

The alchemist

Rory Ross meets Nobuyuki Matsuhisa, the celebrated restaurateur whose consummate skill in fusing Japanese and Peruvian influences have earned him international accolades – and an adoring A-list clientele

HIS RESTAURANTS span four continents, turn over some US\$200m and rate as the A-list's preferred canteens-cum-big-nights-out. Nobuyuki Matsuhisa, progenitor and genius behind the Nobu restaurant empire (which at the last count ran to 16 branches of Nobu, three of Matsuhisa restaurant and one Ubon restaurant) has discovered a way of alchemising sushi into gold. Nobu favourites like Black Cod with Miso, Sashimi Salad, Rock Shrimp Tempura and Yellow Tail Tuna with Jalapenos elicit a consistently ecstatic response from palate-jaded critic and ectomorphic superwaif alike.

I intercept Nobu, as he is known, en route from Singapore to Milan, at Ubon restaurant in the Docklands area of London (Ubon is a Nobu clone, spelled backwards). At a glance, you would find it hard to believe Nobuyuki had a care in the world, never mind 600 staff and 2,500 covers to fill. There he was, dressed down in T-shirt, leather jacket and jeans, kicking back on the banquette, looking as bright-eyed as one of his yellow-tails. His suspiciously pristine appearance makes me wonder if this is indeed the real Nobuyuki Matsuhisa or a franchised clone. You could easily mistake him for a highly successful Japanese fashion designer. Indeed, he may well be a highly successful Japanese fashion designer – Giorgio Armani is his chief backer in Milan. A partnership between Armani and

Nobu says a lot about the direction in which restaurant food is headed. Food today is as much a fashion accessory as nutrition.

Beneath Nobuyuki's Zen-like calm, his mind is aswirl with ideas, plans, new dishes and projects. While grazing sushi dishes and parrying my inane questions, he discreetly takes calls from eight time zones on his sashimi-sized cellular.

How very different his life was up until the 1990s. In fact, he's lucky he still has a life. As a qualified sushi chef in Tokyo in the 1970s, he got a break to work as a partner at Matsu Ei restaurant in Lima, Peru. Although 9,500 miles apart, Japanese and Peruvian cuisines both revolve around marinated raw fish. While the Japanese season theirs with wasabi, soy and horseradish and call it sushi and sashimi, the Peruvians prefer chilli, garlic, lemon and coriander and call it ceviche and tiradito. The idea of fusing the two cuisines fired Nobuyuki's mind, but it was years before he could develop his ideas and bring them to the world.

From Lima, Nobu moved to Buenos Aires – an ill-starred switch, since the Argentines prefer beef to raw fish – then to Anchorage, Alaska, where he opened a small restaurant. Fifty days after he launched, Nobu was celebrating New Year at home, when the telephone rang. His restaurant was ablaze, thanks to an electrical fault. That was the good news. The bad news was that Nobu was

uninsured and leveraged up to the hilt. 'I thought of suicide,' he says, 'car crash, train accident, jumping off Mount McKinley or shooting myself. Then I looked at my two daughters, Junko and Yoshiko, who were seven months and one and a half years old. I could not bear to leave them. They saved my life.'

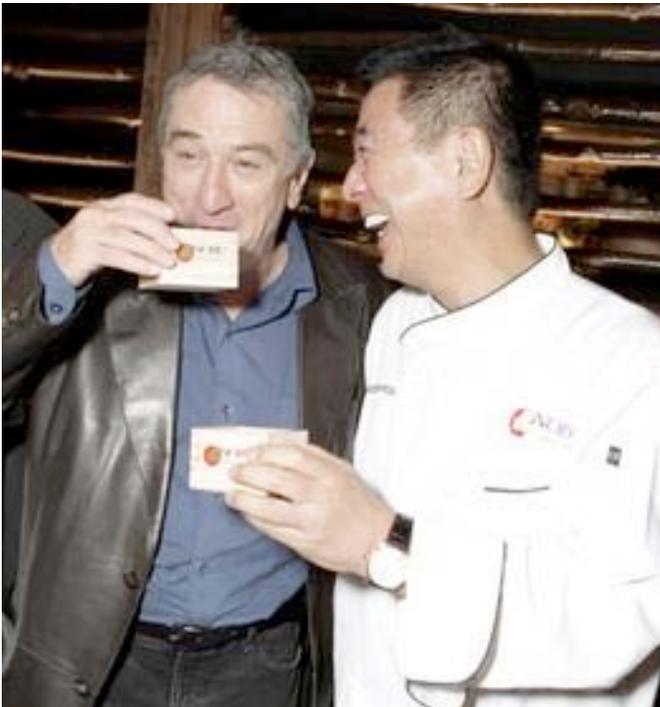
Sending his family back to Tokyo, Nobu went to Los Angeles and worked illegally for two years to pay off his creditors. 'I couldn't get into any fights,' he laughs. 'I couldn't even afford to ring home. I wrote letters twice a week.' His eyes glaze over and for a moment I'm thinking, 'Oh no, he's forgotten about some business meeting or other that he should be attending in Kuala Lumpur.'

'Sorry,' he smiles, 'I'm remembering how tough it was. I had no choice. I wasn't exactly unhappy, because the family was still together. I'd simply re-started from zero.'

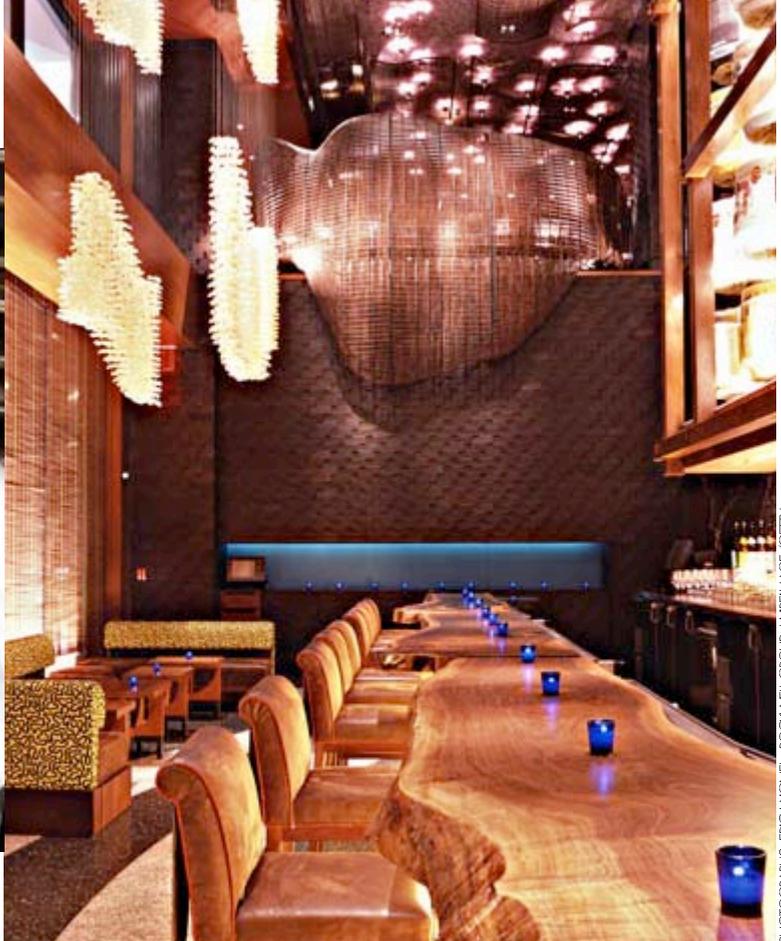
Despairing after years spent aimlessly cutting sushi, he rang a friend in Tokyo who lent him US\$70,000 so that Nobu could set up his own restaurant again. 'Repay me when you can,' said his friend. Matsuhisa restaurant in Beverley Hills is the result of that fortuitous loan. A homely 34-seater that opened in 1987, it serves top-quality Japan-out-of-Peru food. The first 18 months were 'quiet', but thankfully the books balanced. 'We were open every day,' says Nobu. 'Fish always fresh. Customers trust me.'



NOBU
Matsuhisa



From Left to right: Robert De Niro and Nobu Matsuhisa at Nobu Grand Opening Sake Ceremony, December 2007; interior of Nobu Fifty Seven, New York



PHOTOGRAPHS: ERIC LANGMEL - ROCKWELL GROUP; VIRENANCE/GETTY

Ruth Reichl, ex-restaurant critic of the *Los Angeles Times* and *The New York Times*, now editor of *Gourmet* magazine, was the first to spot Nobuyuki. ‘He took a codified, traditional cuisine and threw away the rulebook,’ she says. ‘He made sushi exciting and contemporary. He used the openness of America to push the whole form in a new direction.’

One evening, Robert De Niro rocked up at Matsuhisa with Roland ‘*Killing Fields*’ Jaffe. Intoxicated by raw fish and sake, De Niro fell in love with Nobu’s spicy, citric Peruvian style, and fell into conversation with Nobu. Over flasks of De Niro’s favourite YK35 sake, they got along like a restaurant on fire. ‘He came back again and again,’ says Nobuyuki.

‘Come to New York,’ beamed De Niro, trying to break off Nobu’s shoulder. ‘I wanna open a restaurant with you.’ For three days, Nobuyuki and ‘Bob’ pounded the streets of TriBeCa while De Niro outlined his vision. After much big-picture arm-waving from ‘Bob’, Nobu eventually replied, ‘No. My restaurant is too young.’

Far from being discouraged, De Niro, with the obsessiveness inherent in a great method actor, continued stalking Nobu. Four years later, Nobu took a call at home. No blazing restaurant this time, just a smouldering De Niro: ‘Are you ready for New York?’ For a moment, the gastronomic history of the civilised world wavered in the balance.

‘Bob waited four years,’ says Nobu. ‘That’s why I appreciate him.’ Bob and Nobu went into business and Nobu restaurant in TriBeCa was born in 1997. It wasn’t that Nobu had been playing hard-to-get or waiting for a better offer. ‘I like the old-fashioned Japanese culture of trust and honesty and straight-forwardness,’ he says. ‘I never play games.’

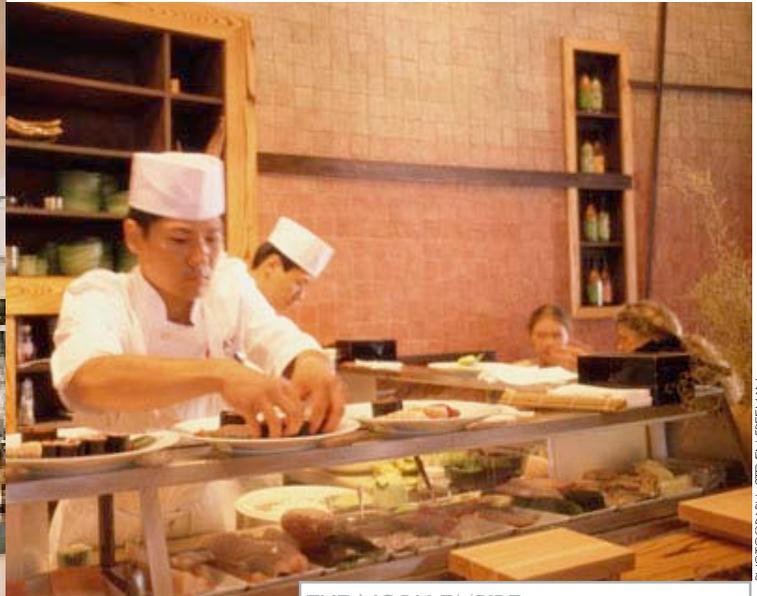
Nobu wisely avoided replicating Matsuhisa. Instead, he created a cuisine based

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on his signature dishes, but simplified them in a way that didn’t require his being present seven days a week. Take his ceviches, for example. In Peru, a ceviche is marinated for six hours in coriander and citrus, which ‘cooks’ it. In six hours, however, Nobuyuki’s business could have been swallowed by a shark, so instead he throws the ingredients together in a bowl, tosses them together and they’re ready in seconds. Unlike formal Japanese food, Nobu serves his dishes family-style with several grazing platters in mid-table. ‘Ninety per cent of the excitement of a dish is in the first mouthful,’ he says.

His *Anti-Cucho*, a Peruvian dish of beef with yellow or red chillies, is the quintessence of Nobuyuki’s style. He adds rice wine vinegar, dips the beef in red chilli, flames it and finishes it with yellow chillies for an exotic spicy taste. He varies the mix by using salmon or chicken instead of beef. ‘That dish sums up my Japanese and Peruvian influences,’ says Nobu. ‘Customers say, “Don’t tell me what to eat. I lived in Japan for eight years.” But I encourage first-time customers to listen. My food is not like traditional Japanese. You wouldn’t know it but I’m very good at sensing what people want. I have always had almost a “sixth sense”. For example, if a customer does not know what to order in one of my restaurants I always know what they would like, even if they have never had my food before.’

This simple, tossed-together style of Japanese and Peruvian flavours and spices, enables Nobu to run his empire by remote control. Well, not entirely. In fact, hardly at all. He spends most of his time either in the air or on the road, touring the outposts. Wherever he goes, facilitators and handlers pick him up, prepare his chef’s whites, whet his sushi knife and even answer questions on his behalf, like acolytes. Communicating his genius via intermediaries is a Nobu trait that has helped him clone his restaurants and gives him a sense of omnipresence.



PHOTOGRAPH: STEIGEN FREEMAN

From left to right:
interior of Nobu Berkeley
Street, London; the Sushi
bar at Nobu New York

THE NOBU EMPIRE

- Nobu New York, New York, 1994
- Nobu London, London, England, 1997
- Nobu Tokyo, Japan, 1998
- Nobu Next Door, New York, 1998
- Nobu Las Vegas, Las Vegas, Nevada, 1999
- Nobu Malibu, Malibu, California, 1999
- Nobu Milan, Milan, Italy 2000
- Nobu Miami Beach, Miami Beach, FL, 2001
- Nobu Dallas, Dallas, Texas, 2005
- Nobu Fifty Seven, New York, 2005
- Nobu Berkeley Street, London, England, 2005
- Nobu Atlantis, Paradise Island, Nassau, Bahamas, 2006
- Nobu International, Hong Kong, 2007
- Nobu Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia, 2007
- MATSUHISA RESTAURANTS
- Matsuhisa Beverly Hills, California, 1987
- Matsuhisa Aspen, Aspen, Colorado, 1998
- Matsuhisa Mykonos, Mykonos, Greece, 2005
- UBON RESTAURANT
- Ubon by Nobu, London, England, 2000
- www.noburestaurants.com

At all Nobu's restaurants, the tables may be celebrity-studded, but anyone can join in the fun. They are refreshingly unsnobbish places. One day at Matsuhisa in Beverly Hills, Tom Cruise found out that jumping the queue was mission impossible. 'He rang Mike Ovitz, the Hollywood screenplay writer, to pull strings,' smiles Nobu. 'Ovitz rang saying, "Take Tom's reservation." I replied, "Sorry, but I can't."' Nobu smilingly shakes his head. 'All my restaurants have strict no-reservation sushi counters.' Well, good for him.

Nobu occasionally flips back to Peru, where he is revered. He cooked ex-President Alberto Fujimori's last dinner in power in 2000. He ceaselessly builds on his 400-dish repertoire. In Milan, he stumbled across *catalonia*, a celery-like vegetable, served in anchovy paste and olive oil. He rushed back to his hotel to Nobu-ise it with Yuzu juice (Japanese citrus juice), bonito flakes (mackerel-like fish) and halibut. Yes!

Producing great food from great ingredients is easy. To create higher value from cheaper ingredients while consistently thrilling the media is arguably the hardest thing a restaurateur can do, and the most profitable. Having an A-list-magnet like De Niro on board sweetens the media. De Niro and Nobu are like that. Bob has a stake in Nobu; Nobu has a part in Bob's film *Casino*: he plays a Japanese gambler who loses his money (he was born for the part). Nobu

auditioned as a Japanese general in *Pearl Harbour*, but wisely had second thoughts.

'No single element makes a successful restaurant,' says De Niro. 'It's a mix of great food, service and cutting-edge design. Nobuyuki has a knack of doing business in the proper manner. He has opened the eyes of a lot of people who wouldn't otherwise have tried Japanese food. Not only that, but non-Japanese chefs are now experimenting with Japanese ingredients in a way they might not have considered doing without Nobu. Another spin-off is the vogue for fine sakes. Nobu brought in the finest sakes and got waiters to explain them to customers.'

Nobu continually patrols his empire by flying first-class around the world each month. 'The best invention ever, it has to be the jet plane,' he says, '...but it was easier when Concorde was flying.' He spends one week in four at home in Los Angeles with his wife Yoko who works at the original Matsuhisa. Junko, 32, works at Nobu Tokyo and Yoshiko, 30, has graduated from Saint Martin's College of Fashion in London.

Although in his scant spare time Nobu finds it impossible to walk past a fish market, he unwinds by playing golf wherever possible. At home in LA, he plays at the Wilshire Country Club with Kenny G, the saxophonist whose music, Nobu says, would be the 'the soundtrack to my life', and Mark Wahlberg, the actor and television producer.

Movies are another passion. Nobu's idea of movie heaven is to watch anything directed by his friend Martin Scorsese. He also dabbles in contemporary art. 'My favourite works are by the Chinese artist Walasse Ting. I just love them. I have a few of his works at home, one of a fish (naturally), some flowers, girls and cats... there is definitely an "East meets West" feeling about his paintings.'

Although he has been pestered to open in cities all over the world, Nobuyuki's business isn't about putting flags on the globe. 'I am happiest when people ask me to cook,' he says. 'When the customer is happy, I am happy. Before Alaska, I wanted to do as many things as possible. Now, I do my best.'

And take out fire insurance. ■