

PHOTOGRAPHY / EDMON PLEONG

Masu Communication

When three club owners make a foray into the dining scene, the result is sophisticated Japanese, with a killer drinks list. JOHANNES PONG gives it a shot – and takes a few, too





MASU HAS BEEN CREATING quite a buzz since it opened at On Hing Terrace, surrounded by Central's clubland. It's the brainchild of an interesting trio: John Rana of Privé notoriety; Derrick Yee, a Californian with a finance background; and local celebrity Mango Wong. It's all hushed splendour in Zen shades of grey, cream and brown, designed by Candice Chan of J. Candice Interior Architects. Dark beige banquettes, separated by light fixtures reminiscent of Japanese paper lanterns, glow in quiet yellow. Given the restaurant's proximity to mega-club Play, whose sound system thumps away right next door, it's a surprisingly warm and serene ambience, especially when cool bossa beats give way to stylish soft jazz of muted trumpet and pensive accordion. It's the unmistakable soundtrack of any contemporary fine-dining venue in Tokyo. "We tried hip-hop," Yee admits when I applaud the choice of music. "Yeah, it didn't work."

The seemingly incongruous threesome met through the demi-monde of nightclub Privé; they were drawn together through their mutual love of Japanese cuisine. Rana is obsessed with the food, especially raw fish and beef. Apparently, that's all he eats. Yee is just obsessed with food, period. "I can talk about food all day, what type of fish is good or bad for what," he says, visibly thrilled. And Wong, having lived in Tokyo as an exchange student, is very particular about her Japanese cuisine. I've heard on two separate occasions that she found the caramelised soy sauce of a *nitsuke* (braising) dish to be too much on the salty side, and told the chefs to make a note for future improvement.

Authentic Japanese restaurants of quality are a dime a dozen nowadays, even in Central. To stand out from the crowd, there has to be a catch. Here, in fact, it's all about the catch; seafood is flown in daily. "It's all about the quality and freshness of the ingredients," Yee says. "A Japanese restaurant only gets one shot – if it's not good, they're not coming back."

The pedigree of Masu's chefs is stellar. Head robatayaki chef Kazuya Nemoto comes straight from the celebrated Inakaya Tokyo. He's only



been here for three months, and hates the subtropical humidity and heat, but doesn't mind adeptly grilling fresh seafood, meat and vegetables to perfection every day. Sushi chef Ricky Chung, trained by the illustrious Kenjo (as most local veteran sushi chefs have been), started out at Ginza, one of Hong Kong's earliest high-end Japanese venues. It must be all the raw fish in his diet, because it doesn't look like he's been doing this for 33 years. Chung is slicing a row of halved avocados into slivers with a dexterous ease that makes me envious. "It's going to be on some of our more creative rolls," he says. "Kenjo-san certainly wouldn't approve of them."

Traditional sushi masters would approve of the way he handles the rice and seafood at Masu though. The rice for the sushi is kept in a rice-warmer, so the grains don't turn cold and hard. Even the *dobin-mushi* – a clear seafood broth served in a ceramic teapot – uses sashimi-grade fish, ensuring the freshest of flavours.

We start off with a platter of sculpted sashimi, a white plate dusted sparingly with pink sea salt to match the predominance of pink flesh (except for a curl of *hirame* topped with amber *ikura*). Ricky-san prefers a thicker cut, to bring out the different textures of each fish, which are serrated slightly, like a tyre, for effective soy-sauce absorption.



The summer *kinmedai* (golden-eyed snapper, also known as splendid alfonsino, Yee's newfound love and mine) is a rosy piece of meat with the firmer bite of a white fish, laced with the unctuousness of fatty fish. The *botan* shrimp has rich, bouncy meat. I wonder if there's a scallop hiding underneath the shrimp head as a fair amount of flesh is still attached to it. When it comes back lightly coated with potato starch and deep-fried golden, it's more than just a crunchy carapace with briny brains (which would have already been heavenly) – it's a crisp shell with a meatier texture and prawn taste that's divinely umami.

A trio of creative sushi is up next: one Kyoto-style *temari* rolled in the shape of a ball and two Edo-style nigiri. The *temari* is a decadent sphere of sea urchin, scallop, salmon and finely

minced *toro*, the *botan* shrimp nigiri is crowned with *negi-toro* (minced fatty tuna mixed with scallions), and the third offering is a nigiri of julienned raw squid that melts in the mouth, topped with fine threads of aromatic *shiso* and gold leaf, which is my favourite – less is always more for sushi.

The robatayaki grilled items come along, one by one. First is a *tsukune*, minced chicken meatball on a skewer. It's one of the most satisfying things to munch on, and a good indicator of the quality of the griller, especially at yakitori joints. Masu's *tsukune* is substantial with a gratifying bite, tender like meatloaf but with the crunch of cartilage bits interspersed evenly within.

I ask what other signature dishes Yee enjoys. He says that the chicken *karaage* (Japanese fried