



TRAVEL JAPAN

FISHY GOINGS ON IN JAPANESE PLAICES

*Ex-banker and hardcore foodie **NEIL DAVEY** is fit to burst after tasting some of the best food Tokyo has to offer – including the potentially fatal blowfish. Hope you're hungry – this is going to blow your mind*

SINCE MY FIRST days of employment at the Bank of Tokyo, Japan has been at the top of my wish list of places to visit. But I never quite got there. Instead, I experienced the country vicariously through its food, initially via disappointing dull supermarket sushi selections, but latterly via Piccadilly's So restaurant, where the canteen-esque décor actually masks some of the most consistently good Japanese food the capital has to offer.

Thus, when Tetsuro Hama, the owner of So, suggested joining him on an “inspiration-seeking trip” to Tokyo alongside head chef Kaoru Yamamoto, the decision wasn’t exactly the toughest one I’ve had to make in my life.

Five days can never be enough to see Tokyo – the wonderment, the contradictions, the glorious insanity, the etiquette, the beauty, the whole other worldliness – but we tried.

Sprinting for trains became a very familiar pastime; ditto to accelerating through *kaiseki* tasting menus. There was barely a moment of those 120 hours where my eyes weren’t popping, or at least two of my senses weren’t simultaneous reeling. It was fun stuff.

This included many hours when I should have been asleep both there and back home, thanks to a curious mix of jet lag and my brain making vague attempts to make sense of what I’d just experienced. It was all a bit odd.

Several weeks on, I’m still struggling, even resorting to Venn diagrams to explain so much of the experience, particularly the food. A dish of wheat gluten in mustard sauce, part of a vegetarian *kaiseki* in a monastery in Kyoto, ➤



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► sits at the point where pasta meets jelly baby. Another dish sits where crème caramel meets fish by-product we probably didn't want to think about. Mr Hama, serving as our tireless translator, made gestures suggesting it came from somewhere around the groin so we clung to the notion the stringy textures therein were roe rather than, ahem, from another aquatic gender that doesn't bear thought.

The layout of the city means the modern frequently sits alongside the ancient. Direct from the airport – after 11 happy hours of Virgin Upper Class – we seek out such a spot. Charyu Ichimatsu, is a *ryotei* in downtown Asakusa, a formal restaurant of private dining rooms, kimono-wearing servers and a charming, peaceful courtyard garden... and 100 yards behind a busy street that brings to mind Tottenham Court Road.

It's a meal that leaves us baffled. In a good way. It's partly the time difference – we boarded a plane 11 hours ago, now it's noon the following day – but mostly it's down to the beauty, creativity and palate-challenging nature of the courses. The point of *kaiseki* is not to get all Heston-ly and dazzle with combinations of flavours. Each individual often oh-so-delicate course is a celebration of a different cooking method or, in the case of many courses over the next few days, the sushi chef's art. And that's worth waiting for.

The first course at Charyu Ichimatsu sets the tone: squares of radish, apple and salmon



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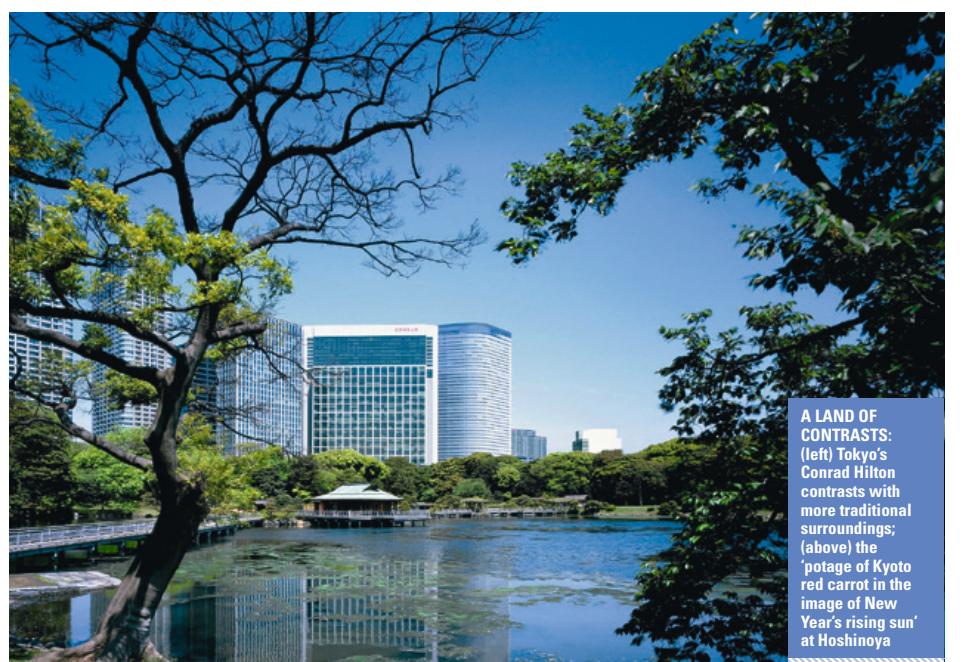
covered in 'snow' – no, not that extracurricular favourite of 1980s traders, but actually desiccated rice powder. It's pretty, witty, and a beautiful collection of textures and delicate flavours – and it's followed by more achingly attractive plates: slices of immaculate sea bass and prawns; a clear soup with a rich tranche of mackerel; a scallop of incredible sweetness; that cod, er, roe custard stuff...

It's a meal that sets the pattern for the next few days, where everything from public transport to architecture will leave me dazzled, surprised and giggling in roughly equal measure. And it's just fun to take it in.

Or, in the case of the Tsukiji fish market, to be stunned into silence. Tsukiji is several acres of pure energy and testosterone, as well as a brutal illustration of just how much we take from the sea every day. It proves to be one of several moments we're glad Messrs Hama and Yamamoto are with us, as tourists appear to be about as popular as fishing quotas, and they can explain just what we're seeing, from the band-sawing of tuna to the crates of shellfish the like of which I've never seen.

Later that day, at the Conrad Hilton (the *Lost In Translation* hotel) we get to sample fugu – blowfish – the one that, incorrectly prepared, can kill. It's a strange experience – the sashimi is almost apple-like in texture – but even with the adrenaline rush of potential death and the view over the city, it can't compete with the simplicity of that morning's meal.

While manic, Tokyo is probably too polite to be described as 'in your face' but, ►





► even so, Kyoto, with its myriad temples, proves a fascinating counterpoint to the capital. The aforementioned vegetarian lunch we enjoy at the Kanga-an Temple proves a brightly-coloured relief from the recent protein overload I have experienced.

While some of the textures are challenging – particularly a shot of potato starch and the jellied pasta feel of the wheat gluten – it's one of the prettiest meals I've ever experienced, with deep fried, night-fluorescent flowers and a ball of sweet potato mash dotted with crispy-

fried green noodles that's designed to – and does – resemble a horse chestnut. "Who needs 'meat fruit' anyway," I think.

There are similar levels of invention at Hoshinoya, where chef Ichiro Kubota brings a French influence to his ten-course *kaiseki* menu. Sadly, as inventive and frequently delicious as it all is – 'potage of Kyoto red carrot in the image of New Year's rising sun' anyone? – we're at that 'wafer-thin mint' stage, craving sleep and simplicity.

Happily, we're in the right place: Hoshinoya is a traditional *ryokan* (a type of traditional Japanese inn that originated in the 17th Century) hotel, albeit one with 21st century luxury touches. The combination of comfort, clean air and wonderful darkness means I sleep as well as I ever have, waking the following morning to the sounds of monkeys splashing in the river outside my room. It's quite simply heaven on earth.

Breakfast and lunch are taken on the hoof at Kyoto's marvellous Nishiki market, a dazzling array of so many foods I have never seen before, where Mr Yamamoto's guidance is more than welcome on this occasion.

It's a wonderfully eccentric place: the fugu shop advertises itself with a mobile of inflated



I wake the following morning to the sounds of monkeys splashing in the river just outside

blowfish carcasses in hats, another has a toy cat, that plays and sways to a Shania Twain tune, nestled between slabs of whalemeat.

It's bustling, bizarre, fascinating and frequently delicious. In short, it encapsulates everything about this small taster of Japanese life. Put it on your plate. ■

Neil Davey travelled courtesy of So Restaurant, London W1; 020 7292 0767; SORESTRAURANT.COM. Seven nights in Tokyo with Virgin Holidays, including scheduled flights with Virgin Atlantic from London Heathrow direct to Tokyo and accommodation at the Keio Plaza Hotel Tokyo, on a room-only basis with transfers included, starts from £1,399; for more information go to VIRGINHOLIDAYS.CO.UK or call 0844 557 3859. For bookings and enquiries for Hoshinoya in Kyoto, visit HOSHINOYAKYOTO.JP/EN or call +81 50 3786 0066.

