



THE SMOOTH GUIDE | THE LONG LUXURIOUS WEEKEND

Nobu Matsuhisa's **tokyo**

The chef, restaurateur and newly minted hotelier shares hidden gourmet highlights and perennial cultural favourites with **Christina Ohly Evans**. Portrait by **Jeremie Souteyrat**

“ Tokyo is an incredibly sophisticated city, and the energy here is like nowhere else on earth. Despite the hustle and bustle, however, the pace of life is gentler than in cities such as New York and Hong Kong, and the people aren't aggressive: everything is driven by ritual, and good manners are very important. Unlike other Asian cities – Singapore and Shanghai, for example – most people outside the larger hotels and corporations don't speak English, and this gives Tokyo a unique feel as well. From the designs of Issey Miyake to the functional underlayers by Uniqlo, this is the city where fashion, technology and attention to quality intersect.

I travel to Tokyo for three days every month to prepare *omakase* [chef's] menus at my restaurant in the historic Minato area. I love it in all four seasons, but the



mild autumn months and spring, with its cherry blossoms, are my favourite times. The period surrounding the New Year holiday is very special, as it's celebrated differently in each of Japan's 47 prefectures. In Tokyo, everything closes down and there is a focus on food and local customs, with people wearing kimonos and going to shrines, such as the incredibly serene Meiji Shrine in Shibuya. Summer is a time of celebrations, including the Sumida River Fireworks Festival, which has been in existence since 1733. They set off thousands of beautiful *hanabi* – “fire flowers” – and you can view them from the various bridges or from river boats.

One of the most luxurious aspects of Tokyo is its hotels, because hospitality is of the utmost importance in Japan. There is the beautiful, sleek Aman Tokyo, which sits on the top six floors of the Otemachi Tower, and The Peninsula, with its views of the surrounding skyscrapers, where every piece of technology and bathroom fixture has been considered. Both are places that make visitors feel very looked after. The magnificent Palace Hotel

From top: Nobu Matsuhisa at Aman Tokyo. Seafood in the *depachika* (food hall) at department store Mitsukoshi

overlooks the Imperial Palace grounds and has an incredible sense of history; it is the epitome of Japanese serenity and tradition, and features Michelin-starred chef Shinji Kanesaka's Sushi Kanesaka. At any of them, you'll find the classic Japanese breakfast of rice or congee, grilled fish, omelette and assorted pickles – all cooked without oil or butter – that makes for a very light, healthy way to start the day.

One of my favourite ways to begin any day is with a walk through Arisugawa-No-Miya Memorial Park, in the Minato district, just down from Roppongi Hills. Once the home of a feudal lord, it became a public park in the 1930s, and features waterfalls, a large pond, pathways and plum trees, as well as the impressive Tokyo Metropolitan Central Library. Another good morning activity is a visit to the fish auctions at Tsukiji Market. It's supposed to move to Toyosu soon, but for now it's in central Tokyo. Go between 4 and 5am to see the chefs and buyers at work, or 7 to 9am to enjoy the general theatre of the place.

Food is, of course, a major highlight in Tokyo; you'll find more Michelin stars here than in Paris. Much of this is because of the ingredients:

when you put the freshest fish available in the hands of some of the most talented and creative chefs, the results are incredible. In addition, many of the finest Michelin-starred establishments, such as the three-star Sukiyabashi Jiro, have just eight or 10 seats, and some do only one seating per meal, which makes getting a reservation very difficult – even for me. But whether you're eating in a fine-dining restaurant or a simple udon place, meals don't typically last long; you can be well fed in 30 to 40 minutes.

There are so many local specialities to be tasted in Tokyo, and one of the best is the tempura at Tenko. Unlike showy teppan cooking, the food is produced in a very thoughtful Zen way here, by two generations of the same family, and it's brought in sequence, beginning with tea, appetisers and miso soup, before the tempura of shrimp, eel and seasonal vegetables. It's in a former geisha house, and a seat at the horseshoe-shaped counter is the one to get. For the juiciest pork gyoza and the best noodles, try Tohyru for a casual lunch, or Chikuyotei in Ginza for traditional unagi [eel] with rice. It's been in business for 130 years, and the tatami rooms here are very popular, so you need to book in advance.

Also unmissable is the tonkatsu – deep-fried breaded pork cutlets – at Maisen, which is in a former second world war bathhouse. The understated atmosphere is ideal for enjoying the kurobuta pork, which is perfectly tender, with just the right crispiness. Obana, with its Michelin star, is far from the centre of town, but the unagi served there is excellent. The fact that each dish is prepared at the time of ordering makes it a little time-consuming, but it's a very authentic dining experience.

Tokyo is known for shopping in part because there are certain things that can only be found here, including high-quality



Clockwise from left: the Palace Hotel overlooks the grounds of the Imperial Palace. Arisugawa-No-Miya Memorial Park. Daikanyama Tsutaya stocks books in many languages

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seasonal fruits such as the peaches and persimmons that are grown nearby. Two of the best places are Sembikiya and Shinjuku Takano, which specialise in all things fruit, including cakes, confections and beautifully boxed, very expensive muskmelons that are given as gifts and served in thick slices. Itoya is a favourite for stationery and everything to do with writing: pens and pencils, notebooks, desk accessories. Daikanyama Tsutaya is the bookstore to go to; it's massive and has antique editions, contemporary fiction and everything in between, in many languages – and all the international magazines. Toraya, in the historic Tokyo Station, is another special place for confectionery gifts, including yokan jellies packaged in lovely Japanese paper. The red bean paste, agar and sugar sweets can

be an acquired taste because of the flavour and texture, but try them anyway.

For totally unique kitchenware – bento boxes, incredible knives – Tokyu Hands is a must; it's unlike any other department store and I'm always intrigued by at least one gadget I never even knew existed. Takashimaya, Isetan and Mitsukoshi are other noteworthy stores, each with its own *depachika*, or basement food hall, offering bento boxes, sweets, pickles and more. You can taste everything and they're very high-tech and traditional at the same time. In terms of the number of offerings and the cleanliness, I've not seen anything comparable anywhere, even in New York.

The rich cultural history of this city is reflected in its museums. The Tokyo

National Museum houses collections of everything from samurai armour to lacquerware to ancient relics. The Mori Art Museum has smaller rotating contemporary exhibitions that include video installations, and as it's on the 52nd and 53rd floors of the Mori Tower in the Roppongi Hills, the views are incredible, especially from the rooftop Sky Deck. Fans of the king of animation Hayao Miyazaki will love the Ghibli Museum, which displays his sketches. And foodies should visit Umami Science Square “museum” in Kawasaki – my personal favourite, as it's a great place to learn about *umami*, or the fifth taste.

For a festive evening, I'd have a dinner of *sukiyaki* and *shabu-shabu* [thinly sliced meat dishes] at Imahan in Ginza, which has small, private rooms. At the opposite end of things is Sarashina-Horii in Azabu-Juban, for the fresh soba that are made daily and served either hot or cold. It is all

about the food here, and people eat very fast; the soba with grated radish and shrimp is absolutely delicious. And to cap off any meal, I recommend a stop at Toshi Yoroizuka in Roppongi, where beautiful desserts are made to order, much like a sushi chef does at a counter, and where watching the exquisite preparation is as rewarding as the final pastries.

Part of why I love Tokyo so much is that there's always discovery. I'm exposed to new products and new ingredients every time I come, and I love introducing these to people all over the world. I'm continually inspired by Japan and by this city.



THE HIT LIST

WHERE TO STAY

Prices are for a double room with breakfast. **Aman Tokyo**, 1-5-6 Otemachi, 100-0004 (+813-5224 3333; www.aman.com), from ¥129,762 (about £1,000). **Palace Hotel Tokyo**, 1-1-1 Marunouchi, 100-0005 (+813-3211 5211; en.palacehoteltokyo.com), from about £475. **The Peninsula Tokyo**, 1-8-1 Yurakucho, 100-0006 (+813-6270 2888; tokyo.peninsula.com), from about £485.

RESTAURANTS AND CAFES

Prices are for three courses and half a bottle of wine. **Chikuyotei**, 5-8-3 Ginza (+813-3571 0677), from about £60. **Imahan**, 6-8-7 Ginza (+813-3571 5333), about £80 for

beef. **Maisen**, 4-8-5 Jingumae (+811-2042 8485), about £23.

Obana, 5-33-1 Minami-Senju (+813-3801 4670), from about £30 for eel. **Sarashina-Horii**, 3-11-4 Minato-Ku (+813-3403 3401), about £20 for soba with tempura. **Sukiyabashi Jiro**, 4-2-15 Ginza (+813-3535 3600), about £235. **Sushi Kanesaka**, 1-1-1 Marunouchi (+813-3211 5323), from about £50. **Tenko**, 3-1 Kagurazaka (+813-3269 1414), from about £20. **Tohyru**, 2-4-5 Azabu-Juban (+813-3451 0514), from about £20. **Toshi Yoroizuka**, 9-7-2 Akasaka (+813-5413 3650), from about £8 for dessert.

SHOPS

Daikanyama Tsutaya, 17-5 Sarugakucho (+813-3770 2525).

Isetan, 3-14-1 Shinjuku (+813-3352 1111). **Itoya**, 2-7-15 Ginza (+813-3561 8311). **Mitsukoshi**, 4-6-16 Ginza (+813-3562 1111). **Sembikiya**, 2-1-2 Nihonbashi Muromachi (+813-3241 0877). **Shinjuku Takano**, 3-26-11 Shinjuku (+813-5368 5147). **Takashimaya**, 2-4-1 Nihonbashi (+813-3211 4111). **Tokyu Hands**, 12-18 Udagawacho (+813-5489 5111). **Toraya**, 1-9-1 Marunouchi (+813-5220 2345).

SIGHTS

Arisugawa-No-Miya Memorial Park, 5-7-29 Minami-Azabu (+813-5114 8803). **Ghibli Museum**, 1-1-83 Shimorenjaku (+815-7005 5777). **Mori Art Museum**, 6-10-1 Roppongi (+813-5777 8600). **Tokyo National Museum**, 13-9 Uenokoen (+813-3822 1111). **Tsukiji Market**, 5-2-1

Tsukiji (+813-3261 8326). **Umami Science Square**, Ajinomoto plant, 1-1 Suzuki-Cho (+81120-003 476).

WHEN TO GO

The best times to visit are between September and November, when the days are mild, and March to April, when cherry blossoms are in full bloom. June to August has hotter, more humid days but a profusion of events, including July's Sumida River Fireworks Festival (www.sumidagawa-hanabi.com).

HOW TO GET THERE

British Airways (0344-493 0787; www.ba.com) flies three times daily from Heathrow from £495 return, and **Japan Airlines** (0344-856 9778; www.uk.jal.com) from £575 return.