

NOBU KUALA LUMPUR

First in Southeast Asia

By Jane Bee

Started by chef Nobu Matsuhisa and international celebrity Robert De Niro in 1994 in New York, Nobu has since become a Michelin-starred titan in the world of sushi, sashimi and tempura. It took the world by storm and has since won the hearts of many food critics with its extraordinary dishes that are comforting and heavenly at the same time.

When Nobu decided to open its 29th outlet in Kuala Lumpur, food connoisseurs across the nation were excited with anticipation. After all, Nobu Kuala Lumpur will be the first branch in Southeast Asia with a dramatic 360-degree view of the KL city skyline. Nobu also brought in head chef Philip Leong who previously worked at Nobu Berkeley St to helm the KL kitchen.

Nobu is known for its unique modern Japanese cuisine, creating a genre that defies the norm of global fine dining. Known for experimentation and fluid incorporation of multicultural ingredients, Nobu seeks to

constantly push the food envelope, drawing in a wide variety of people with different taste preferences and backgrounds. It infused Japanese cuisine with Latin American flavours, thus creating dishes that are so intriguing and alluring to the palate.

No other chef can so gracefully pair the precise and delicate Japanese techniques with the colours and zest of Peruvian cuisine aside from Nobu Matsuhisa (aka Nobu-san).

One of its signature dishes, dubbed Salmon Sashimi New Style, is what many consider as extraordinary. Not only it showcases the sushi chef's knife skills and timing, this plate of sashimi is designed to suit palates that shy away from raw fish. The sashimi are flash-seared with sesame oil for the slightest of char that eliminates the seafood pungency without ruining its natural creaminess. The fish is then soaked in splashes of yuzu-soy emulsion and topped with thin slivers of green onion – offering the diner a glimpse of aquatic paradise.

The Black Cod Miso is a dish that is synonymous with the name Nobu. Marinated in Nobu's signature miso sauce for two to three days, the Black Cod Miso presents a tender and succulent piece of roasted cod fish with a distinctive texture and robust flavour. This particular dish never ceases to amaze the palates of diners who visit Nobu restaurants around the world.

Its Chilean Sea Bass with Jalapeno Miso and ais kacang is worth checking out as well. The ais kacang, for example, is a lovely concoction of shaved Calpico ice topped with caramelised yuzu lemon, cincau, azuki beans and house-made green tea mochi. These two dishes are examples of the perfect infusion of Malaysian-Japanese influenced cuisine.

And these are just a few of the dishes that wow food connoisseurs.

Everything about Nobu is perfection – from the food to the service and the ambiance. Unlike its New York or Vegas counterpart that



incorporates edgier and sleek looks, Nobu KL chooses to play with the wood. From the casual sushi bar area, lush private dining area and to the club member area, wood is used in various forms and displays a various degrees of dimness. In an instant, patrons never fail to feel that they are whisked away to Japan from the moment they step into Nobu. Not only that, patrons will be able to enjoy the naked view of the Petronas Twin Towers as well as a sweeping view of Kuala Lumpur.

Splendid food, excellent service and spectacular view – one can definitely expect an unforgettable dining experience at Nobu.

Chef Philip Leong

One thing for sure, chef Philip Leong is not your typical-looking chef. With his dreadlocks and tattoos, he might raise a lot of eyebrows. But that did not stop the small town lad from making a name for himself as one of the celebrity chefs in town.

Looking at where he is now, success is sweet. However, behind the sweet success, lies a long journey that involves a great deal of determination, patience, perseverance and courage to pursue his passion in culinary art.

Before becoming a chef, he was an architect. Leong had always wanted to be involved in the designing field. He pursued his studies in interior architecture at Lim Kok Wing University. However, he decided to take a gap year between his studies and moved to New York to be with his mother.

Leong would consider it as a coincidence that he ended up working at a traditional sushi restaurant. He started off as a sushi helper and learned all the skills to make sushi in a very conventional way. He spent the first six months just cleaning and sharpening the chef's knives and taking care of the sharpening stone. From there, he moved on to washing and polishing plates before spending another three months washing only sushi rice. Leong then spent months learning how to cut thin slices of spring onion, cucumber, white radish and carrot.

It was from there that Leong developed a passion for Japanese cuisine.

"Japanese cuisine is not complicated. And yet, there's a lot of stories behind each dish. I like the way I was taught there – the appreciation of the kitchen tools and everything that you put on the plate as well as how the process itself is more important than the end product.

"It would normally take 10 to 15 years of experience to be qualified as a sushi chef. Even now, I wouldn't call myself a sushi chef, instead, I consider myself a sushi helper. That is because, I never really complete my training – I have the skills to make sushi, but I would need to practise the skills everyday in order for me to master it," said Leong.

He ended up spending three years working at the Japanese restaurant in New York before returning to Malaysia to complete his studies

in interior architecture. Upon graduation, Leong chose to pursue his career as an architect where he was involved in multiple projects such as the Khoo Hooi boutique as well as being part of the team that was responsible in designing the concept for Zuok Kuala Lumpur.

One would think that Leong would stick to the stable profession of an architect. However, Leong decided to drop the bomb after spending three years as an architect. He decided to give up everything he had achieved so far in his career and packed his bag to Europe to pursue a career in culinary art. He was 28 years old at that time.

"I have always like cooking and experimenting with food. So, I decided to apply for the holiday visa under the Work/Travel Programme in UK and I was granted a three-year visa," he said.

From there on, Leong embarked on a culinary journey in Europe where he learned all the cooking skills by himself and through the experience he gained along the way.

Leong secured a job at a Japanese restaurant, Itsu, in London but decided to quit after spending a month there. He then decided to travel to Berlin, Germany where he joined the Sushi Project – where a sushi store was set up behind the bar counter every weekend and people would pay for the selected sushi. He only lasted for two months in Berlin.



Rock Shrimp Tempura

COVER STORY

"I was running out of money and barely survived there. Plus, I didn't understand their language at all. Thus, I decided to return to London," said Leong.

Despite that, Leong was having difficulty landing a job in London. He finally secured a position at Yo! Sushi. But to his dismay, he found himself making sushi with a machine and there was no motivation and passion involved.

The turning point of his career came when he spotted an ad while walking around Mayfair on his off day. Nobu, then already widely known for its signature Peruvian-influenced Japanese cuisine was hiring. Leong decided to submit his resume and was called for an interview by Mark Edwards, Nobu's executive chef.

Edwards managed to convince Leong to work in the kitchen instead of being a sushi chef as the positions were all filled up. Thus, Leong found himself back to square one – as a commis at the age of 31, spending another year polishing plates and cooking food for the staff. For some people, this situation might lead to frustration and dissatisfaction.

But not for Leong.

"Even if we were just cooking food for the staff, we were actually being taught the basic skills by the head chef. However, a lot of people didn't understand it and ended up doing the job halfheartedly. There is always a reason and theory behind each lesson," he said.

Despite working with colleagues who were way younger than him at that time, Leong did not let his pride get in his way in gaining more knowledge. "I didn't feel awkward working alongside younger people at all. In fact, we actually learned from each other. They were experienced in the hot kitchen while I had the knowledge and skills in making sushi. So, we just exchanged our knowledge with each other," said Leong.

Becoming a chef requires a great amount of passion and patience. And these are the values he learned from Nobu-san himself. Under Nobu-san's guidance, Leong found himself enjoying cooking and the process of making food more than ever. From there, Leong learned about umami palate, the fifth taste. "Umami is something like MSG. Food like tomato, seaweed and miso contain natural MSG that are good for your body," he said.

When Leong first learned about the Peruvian-influenced Japanese dishes from Nobu, the taste itself excited him. He never tasted something as interesting as this before and most importantly, the flavour brought along a wave of nostalgia – reminding him of his roots back in Malaysia.

"Working in Nobu is indeed a privilege. We just have to think and take things in the positive way," said Leong.

When he was given the opportunity to lead the kitchen in Nobu Kuala Lumpur, the idea to come back to Malaysia excited him. However, that excitement came with the pressure of sourcing for the right staff and

ingredients as well. There weren't many Peruvian products and that forced them to import most of the basic ingredients needed.

Also, hiring the right staff was a daunting task. "We were looking for a passionate and patient chef. However, the people that we interviewed only make a good cook. For a cook, there's no passion involved as all he does is complete the job and collect his salary. But a chef is different – he would go out and try various kinds of food and seek to project the experience on the plate in his own style. There's no asking for overtime as all this is done purely for passion in the culinary field. That's what makes a real chef," said Leong.

To this day, Leong still practises the Japanese philosophy of continuous improvement and self-reflection. In Nobu, everyday is a learning process where everyone exchange knowledge with each other regardless of their position and they work as a team.

When asked about his lowest point in life, Leong chuckled. "I would consider my off day as my lowest point in life. Simply because I am bored and I have nothing to do! I'm the type that likes to move around so even on my off day, I would just drop by the restaurant to say hi and watch the chef prepare the food," said Leong.

When Leong is not spending his time in the kitchen, he can be found at his favourite mamak or hawker stall. "I prefer street food like Maggi mee goreng, roti canai, teh halia and wantan mee. I actually like street food instead of sitting in the restaurant," he confessed.



Main Bar