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These haute young chefs are stirring up the dining industry

Out of the kitchen

Matt Wilce finds there's more to being a chef than cooking when he talks to four of Tokyo's top culinary executives.

Tokyo has arguably the biggest and most dynamic dining industry in the world, running the gamut from individual eateries to upscale restaurant groups. We already had some theories of our own when it came to predicting next year's hot food trends, but rather than put our necks on the chopping block we cherry-picked some of Tokyo's bright culinary sparks to give us their insider tips. Known about town for their Prada suits, well-developed palates, *jus-ed-up* opinions, and general *joie de vie*, our four up-and-coming movers and shakers got together to set us straight on next year's trends and what pushes them to drive the industry to greater heights. Great food's one thing, but these guys know that running a successful eatery doesn't end with what's on the plate.

Mario Frittoli

Although he claims not to follow trends when he's in the kitchen, Mario Frittoli, vice president and executive chef for the Still Foods group—Il Pinolo, Niu, Oli—is convinced that fusion will continue to dominate the Tokyo scene next year. However, in overseeing the group's 28 restaurants, he prefers to follow his own instincts—doing things “Mario-style”—rather than following the latest fads, eschewing market research in favor of unique dining concepts such as the olive oil-based restaurant Oli. “I try to sense what the market's needs are and then try to create something that goes with the image I perceive,” the charismatic Tuscan adds.

The creative force behind Still Foods describes the group's philosophy as centering on family, flexibility, quality and new ideas. “Our company is always searching for new ideas to incorporate into our restaurants, but every restaurant has to have a family-like environment where we can entertain the customers so that they feel at home, and we have flexibility to offer anything the customer requests,” he elaborates. Although the market here is vast, the focus is often on eating rather than dining, but that's a “cultural difference” that Frittoli thinks people in Japan are catching up on.

Having already racked up appearances on “Iron Chef,” “Osama no Brunch” and “Yuhan Banzai,” Frittoli plans to venture further into the world of celebrity with more media work. If his rabble-rousing antics during our photo shoot and passion for karaoke are anything to go by, the genial Italian should have no problems charming his way onto the tube again. Personality is obviously a key element of success for many top chefs, and Frittoli recognizes the potential dangers attached to celebrity. “In order to be a great chef and be popular at the same time, you need to be a little arrogant. Sometimes it's difficult to be that way,” he adds. But with charm to spare and a proven track record, Frittoli seems set to drive the Tokyo scene as fast as his Jeep Cherokee—“It's very powerful and I love it!”

Photos by Elina Moriya





“Tak, it was like a gift from the gods. I was a bit worried, because I was afraid that the people would not like the new design, but they did. I think it was a success. I am very happy with the results.”



Ian Tozer

Having cooked for 600 on Alcatraz with no running water or electricity, having catered for 60,000 golf-fans at a PGA tournament and having had tigers come to the kitchen for a bowl of milk in Guam, opening a restaurant in Tokyo might seem like the easy option. But British native Ian Tozer recognizes that planning and executing a concept 100

percent is not as simple as it seems. Tozer first came to Tokyo to open the Farm Grill with friend and fellow chef David Chiddo, and followed on with stints at T.Y. Harbor and West Park Café before creating the concept for his own American brasserie, Roti, with three partners. His decision to stay was partly due to Tokyo's unique dining scene. "The amount of people who eat out and how often they eat out compared to other countries is quite amazing, and if you're a restaurateur then it's probably the best place in the world," says Tozer. After creating diverse dining spots from Seoul to LA and Guam to Oklahoma—his first move overseas back when he had Duran Duran hair—Tozer appreciates the well-developed palates of Tokyo's ladies who lunch. Compared to eight years ago when he started out here, the diners' expectations have risen substantially. "The standard is a lot higher [now]. People demand a lot more for

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the money, and the quality of food in Tokyo restaurants compares highly with any other city in the world. You have to push yourself to make a difference here."

Tozer believes restaurants don't dictate the trends. "Food trends start the same way as high fashion with the top media presenting the trend, then it catches on with a select group of people before filtering down to the rest of the population," he says. Tying trends to travel and people's lifestyle, he's putting his money on Latin American food as next year's hot item, with a revival of reasonably priced French food as a close second. "Some things that have been trends in New York, such as Mediterranean, have just half-started and then fizzled out here," he observes.



Mark Hehir

He might be a newcomer to Japan, but Mark Hehir, 33 and chef de cuisine of Twenty One in the Hilton Tokyo, knows the hotel restaurant industry inside out—after all, he started his apprenticeship when he was 15. After becoming the executive chef at Melbourne's Como Hotel at the tender age of 23, Hehir has trotted around the globe, heading up the kitchens at prestigious

establishments from London's renowned Dorchester Hotel to the Maldives. Hotel restaurants are in a class by themselves. "Sometimes they tend to be more stiff and corporate, and the most successful ones break that barrier and are more entrepreneurial, personalized, flexible and pay attention to details and the individual," the opinionated gourmand says. Certainly in a sector where every location follows a formula of the same four or five kinds of restaurant, breaking the mold can reap benefits. Hehir's reinvention of Twenty One already seems to be pulling in punters, helping The Hilton ride out the recession where it's "business as usual."

With a predominance of fusion confusing Tokyo's palates, Hehir is keen to capitalize on his classic training and put a solid French foundation into his menus, which also draw on the Asian flavors he's been exposed to. Predicting a renaissance in French cuisine next year, he acknowledges the masters of fusion—he hangs out with Testusya Wakuda when he's in town—but is clear that he only fuses flavors he's experienced in his travels. When it comes to inspiration, he ranks Charlie Trotter and Thomas Keller of California's French Laundry as his idols and recognizes that the secret to fame and success lies in being yourself. "You have to be free. You can't manufacture it," says Hehir. While he thinks some of the star chefs—such as Alan Wong, Nobu and Roy Yamaguchi—who've opened in town are doing well, he's more critical of those who temper their menus to suit the locals. Alan Ducasse's Spoon is one example he gives of a great concept that's unfortunately been watered down.

Li Nam Ha

With an average age of 25, the Chanto restaurant group has to be the most dynamic of Japan's dining empires. "Grand chef" for the entire group, Li Nam Ha, currently presides over 31 establishments, a number that's set to double next year. Li seems unfazed though—he still manages to cook at his eponymously monikered Korean restaurant in Daikanyama several times a week—and when it comes to the future he just chuckles. "I have to retire next year when I turn 35. That's the group's policy." After directing Chanto's culinary and geographical expansion—both nationwide and in their first foreign venture in Hong Kong—Li wants to return to focusing on his upmarket twist on home-style Korean favorites.

While the Chanto group has been quick to capitalize on the current demand for nouveau Japonais with its Daidaiya restaurants, their other strands show that the group is also keen to direct dining trends. In a nice piece of reverse cultural imperialism, Chanto is re-importing the fad for *kaitenzushi* from Europe in a move that's sure to spawn impostors. "We're always looking for new and exciting concepts," comments Li. "Kaitenzushi is thought of as quick, cheap and easy, but we want to focus more on the style and the ambiance of the whole restaurant, because that's central to our group. Our concept is to produce something more like a sushi shop in London or Paris," he adds. Li, who trained as a French chef at Osaka's Royal Hotel, acknowledges that style and the total packaging of a restaurant are vital in this fashion-conscious city—hence the group's work with interior coordinators and design collective Tomato. Developing the ambiance is part of Li's desire to entice Tokyoites to spend more time enjoying the whole dining experience. ■

