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Star chef Nobu Matsuhisa brings his new
Japanese cuisine to the bookshelves

Nobu

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Cooking the books



Special to the Tokyo branch, scallop with red onion salsa



Octopus tiradito, Nobu style



Nobu's trademark soft-shell crab rolls

Celebrity chef Nobu Matsuhisa's in town with his new book in hand. Matt Wilce gets an exclusive insight into his world of sushi, stars and worldwide success.

Having weathered the caprice of celebrities before, we were worried the world's most famous chef, Nobu Matsuhisa, would be a touch pretentious and difficult. After all, he did add truffles and foie gras to the sushi bar. But the culinary superstar, casually dressed in his trademark blue pants and kitchen whites, was all smiles and firm handshakes when we met at his Tokyo restaurant. Later, it transpires his pants are actually by Guess, and Giorgio Armani is personally designing his new chef whites. The only visible indication that he's truly the king of restaurant royalty is the platinum diamond-encrusted Rolex tucked under his sleeve.

With more on his plate than most chefs could dream of, Nobuyuki Matsuhisa has arguably the most famous restaurant on the planet—even before the recent cause célèbre in the UK involving Boris Becker, a Russian woman and Nobu London's linen closet. From Dubai to Shanghai—the site of his next venture due to open in 2002—everyone wants a piece of him. Madonna once said, “You can tell how much fun a city is going to be if Nobu has a restaurant in it,” and fortunately for her, his 14 restaurants inhabit her stomping

grounds of Paris, Milan, London, New York, Tokyo and LA. With a famous business partner, Robert De Niro, in tow, Nobu has gastronomes the world over salivating into their lime-juice-dressed sashimi, and fortunately here in Tokyo—unlike Manhattan—you don't have to wait a month to get a taste of his unique synthesis of New World flavors and traditional Japanese cuisine.

The dish

Now, the master of nouveau Nipponese and the inventor of the soft-shell crab roll has set down his entire culinary repertoire in English in his debut volume of recipes, “Nobu the Cookbook” (Kodansha International, ¥3900). His own idea, the book, which Nobu calls “a souvenir of my life,” is a midlife attempt to preserve memories and solidify his art. “Food isn't like music, art or movies. The process is the same—planning, practice and execution—but in the food business after the customer bites, my art is gone,” he says. Although those around him felt it might be rash to give away too many trade secrets, Nobu confidently asserts that “people can copy the recipes, but they can't copy my heart.”

Asked to define *kokoro* (heart or spirit), his elusive personal ingredient, and how he teaches his chefs to add their own spirit to their work, he emphasizes the importance of detail. As in many of the Japanese arts, his recipes may be formalized and the details and accents prescribed, but like

the master artisan, the chef must invest something extra into the arrangement. Nobu at one point likens *kokoro* to the popular Japanese expression of “plus alpha,” meaning that extra something, which in the case of his restaurants is an attention to service.

“I know Japan and I was afraid to come back.”





→ From his days as a Shinjuku sushi chef, Nobu has had the value of detail and service drummed into him, and he now describes his business as 50 percent food, 50 percent service—plus alpha, of course. His chefs may have the freedom to create their own specialties for the renowned *omakase* courses (chef's choice tasting courses), but when it comes to Nobu's classics, the dishes are prepared the same the world over. "Before this, a lot of my chefs would ask me how to prepare the dishes, but now I just hand them a book and say here you go," he quips.

The galloping gourmet

Despite being born and bred in Japan, Nobu is a citizen of the world and spends each month flitting between his restaurants: This month was easy, he claims, as the Milan branch was closed. With his wife looking after his LA Matsuhisa restaurants, daughter Junko overseeing the Tokyo branch of Nobu, and his younger daughter studying design at Central St Martins in London, the family is as widely scattered as his business. While the world dines on Nobu, the man himself eats most of his own meals at 45,000ft. Perhaps it's no surprise, then, that Mark Edwards from the London restaurant now oversees British Airways' in-flight fare.

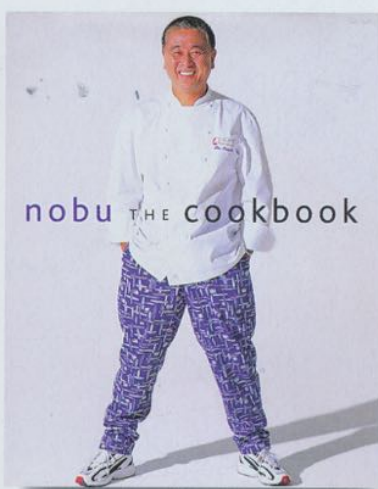
Even in the early days before he became the celebrity's celebrity chef, Nobu started globetrotting. He left the Shinjuku sushi shop—where he started out cleaning up and making tea—for Peru when a customer invited him to open his own restaurant in a leap that he says made him what he is today. Unwilling to sacrifice quality for cost, Nobu eventually decided to take control of his destiny once again and uproot to Alaska. Things didn't exactly go to plan and the burgeoning restaurant was destroyed in a fire after just 50 days. A lesser man may have been broken, but returning from the brink, and with a young family to support, Nobu had no choice but to make a success of himself.

"People can copy the recipes, but they can't copy my heart."

That success came with the first of his California restaurants, the small, 40-seat Matsuhisa, a far cry from

the heights of his later ventures. It was there that he first met De Niro, who came to the restaurant as a guest of *The Killing Fields* director Roland Joffe. "I cooked, and at the end of the meal I joined them for a drink and chatted, but I didn't know who Bob De Niro was," Nobu admits. Over time De Niro became a valued patron, and when the actor purchased a leaky old mouse-infested coffee warehouse in New York's Tribeca district, he invited Nobu to open a restaurant with him. "I was really excited and talked to him every day about it, but finally I decided to say no because Matsuhisa was not stable yet, and I wanted to make a stronger team there before I moved on." The space later became the Tribeca Grill, and though they remained firm friends, it was four years before De Niro popped the question a second time. The rest, as they say, is food history.

In addition to the original Matsuhisa in LA, Nobu opened a second branch in Aspen to offer elite apres-ski fare in 1998. Eight Nobu restaurants now circle the globe, and in an attempt to stem the demand for tables in New York, a second restaurant, Nobu Next Door, opened in the same Tribeca building also in 1998. A more successful attempt to go casual was Ubon—the name, which is "Nobu" backwards, was suggested by a customer—in LA's Beverly Center, which now offers shoppers souped up noodles.



Sushi sensei

Many may expect him to follow the book with a TV program, but Nobu maintains that he's no showman. "I'm not that type. I did the book and I do Martha [Stewart's show] and things like Jay Leno, 'Good Morning America' and The Food Network, but I don't want my own show." He may be no showman, but friends Bob De Niro and Marty Scorsese did give him a taste of Hollywood when they cast him as a Japanese gambler in their movie *Casino*.

Even without the TV show Nobu seems to have taken it upon himself to educate Western diners—including Tim Zagat of guidebook fame—to the pleasures of Japanese cuisine. "I love *uni* [sea urchin] and I love to present it to people overseas.

Often they don't like to eat it raw, and that's why I invented uni tempura. Tim hated uni, but because he's in the food business he has to understand its flavor, so I made tempura for him. He ended up eating seven or eight pieces, and he decided to try it raw the next time."

Ironically, despite his huge popularity overseas, his English-language cookbook has just been released in his native land before it hits the stands in the US and Europe in October. He's not the first of his countrymen to make it big overseas and then return, but what sets Nobu apart is his attempt to convince people here that new style Japanese works. "I know Japan, and I was afraid to come back," he admits. While the restaurant here—like the other locations—has an annual turnover of about US\$10 million, NOBU TOKYO has yet to instate a month-long waiting list, and the clientele tends toward foreign businesspeople and *kokusaiteki* locals comfortable with the addition of cilantro or chili to their sushi.

If the media are anything to go by, many Japanese diners appear to be more comfortable challenging their palates and eating nouveau Japonais in Paris or Las Vegas. Perhaps that's why Tokyo partner Soho Tsukikawa worked hard on capturing the feel of the New York original, minus the Japanese accents, with exposed brickwork and artwork by De Niro's dad. Even the banquettes, emblazoned with giant pink roses, turn out to be a covert message. "Each flower is a gift from Nobu to his customers," the assistant explains, adding that the rose is New York's state symbol.

The next course

So what about the future? "I really like Wolfgang Puck's energy and personality. He does a lot of charity work... and I'd like to do more work like him." After his first taste of the publishing world, Nobu is raring to put together another volume of recipes, this time for charity. Next time he plans to give his 14 head chefs the chance to steal a little of the limelight and create a menu each, either for a book or a special charity birthday bash.

For the time being there's plenty in the existing book to tease the taste buds. Try your hand at Black Cod with Miso—De Niro's favorite—or if Di Caprio's coming for dinner, make New Style Sashimi. Focusing on the fruits of the sea, the book provides an excellent introduction to preparing and serving seafood and fish with few concessions to the novice cook. Sandwiched between the stunning photos and mouthwatering recipes is a potted biography, personal musings on various ingredients, and celebrity testimonials. Reviewers are already predicting that it will be the stocking stuffer of choice for foodies from Tokyo to Milan. As Nobu circles the globe again to promote its launch, it's no surprise that he lightheartedly laments that he has little time to eat out himself, claiming, "They never give me a night off!" ☞