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Food From a Perfectionist Does Not Come Cheap, or Easy

By ALEX WITCHEL

EARLY in my conversation with Masa Takayama, whose English comes and goes, he frowned. "What is 'meticulous'?" he asked.

I laughed. "You," I answered.

Mr. Takayama, the chef and owner of the newly opened Masa in the Time Warner Center, made his reputation at his Beverly Hills restaurant, Ginza Sushiko, as a perfectionist sushi chef whose genius veered from preparations of fugu, the poisonous blowfish considered a Japanese delicacy, to foie gras, cooked in such a traditionally Japanese fashion that the French would barely recognize it. For 20 years, his food has been a particular passion for a select group of diners who embrace his version of meticulous and all that it entails.

First, it means that 90 percent of the fish he serves is flown in from Japan. And that will cost you. The prix fixe per person at Masa starts at \$300, and depending on the ingredients in season, can go as high as \$500. That's without drinks, tax or tip.

Second, there is no menu. Mr. Takayama serves what he wants, though he also keeps a book in which he records what each customer eats at each meal and his or her reactions. Third, the restaurant has 26 seats and accepts reservations during the first week of the month only, for the following month, and requires them to be guaranteed with a credit card. If you cancel less than 48 hours before your reserved time, he charges \$100 per person. Once you're there, however, the place is all yours. Like Rao's, there is only one seating a night.

"Once a customer come to my restaurant, they get it," Mr. Takayama said.

He has also opened Bar Masa next door, a slightly larger, less meticulous version of Masa that seats 13 at the bar and 26 in a lounge area and takes no reservations. A sushi or sashimi tasting goes for \$85 and one of the chef's signature dishes, uni with black truffle risotto, costs \$34.

"Today, in the newspapers and magazines, the first sentence is, my restaurant is expensive," Mr. Takayama said with a sigh. "The major cost is getting the ingredients from Japan direct. At Bar Masa, I use same ingredients. The sushi, sashimi over there, that's a bargain."

In order to operate these restaurants in New York, Mr. Takayama closed Ginza Sushiko. "My customer is expecting me to cook," he said. "Masa not here? I cannot do that."

Mr. Takayama said that he built his clientele mostly through word of mouth. "My customer talks to a friend on the same level, then they come," he said. "I spent a long time building customers in Beverly Hills slowly."

He seems to want to do the same thing here, considering that the phone number for Masa is not listed. (It is 212-823-9800.) But if you call for a reservation, you could be turned down. "My manager was on the phone," he said, "and people called for reservation but say they don't like raw fish. I said, 'Don't give reservation. I don't want to waste my time.' When people call we ask if allergic to something, the only way to find out in beginning what kind of people they are. Sixty-eight percent of people love this kind of food. If they say, 'I only eat steak,' 'I only eat French,' we say please don't come."

If, right about now, you're thinking that Mr. Takayama sounds a bit much, you would be correct when it comes to his food and service, but other than that, he is actually pleasant, relaxed company. He sat in a chair pushed back from the sushi bar, itself a \$60,000 piece of rare hinoki wood from Japan, and the smell of new wood mingled with the smell of fresh fish to create a briny whiff of the outdoors.

"Hinoki wood most expensive," he said. "Hard, strong, no bugs. A 100,000-year-old column still there from Japanese emperor's house, so most durable. It spiritual for me, my spirit, my philosophy based on Japanese culture. My job to show American, European people this very, very clean food."

As he spoke he sat with one arm tucked inside his samue, which are work clothes worn by Buddhist monks when cleaning in and around their temples. A cotton robe tied across his chest flowed long over loose pants down to his clogs. The look was part monk's robes, part surgical scrubs.

But this monk has a twinkle in his eye. He laughs often, plays golf and runs marathons (his best time was in New York, 4 hours 50 minutes). He is also a potter who designed the plates at Masa, along with the wooden sake cups. He sculpted the other sake cups from bamboo.

"I was 10 years on Rodeo Drive and I still wanted to do something in New York," he said. "I was almost 50. I don't want to miss in my life."

Mr. Takayama is separated from his wife, he said. Two of his children are in college, another has graduated. "The kids older, another reason to move away now," he said.

Soon enough, talk of moving to New York and eating here steered him back to the subject of restaurants. "Today in New York people all try to do something different," he said. "I went to famous French restaurant, I don't say name. I have scallops, maybe five or six different flavors in the sauce. I couldn't taste the scallops. The waiter describes the dish, I call it singing: Dadada da da da. Like listening to music, you know?"

"It was not the right temperature, flavor or taste," he went on. "I disappointed. I love sauce, too, but not to cover the ingredients. These unusual combination try to make different from other restaurants and at beginning I was very afraid to open here. Have to do same thing to try be unusual and stand out. But my philosophy is I cannot do that."

Thomas Keller, the chef at Per Se at the Time Warner Center and the fabled French Laundry in the Napa Valley, who invited Mr. Takayama to join him here, is a devoted fan of his restaurant.

"It's one of those experiences where if you have to ask how much you probably shouldn't go," Mr. Keller said. "The food is astounding but that's only part of it. Masa brings you into his world and it's hard to put a price on something like that. You're feeling the sushi bar, almost a satiny kind of feeling, you're watching when he grills a matsutake mushroom in front of you and he puts parchment on top, the paper turns colors, he lifts it and you see a beautiful silhouette. It's almost like art. But some people will go and not be ready for it, not understand it. He's very specific. It's like going to see a great performer."

But as Mr. Takayama sees it, it's about staying simple. "My job the same as carpenter," he said. "What kind of house you want to build? What kind of food you want to make? You think your ingredients, your structure. Simple. These Japanese restaurants in New York mix in some other style of food and call it influence, right? I don't like that."

No, but what about his uni with black truffle risotto? Isn't that an Italian influence? He shook his head. "Japanese have that kind of dish very close to risotto, call ojiya. I use Japanese rice, very moist, sweeter, a silky kind of rice. I use foie gras but with a Japanese sense. Shabu shabu is style of eating where dip pieces of meat in broth, dip in sauce and eat. I take foie gras, naked, dip in hot broth, slightly poach it. Dip in tosazu sauce, with bonito flake. Gets soft, melt in mouth." He made an expression of bliss. "If I sautéed it with sauce," he went on, "I have to start singing, right? You get it?" He laughed.

Mr. Takayama has been cooking since he was a teenager. He grew up in a small town one hour north of Tokyo, he said, where his parents owned a fish shop and a catering business. He, his brother and three sisters all helped in the store, loading the fish into the display cases before school. After school, Mr. Takayama would get on his bike and deliver sashimi his father had made. In the spring, which is wedding season in Japan, the family catered celebrations, typically five-course dinners for 200 guests. "That day I don't go to high school," he said. "We cook the fish, sea bream on charcoal, prepare the dishes."

After he graduated, he moved to Tokyo where he worked at Ginza, a well-known sushi restaurant, as a dishwasher and bathroom cleaner. "This is serious job, like the army," he said. "It's how you start. Every single thing have to be perfect."

He became a sushi chef there, but eventually wanted to do things his own way. He left after eight years and arrived in Los Angeles in 1980, working in a number of sushi restaurants before opening his own. After eight years on Wilshire Boulevard he moved Ginza Sushiko to Rodeo Drive in 1992. When he decided to relocate to New York, he sold the restaurant to his sous-chef, which in the same location is now called Urasawa.

Mr. Takayama moved here last September. He said he is looking forward to his parents' first visit, though he has no desire to return to Japan. "In Japanese sushi restaurants, a lot of sushi chefs talk too much," he said. " 'This fish from there,' 'This very expensive.' Same thing, start singing. And a lot have that fish case in front of them, cannot see what chef do. I'm not going to hide anything, right?" He swept his arm across the bar made of the emperor's wood: "This is it. This is sushi. Very simple."