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EXQUISITE TASTE

Tan Lee Kuen experiences the kaiseki at the **PALACE HOTEL TOKYO**

There is no shortage of extraordinary gastronomical moments in Japanese cuisine. Whether it is saltwater fresh sushi from Tsujiki or fork-tender Kobe beef, Japanese food leaves an indelible mark on the mouth and mind. So when it comes to kaiseki, considered its highest pinnacle, it is sure to tick all the right boxes – superb techniques and craftsmanship, gorgeous presentation and super fresh seasonal ingredients. It is a take on the degustation menu, in which a meal would feature a variety of small dishes that changes according to the season and the catch of the day.

As it is with most food origins, there are several accounts on how kaiseki came to be. It starts with the name. The characters for kaiseki are 'breast pocket' and 'stone' and is believed to refer to Zen monks who would stave off the cold and hunger by placing warm stones against their stomachs. In another story, kaiseki was derived from the tea ceremony, a meal of a few choice morsels that emphasises seasonality and simplicity in preparation. Whatever the origins, kaiseki has evolved to represent the height of Japanese gourmet dining, and at Palace Hotel Tokyo's Wadakura restaurant, an experience.

The two go hand-in-hand somewhat for their nod to elegance and the fine things in life. The only hotel to abutt the palace walls, Palace Hotel Tokyo underwent an extensive renovation to reopen in 2012. It now sports a contemporary classic look with effortlessly elegant common areas and rooms, with wraparound views of the palace park and the metropolis skyline in one of the hottest addresses in Tokyo.

The lunch review took place in autumn, when the leaves in the Palace Park were turning into a kaleidoscope of flaming reds and sunny yellows. Foodwise, autumn offers up a bounty of harvest, which means chestnuts, mushrooms and pumpkins, ingredients that would find its way into the meal.

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Images courtesy of PALACE HOTEL TOKYO

A kaiseki meal is structured around a set flow of courses, starting with the appetisers, followed by a first course which is often a soup, seasonal courses of sashimi, and cooked courses consisting of foods prepared in the following way – grilled, simmered, vinegared and chilled. A course of rice rounds up the savouries, and the meal ends with dessert. The arrangement and the formality of this structure is adhered to in the preparation of the meal, with some allowances for change according to the season.

At Wadakura, the kaiseki experience started with the elegant waitresses in kimonos gliding along the handcrafted floors, flanked by textured walls crafted by master plasterer Naoki Kusumi, to show me to my table. The main dining room, which overlooks one of the Imperial Palace's six moats, is quietly elegant with a stone wall of cascading water. A couple of ladies, decked out in Chanel, were already at lunch. The stage was set for a meal to appeal to all senses.

It started with a Palace Hotel original sake, made especially for the hotel by Hakkaisan of Niigata. It is

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a pleasant, sweet-tasting sake to fire up the palate, and if ordered by the bottle, is a lovely accompaniment to the food.

Wadakura has thoughtfully provided a bilingual menu to guide you through the meal. It reads like poetry. Silent study was needed for the appetiser, a bite-size portion of perfectly grilled barracuda and in-season daikoku shimezi mushroom on a bed of chrysanthemum coronarium leaves and flower, topped with a wispy deep-fried tofu skin and tinged with just a taste of yuzu. The soup was a sublime clear concoction with a single serve of shrimp dumpling and turnip, Japanese spinach, carrots and the ever-present yuzu. The seasonal sashimi for day were tuna, seabream and squid; fish so fresh and smooth that it melted on the tongue.

Then came the Nodate bento box, a two-tiered lacquered box filled with goodies from the cooked course. I hardly knew where to begin as I pulled out the ceramic bowls, each containing a delight of some sort. In one ceramic bowl, there was perfectly grilled chicken



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In a kaiseki meal, the rice is served after the feast, because no meal is quite complete with it. Here, we have a bowl of koshihikari rice from Niigata, a sweet and slightly sticky Japanese short grain rice, with miso soup and pickles. Dessert was simple but delicious stewed apples with a beautiful yuzu sauce. In all, it took about three lush hours of quietly eating and appreciating every morsel that was put in front of me. In these short hours, this kaiseki meal at the Palace Hotel Tokyo has deepened my appreciation for the Japanese sensibility for art, culture, food and hospitality. **17**

with plum, a fluffy egg omelette, a well-formed shiitake mushroom dumpling, fresh pumpkin and Japanese pepper with a slightly bittersweet ginkgo nut to round out the taste, beef with vegetables, and grilled fish – all in bite-sized portions.

The grilled dish was a meaty beef Hamburg steak, the simmered dish was Japanese spinach, fried tofu and scallop, while the steamed dish was a steamed egg custard with crab, lily bulb and ginger. Every bite was to provoke contemplation, whether in appreciation of the flavour, the texture, the freshness or the combination of flavours.

With each course, the graceful wait staff would unobtrusively glide in and out with the plates and a smile. Communication faltered at times as I asked a lot of questions and they strove to answer every one of them to the best of their abilities. The service was faultless.

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