

**Poetics of Small Platters**

The joy of kaiseki-ryōri is that one leaves effortlessly elevated as the concerns of the day are laid aside and attention drawn to noticing artistry, seasonality, and ever finer points of aesthetic sensuous delight. The “haute cuisine” of Japanese chow is surprising, memorable, and even whimsical in Ginza’s Kyoto Nijyōen Japanese restaurant.

Given that it was the end of the cherry blossom (sakura) season and early spring vegetables and cuisine are in play, how would this, the signature offering featured on their web site and advertising, be interpreted?

Swept into the structured space of plain rough walls and detailed sliding screens of woven bamboo strips and glowing off-white washi, our kimono-clad hostess conducts us down a narrow aisle offset by intimate dining rooms to our eyrie table overlooking the Ginza.

A glass of Kokuryu (Black Dragon 黒龍) daiginjyō sake appears. Lightly scented, warm, and mellow in flavor ending with a piquant farewell, it perfectly discreetly complemented the flavors of kaiseki.

**1** Our culinary journey launches with the arrival of a red lacquered platter carrying three complex compositions. Starting with a refreshing small clear glass boat, the bright green spinach in a delicate clear konbu seaweed sauce, it is clean, slightly slippery, and calls to mind drinking pure mountain water.

In a flattish yellow and orange peach-shaped plate, architecture of small, intriguing creations teased for comprehension/analysis. A bamboo spear captured an eye-catching bright cherry tomato, just come into season, a yellow butterfly carved from a tender Satsumo imo potato, and an anchor of red striped lily bulb. The spike rests against a tender bamboo shoot, cleverly carved into a boat. It holds a cluster of gleaming white rice bearing a strip of yellow steamed takenoko bamboo shoots and wearing a feather of green kinome, a fern-like leaf of the sansho Japanese pepper plant, with a highlight of an orange dot of a single large salmon roe (ikura) for a salty finishing tang. A clear glass bowl presided over by a sprig of late-blooming pink cherry blossoms held a translucent square of gelatin, made sprightly with dots of red paprika. Captured with is a large curl of white shrimp swimming in a pale yellow pool of...a light peanut butter? Au contraire, this is a sauce of pureed white sesame seeds with a hidden dash of mayonnaise.

A stately folded bamboo leaf throne pinioned by a short bamboo spicule protects a square of white rice. The upright leaf holds court over a slice of spring iwashi sardine enlivened with a thick



strip of a paste of spring peas. A block of silky fine tofu is crowned with a custard yellow pâté of chicken paste, the smooth flavor arrives belatedly, as if to politely plea, “Please do not forget about me.” An accent of a single pink edged cherry petal shape of murasame-shinjo composed from a white potato completes the composition. Guarding one side is a lustrous yellow small bowl with another cherry blossom reference; a fu wheat gel accompanies a sliver of asari clam on a small shoal of bright green spring onion leaves.

**2** Following the initial detailed masterpiece, the next arrival was a bowl of thin white porcelain containing a golden glitter of dashi soup stock. A single pink cherry blossom floated wetly against a white triangular block of thick whitefish endo mame pâté, which had a slightly dry, floury texture. A long, thin, triangular accent of orange carrot laid across it and a single slice of remarkable tilefish ama-dai, whose black pattern skin contrasted nicely with the white, pink, and orange composition. I am afraid I slurped in the hapless pink blossom. Could not help it!

**3** Next, our hostess quietly arrived bearing a flat ceramic yakimono platter of sashimi. One could imagine the platter as a squarish map



populated by two steep islands, each with a surf of thin white grated daikon radish washing against the overhanging a steep forested mountain slope of green perilla shiso leaves. Nearby, Awabi Island has a steep cliff of abalone graced with a flotsam sprig of purple shiso flowers. Tai Island has a beach of sea bream glistening as if under moonlight. Nearby, the nations of Kampachi yellow jack, Maguro tuna, Kinmedai sea bream with bright red-orange skin, and Aori-ika squid bearing a bull’s-eye of a cross slice of red radish. A small lighthouse of green grated wasabi in a forest of red-purple sprouts keeps watch over the assembly. After a tasting tour typhoon through the gleaming nations and islands, all territories had vanished.

**4** A black bowl with a cluster of mysterious shapes is next. A cherry tree leaf, preserved with salt and a bit of sugar wraps a single greenish bean of impressive girth, the spicy sora mame and in homage to the cherry blossom season, a heart shape petal of icefish, or shira-uo. A bit of kinome leaf brightens the scene.

A tiny pink octopus head shyly ducks itself beneath its display of upturned knobby tendrils. It is gone in a single swoop of my elegant ohashi bamboo chopsticks. In wait at the bottom is a rare find, the crunchy and vaguely sweet heart of yurine lily root. This small, dark bowl is an inspired world to itself.

**5** A quiet and simple moment came with a flat matte white, funnel-shaped bowl. The coppery bronze interior perfectly held a small block of soft, finely textured kinu oboro-dofu, a silky, fine grained tofu, lightly tinted from incorporated green peas. With a twist from a waiting salt grinder holding tantalizingly pink salt crystals, the combination of saltiness with the smooth tofu is a new experience. While both flavors stand apart, there is a harmonious balance.

**6** While for some, the sashimi would be the main course, for others, the grilled Matsusaka Beef from Mie would be the highlight. Filling a large



red lacquered platter, a tabletop metal and wood box with a grate awaited the grill expertise of our hostess. The squarely cut pink and heavily marbled with fat beef slices were quickly transformed and ready to be swished through a egg dip (beaten to a pale appealing yellow) or a sauce dip. This is a surprising and energetic flavor carnival. If the sashimi is a subdued Noh theatre meditation, the Matsusaka resembled a sumo bout of surging flavors of savory umami layers of wonderfulness.

The bowl of white aburi-gohan followed the flavor riot and brought us down to earth after such an exuberant performance

Pickled tsukemono vegetables nesting in a small square bowl attempted to calm things down. Pickled warabi, a large bracken fern stems that are rather bitter with a sour tang offsets the pinkish white mountain yam nagaimo, which proves pleasantly crunchy and peppery.

**7** Next, a surprisingly modern appearing dessert is served in what at first glance is a porcelain recreation of an upside-down classic Dior wide-brimmed summer hat. The bright red sliced strawberries swim in a small round pool of clear gelatin. The strawberries entertainingly prove adept at escaping through the gelatin just ahead of a mirror-bright spoon, but not for long.

From the welcoming blonde wood 8th floor lobby, greeted by meditative twanging of musical koto and soothing water flowing sounds, one arrives and departs viewing the large back-illuminated screen of the original Kyoto Nijyōen’s expansive Kyoto garden.



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