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5/18/2012 12:44:00 PM

Inside New York's Japanese Restaurant Boom

By Beth Landman

Japanese chefs in New York used to be prized more for their precision than creativity, but this year, it's clearer than ever that the cuisine has reached another level. "We have access to a greater range of ingredients like new fresh mushrooms or fruit like durian," says "Gari", who is opening two additional restaurants this spring – one in the Plaza Food Court and one in Tribeca.

Unlike traditional Japanese places in the city, which mostly offered sushi along with standard cooked dishes liked yakitori, yosenabe, teryaki and tempura, the latest crop of restaurants are unique and distinct from one another.

The wave started several months back with **Kibo**, a grand space which has a menu designed by famed chef Joel Robuchon. It features such original items as Japanese Caesar salad, maki rolls with balsamic vinegar, and curried cauliflower with edamame.

On March 9th, two disparate spots premiered simultaneously. At **Neta**, an unassuming eatery on 8th Street, alumni of **Masa** are artfully tossing crab meat with wild parsley, lacing rice with icefish, mizuna and truffles, and mixing king mushrooms with spicy fries and Serrano peppers. The melt-in-your-mouth sushi is often brushed with a subtle sauce, and omakase's go for \$95 and \$135.

Down on Rivington Street, Gaku and Christy Shabata opened a cozy spot called **Yopparai**, where they are presenting soul-warming pub food like Oden in a deep rich dashi studded with daikon and home-made fish cake. "Diners are tired of the same old rolls, and Japanese people in New York are looking for the food they grew up eating," explains Christy Shibata.

A long line of mostly Asian diners is constantly forming outside **Ootoya**, an outpost of the Japanese chain, which opened in April and serves up full basic meals at impossibly reasonable prices. A tray with grilled fish or fried chicken, vegetables, rice, soup and chawanmushi can be had for under \$20.

Just three blocks away, at the other end of the spectrum, is the decidedly posh Franco-Japanese **Mihoko's 21 Grams**, which recently opened to the public. Uni will go for \$70 per ounce, omakase will cost \$150, and among the a la carte menu selections are line-caught tuna "en croute" with hibiscus, daikon and smoked chantilly; Kushi oysters with cucumber, sake, aloe vera and seaweed toast; marinated cuttlefish noodles with yuzu-koshu, basil uni dressing and crispy rice; and foie gras torchon with rhubarb, sesame nut sable and mizuna.

On the same block, longtime Hamptons favorite **Sen** will open a sister restaurant this September. They have a distinct advantage of long term relationships with Montauk fish purveyors and Hamptons farmers.

According to food consultant Shoji Iso, the farm-to-table craze is partly responsible for the current success of Japanese restaurants. "People are very into the farm to table concept now, but even many restaurants that claim to function this way will refrigerate vegetables and serve them a day or two later," he reveals. "Japanese chefs must serve things the same way they arrive."

And, Gari says, chefs are aware that the ante has been upped. "We have become more competitive," he declares. And that competition will be tested. When he opens his Tribeca branch in June, serving dressed sushi like luscious tuna topped with tofu, salmon graced with a slice of sautéed tomato, and red snapper texturized with the baby greens, fried lotus root and pine nuts, it will share a neighborhood with the sushi bar David Bouley has just added to **Brushstroke** and soon, Testsu, the new spot being planned by Masa, king of the \$450 per person omakase. ←