith was surprised at his request at first, as few other chefs use knives of this size. "I must focus on speed and precision, not the length," Chef Tatsu explains, then adds jokingly, "much like the best samurais who only used small knives to be quick and nimble."

His other two knives serve specific purposes as well. His eel knife, the unagi-saki, is a heavy piece with a single bevel, pointed tip and uniform thickness along the spine. The knife's weight and shape allows the chef enough control to fillet the writhing eel as well as pierce and peel the slippery skin. The hefty deba, akin to a meat cleaver, is used for fish prep and particularly well-suited for bones and cartilage.

All knives are regularly sharpened, especially the fuguhiki, due to its heavy use during service. Chef Tatsu opts for a natural stone from the Kyoto mountains as his primary sharpener, but supplements it with two high-quality, factory-made whetstones. The roughness of each whetstone is indicated by numerical hundreds, becoming finer as the number increases. Chef Tatsu starts with a stone of 1,000 grind and ends at a 5,000 grind. "Always move from rough to fine," Chef Tatsu says, "and soak the stones in water before use." Be prepared: a typical factory-made stone will require an hour of soaking, compared to just five minutes for natural stone.

CHAPTER VI

THE OMAKASE ROOM EXPERIENCE

こだわり

シェフ・タツの鮨への思い

Omakase Room by Tatsu is housed in a serene, subterranean space nestled in the busy hum of West Village. For anyone not purposefully looking for it, the entrance is easy to miss. “The restaurant is like a secret,” Ms. Hidaka describes, “only for those who seek us out.” A discreet flight downstairs from 10th street brings you to a glass-paned door, adorned with the Japanese words for omakase in soothing brushstroke calligraphy. The entryway is guarded by an andon (Japanese paper lantern), handmade from Kyoto, and a tiny bowl of mori jio (purifying salt). The andon harkens back to the Edo era; it is shaped like a tall pyramid and encased in a copper weave. Despite being electric, it flickers gently like candlelight. The small mound of mori jio is constructed in a cone, a typical Japanese practice to keep away evil spirits and bring in good luck for the household or business. Just as the salt is meant to purify and cleanse, the mori jio must also be refreshed with new salt every day.

Guests are greeted by every member of the Omakase Room family with a cheerful “ira shai mase,” or “welcome,” and light bow. In Japan, this is a customary salutation for guests and colleagues alike and imbues respect and appreciation. Otherwise, the space is quiet. There is no background music beyond the steady din behind the sushi counter and Chef Tatsu’s polite explanations of each fish. There are no flowers or other scents that may interrupt the guest’s olfactory palate. The lighting is clean and white, giving guests a clear view of their surroundings: floor-to-ceiling bamboo walls and shelves, a long sushi bar made of cypress, framed originals of the land deeds from Chef Tatsu’s family restaurant in Japan. The lighting serves as Chef’s promise of transparency as well – no subpar knife skills or sushi imperfections can hide in this pure, white glow.

The table setting is neutral and unassuming: a black wooden mat to mark each seat, bamboo chopsticks on a pebble-shaped holder and delicately light water glasses. Each guest is offered an oshibori (hand towel) fresh from the warmer, scented with cypress. This is an important tradition, a way to remove the stress of the day and bring guests to this space, this moment. Ms. Hidaka attentively watches each guest settle into their seats to see if anyone is left-handed, in which she immediately switches glasses, flatware, napkins to match. The only thing that doesn’t change positions is the gari, which always remains to the right of each guest’s sushi plate. For those who eat sushi with their fingers, a folded yubifuki (finger cloth) sits to the side of the mat, ready for a quick wipe between pieces. “If you prefer chopsticks, that’s okay too,” Chef Tatsu says amicably, pulling out a pair of his own to demonstrate proper technique. “Pick it up from the side, horizontally – not from the top down.” When asked if fish or rice should touch the tongue first, he laughs. “Some guests like to flip the sushi, but I ask – would you flip a hot dog?”

Chef Tatsu encourages newcomers to converse with him about their preferences before he starts preparing their omakase. "I will always listen and watch to see what the guest likes," he says, "because I am making each piece of sushi just for them." His ultimate goal is to have every guest in a peaceful state of mind to enjoy the omakase to its fullest. He aims to convey approachability with his image and mannerisms, smiling good-naturedly throughout the evening and even hamming up a joke or two. "I don't want guests to be nervous," Chef Tatsu explains, "I want them to know they can ask me questions and talk to me." But he does not impose; if he sees guests are uninterested or occupied in deep conversation, he will politely offer the sushi without interrupting with a description. Every service, Chef Tatsu's meticulous observations direct everything from when he serves a piece of sushi to the size of each sushi-meshi (sushi rice). For couples eating at different speeds, he alternates the pace of each piece to match one guest half the time, so neither party feels rushed. For guests who appear to be getting full, he will lessen the portion of sushi-meshi just a hair, so they can enjoy the entire progression without feeling overstuffed.

Everything at Omakase Room is served in its final state, with no additional components needed. The sushi looks deceptively plain, as Chef Tatsu is not concerned with extravagant presentation. "I want my sushi to be simple and wonderful," he says, "I want to wow my guests with the taste." Chef Tatsu shows his respect towards the guest by preparing each nigiri completely and asks guests to respond in-kind by abstaining from extra soy sauce or wasabi. The art of Chef Tatsu's omakase art lies in the subtlety of every fish, a balance easily overthrown with any unintended additions. "The most important thing I tell my guests is to eat each piece immediately," he says, "the fish and rice are just right at that point, please don't wait."

"I ALWAYS WILL LISTEN AND WATCH TO SEE WHAT THE GUEST LIKES, BECAUSE I AM MAKING EACH PIECE OF SUSHI JUST FOR THEM"

A restaurant is not complete without beverages, and Omakase Room takes its offerings seriously. Beer, sparkling wines and white wines are all offered, but the sake list is the highlight of the menu. All the sake offerings are lightly dry, smooth and crisp. Chef Tatsu chose these specifically to pair with the omakase, their mild flavors working as an accompaniment, not a distraction, to the sushi. “I especially enjoy junmai,” Chef Tatsu says, “it complements the flavor of the rice.” Junmai is a classification of sake made only from pure rice wine, with no additions of distilled alcohol. Further specifications within junmai revolve around the percentage of each rice grain that is milled away before the fermentation begins – junmai starts at 30% and rises to 60% for junmai daiginjo. Chef Tatsu opts for junmai, which showcases a more pronounced rice flavor, when eating sushi but something closer to a junmai daiginjo during kaiseki. Sake is served both hot and chilled, poured from custom ceramic decanters boasting an open-top design and gracefully long neck. The matching glasses are small and dainty, meant for thoughtful sips. Pairing sake provides great pleasure for any omakase, but Chef Tatsu urges guests to know their limits. “Please, don’t drink too much – then you can’t taste anything.”

The finesse of Japanese hospitality is best captured in the fact guests never need to ask for anything. Glasses are filled quietly anytime one dips below half-full; a single grain of rice on the yubifuki merits immediate replacement. If a guest appears to be jostling something in their mouth, Ms. Hidaka helpfully brings them a toothpick, individually packaged in colorful origami. She is especially alert for sighs, usually of contentment, or a slight flushing in the cheeks indicating fullness. Like Chef Tatsu, she keeps a diary as well, writing down guest names, drink orders, special requests. This way, she can set the scene for repeat guests before they even arrive. “If they are left-handed, I’ll have that arranged,” Ms. Hidaka explains, “if they consistently order a certain sake, I’ll remember and offer that bottle again.”

After the full 18-piece series, Chef Tatsu always asks if guests would like any other sushi. Some want to revisit a favorite cut of fish; others to try a new varietal they haven’t tasted before. If a guest is unsure about what to choose but keen for another bite, Chef Tatsu may ask for their favorite piece and offer his suggestions. An hour and a half goes by swiftly in this tranquil setting, and many don’t want to leave. As guests put on their coats and straighten their bags, the whole Omakase Room family will bow again in thanks. “Arigato go zaimashita” or “thank you for your patronage” is the courteous goodbye. If a guest wants to answer in kind, the typical Japanese response is “gochisosama deshita,” which translates literally to “I have feasted!” but figuratively means “thank you for the delicious meal.”

お任せ

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