

# Make mine sushi

Japanese cuisine: cat food or fine dining? *Hariati Azizan* and *Salina Christmas* get *au naturel* with raw fish and wasabe.

THE GOOD NEWS IS THAT PEOPLE ARE getting around to the idea that Japanese food is not cat food, and Japanese haute cuisine is not as rigid as it sounds. The bad news is that, to borrow Andrew Purvis' flippancy, you simply cannot get industrial quantities of food at pre-War prices at any posh Japanese outlet just yet.

On a more positive vein, Suntory's general manager Eiji Kamada insists that Japanese diners now are more discerning and flexible. He says, "The new Japan is more westernised. We are eating Italian, French and American food daily."

While boasting of the latest fusion trends in Japan, Suntory insist that the authenticity of their Japanese cuisine is maintained. "Even in Japan the traditional dishes are not common anymore. They are too old."

With a supervisor to oversee the trend in Japan, they keep themselves hip and happening among the Japanese crowd. Says Kamada, "Adaptations are acceptable only if they are accepted by the regular Japanese customers."

Unlike Suntory, the more traditional Benkay (at Hotel Nikko Kuala Lumpur) is willing to "compromise" - provided that it's for east-meet-west promotions: There's an exception: the Malaysian roll of the "I can't believe it's Japanese" variety, which Benkay claim to be the only kind in the world to have *cili padi* in place of wasabe. Otherwise, fusion is heavily frowned upon, as the major clientele of Japanese restaurants are Japanese, and it is their preferences that matter.

Interestingly, modern fast food *sushi* bars are the latest hit in Japan. Conceived at the end of last century, this genre has been cosmetically-improved after the War, but was quick to sink into decline slump after the introduction of the fast food concept.

However, since many people have no time to mull over their meals, haute cuisine or otherwise, these fast and fuss-free meals have gained popularity in

Japan. Says Chef Katsumi Goda of Benkay, "Before, it's not of good quality, now the quality has improved."

Sushi has also found its way into buffet spreads everywhere, giving it more prominence in the international scene. The authentic Japanese restaurants take care not to compromise in taste and quality. The best ingredients are still used, and the cold weather keeps the raw delights fresher for a longer period in spite of their exposed display on the conveyor belts. The selection is also more varied, so you are not lost for choice.

In Malaysia, although popular, the picture is different. Hotter weather hastens decomposition, making the quality of the conveyor belt's spread rather dubious. Plus, to sell at lower prices, operators have to substitute the originals with local items, or buy them in bulk. Taste and quality, therefore, are greatly compromised. The plastic covering is not an adequate protection, making food sitting ducks for salmonella and the like.

Chef Takao Ando of Miyako, Sheraton Subang, notes that the Japanese F&B has branched out into other fractions. Some outlets focus on *tempura*, some on *teppanyaki*, and so on. Ando says the respective outlets have tried the concepts here, but found little success. *Sushi* bars have done well, though, despite the expats' resentment towards local *sushi* bars.

Kamada thinks it's hard for authentic Japanese restaurants to find a niche in the local market. He says, "Malaysians are going to the wrong restaurants. They should try the authentic restaurants to experience the real Japanese style and quality of food and service."

Yet, if you are daunted by the various alien dishes and ingredients, you can rest assured that the service staff are, more often than not, only too willing to explain the items they have on the menu. More importantly, rawness is not all there is to Japanese cuisine. And for all you know, you might even fall in love with Japanese cuisine.



Food for thought ... A lot of philosophy goes into Tomoo Naguci's and Katsumi Goda's "simple" compositions at Nikko Kuala Lumpur.