

Traditions Run Deep

The very exclusive SUSHI ICHIZU *omakase* restaurant might be a newcomer on Bangkok's fine dining scene, but its roots in Japanese culinary tradition run deep, discovers MICHAELA MARINI HIGGS

Photography: SALT CHAIROONGRUANG

AT THE HELM of Sushi Ichizu, Chef Riku Toda began his culinary training in the now closed three-Michelin-star Sushi Mizutani in Tokyo, working as the protégé of Chef Hachiro Mizutani, who himself once served as assistant to sushi god Jiro Ono (of documentary and foodie fame). Alongside his next mentor, Chef Takaaki, Toda worked in the Tokyo kitchens of Miyakozushi, and then Sushi Sugita (as sous chef), which in its first year received a Michelin star and a reputation for being nearly impossible to book.

Leaving behind the Michelin-starred restaurants of his past, Toda's departure from Japan and arrival in Thailand symbolizes both a young chef's desire to strike out on his own as well as his ambition to bring quality Japanese dining and ingredients to a local audience.

Well-versed in traditional preparation methods and mentored by the best, the chef's *omakase*

menu offers indulgent dishes that both please traditionalists and offer adventurous eaters unexpected twists. You have to know the rules before you can break them, and with his pedigree, Toda is more than qualified to do so.

Tucked right off of hectic Petchaburi Road, Sushi Ichizu's easy-to-miss entrance, a nameplate and nondescript door, is as understated as Toda himself. From the moment you step inside the entrance hall, a dark room with a spotlighted bonsai tree at its center, Bangkok fades into the distance. The hum of traffic is abruptly muted and the energy of the city gives way to calm.

With only 12 seats along a single tan bar, the dining room is sparsely decorated and filled with warm light, the minimalist design sensibility feeling cosy and unmistakably Japanese. Against this clean backdrop, Toda and his team serve up two rounds of *omakase* each night. Though the intimate bar means you're seated with strangers, and the space has a hushed and almost reverent atmosphere, you can just as easily carry on a personal conversation as you can soak up the experience in silence.

Omakase, which translates to "I'll leave it up to you," is often described as a journey. With a menu left entirely up to the discretion of the

chef, it rewards diners with a meal that winds its way through varying flavours and textures, often offering a taste of delicacies that can be difficult to find elsewhere. No two visits to an *omakase* restaurant are alike thanks to a certain magic randomness, a unique combination of quality ingredients and a chef's own inspiration and inventiveness.

While many associate the format just with sushi, it can encompass a wider variety of offerings, and Sushi Ichizu is sure to highlight this range with dishes like carefully marinated octopus, which sings with the tangy and vibrant flavours of sake and Japanese mustard. Because *omakase* is all about trust, the menu has its share of adventurous delicacies as well, like the *tara shirako* (cod milt), which arrives looking like singed cotton, the skin of the sac and the burst of its milky center making for a memorable mouthfeel.





Sushi Ichizu has arrived at just the right moment when a wave of high-end omakase restaurants sweeps Bangkok, while international awards like Michelin and Asia's 50 Best continue to elevate the city's fine-dining reputation. In an age where sushi is available in most supermarkets, Sushi Ichizu is powered by the philosophy that sushi culture should be considered part of a global, not just Japanese, heritage. And if it's to be a truly global cuisine, that means chefs like Toda, who have trained under some of the best mentors Japan has to offer, need to share their gifts abroad.

Omakase is also probably the highest-end version of dinner and a show, as Toda, flanked by supporting chefs, deftly prepares dishes like *kegani* (horsehair crab), served in a sauce made with its own brain. The grey matter lends the intensely fresh crab a creamy flavor, and the dish gives diners a chance to watch a process usually hidden behind kitchen doors.

While the main focus is the food, the chefs certainly know how to play to a photo-loving audience, offering picture-perfect moments as they display ingredients (like the live *kegani*) to each diner before whisking them behind the counter to prepare for cooking. They do the same when previewing the sushi course, a wooden box with beautifully layered *uni* (sea urchin) placed teasingly on the counter.

If a camera is trained in their direction, Toda

and his staff know exactly how to slow down and angle themselves so that diners can snap the perfect shot of their food being prepared. The only pause in the action comes when each mouthful is deposited on your plate, as each ingredient, and the often-laborious process of preparing it, is explained with clear pride and a gentle smile.

The attention to detail extends even to the real wasabi, which is prepared by sous chef Masato using a traditional *oroshiki* (grating board made with shark skin) as Toda stands nearby deftly packing sushi rice into the palm of his hand. Wasabi is one of the world's most

expensive crops, meaning that most restaurant wasabi is made with a cheaper (and less potent) mix of horseradish and food colouring, but here there's no cutting corners when it comes to authentic ingredients.

After the packed rice is dabbed with wasabi, Toda quickly tops it with offerings ranging from cured tuna, grilled mackerel, and plump tiger shrimp plucked straight from a steaming basket. A few pieces, like the fatty tuna rolls, are singed with a charcoal rack in front of each diner before being deposited on the plate, the exceptionally buttery flavour intensified with smokiness and the spice of the wasabi. With each

bite and taste of how sushi is intended to be, it's difficult to imagine ever enjoying a lower-grade sushi experience again.

The intimacy of the experience, the skills Toda puts on display, and the sheer flavours and quality of each imported ingredient is what makes the meal luxurious, but the unexpected twists and turns are what makes it fun. In a menu that sticks closely to traditional ingredients and methods, some of the subtle twists (an extra piece of *nori* here, the additional dollop of Japanese mustard there) are hard to spot as anything new because of how well the flavours complement each other.

The only dish that stands out as overtly experimental, both in terms of taste and presentation, is a monkfish liver "macaroon" described as a showcase of Toda's interest in the globalization of Japanese ingredients and

cuisine. With pickled watermelon and a wafer to sandwich every-thing in, the dish is salty and rich with a delicate meaty flavor, enhanced by the unusual interplay of textures produces by the brittle wafer and smoothness of the rich pate.

Though it might not be a favourite for everyone, in a menu with 23 dishes (8,000 Baht ++ per person) it offers a brief and playful teaser of something new. The magic of an ever-changing omakase menu promises diners the opportunity to both sample traditional Japanese cuisine, and taste the evolution of Toda's imaginative experimentation. **E**