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LIFESTYLE



TASTE OF TOKYO

Food and travel have long been the preferred coupling for today's clued-in travellers. Discover Japan's fascinating world of *washoku* in an interactive and informative way with the Palace Hotel Tokyo's innovative new eat-and-stay packages that serve up the best of the city's tastes in truly personalised style.

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PALATE'S PATHWAY
The Palace Hotel Tokyo's Japanese restaurant is named after the Wadakura moat, which used to be the primary pathway for transporting food to the shogun's seat.



A ROOM WITH A VIEW
The Palace Hotel Tokyo offers rooms with stunning, uninterrupted views over the Imperial Palace gardens.



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Few destinations hold me in thrall quite the way Japan does. From its natural offerings to its culture, the legendary politeness of its people and the way it seamlessly melds ancient traditions with space-age living, it ticks all the right boxes and then some. When it comes to its cuisine, however, no nation can compare to Japanese food's sheer breadth, depth and finesse.

Collectively termed as *washoku*, which translates simply as "Japanese cuisine" – an elegant fusion of the words *wa* (harmony) and *shoku* (food), it is, in essence, an integrated approach designed to ensure each meal achieves both nutritional balance as well as aesthetic harmony. This may be seen in a simple rice bowl served with warming miso and crunchy Japanese pickles or perhaps a plate of grilled fish, paired with threads of grated *daikon* (radish) for contrast and as a digestive aid.

I had asked a Tokyo-based friend what exactly defines *washoku*. After all, this simple guideline for preparing food also serves as a guiding light for the nation's culinary

philosophy, to the extent it was designated as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in December 2013. The friend mulls over the question awhile before answering: "*Washoku* is, to put it plainly, food that feeds body and soul." And, as if to stress the importance and sincerity of that statement, he added: "*Kokoro kara* (from the bottom of my heart)."

Body and soul is inseparable in Japanese culture. After all, when even the simple act of soaking in an *onsen* (hot spring) is imbued with an almost ritualistic beauty, why then should it not extend to its cuisine? Although *washoku* is open to individual interpretation, it remains mysterious to most non-Japanese. In this light, the Palace Hotel Tokyo, one of Tokyo's grandest and finest places to check in to, recently launched two new food-centric experiences to please today's gourmet-minded traveller.

To the uninitiated, Tokyo can be intimidating – a megalopolis that combines, at once, slick modernity, with its endless pop of flashing neon lights set against a backdrop

01 Of maple leaves and a moat - serene views from the hotel's main lobby.

02 *Takikomi gohan* with burdock root miso.

03 Stunning sushi from Sushi Kanesaka at the Palace Hotel Tokyo.

04 Cuisine is an edible art form here.



05 The sights, sounds and shops of Ginza is a short stroll away.

06 A food stall selling *oden*, Japan's take on *yong tow foo*.

07 Grilled fish on a stick makes for a moveable feast.

08 Tokyo's Tsukiji Market remains one of the city's biggest draws.



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of space-age streetscape filled with Harajuku-esque characters, coupled with the lingering spirit of ancient Edo, where Zen temples, geisha and art forms like Noh and Rakugo still hold sway. Therefore, finding a haven, a safe base, from which to experience and explore Tokyo at its best is imperative.

Located in Marunouchi, by the moat of Kokyo (the Imperial Palace) and a short stroll away from Tokyo Station, the iconic Palace Hotel Tokyo is now drawing guests who come primarily for inventive, gastronomically-inclined stays. Although its dining establishments are nonpareil, the hotel has cleverly created interesting new experiences with which to delight today's increasingly-discerning traveller. Foremost is the *Savoring Tokyo* package, which serves up a bespoke foray into the city's culinary riches with knowledgeable personalities, including John Gauntner, the world's foremost non-Japanese authority on saké; Steve Trautlein, a food journalist and editor with over 15 years of Tokyo experience; and Yukari Sakamoto, a chef, sommelier, *shochu* advisor, and author of the popular food and dining guide, *Food Saké Tokyo*.

It was Sakamoto whom I met in the lobby of the Palace Hotel Tokyo early one crisp morning before we cabbid it over to the city's legendary Tsukiji Shijo, the world's

largest fish market, famous for its live tuna auctions. Speaking both Japanese and English fluently, Sakamoto proved to be the perfect foodie guide as we navigated the *jogai* (outer market), where all kinds of produce and culinary tools are sold.

I sniffed the air, heady with the aromatic scent of broth, as we walked past *tachigui* (seat-less food stalls where you eat standing) peddling hot noodles. A woman with a wealth of information, Sakamoto deftly points out the best places to buy or taste everything, which may range from Shoro's fluffy *tamagoyaki* (egg omelettes) to Nakagawayaya's colourful pickled fruit and vegetables and the wares of Suita Shoten, a shop that sells over 100 varieties of kelp.

"Because of my training as a chef, sommelier and *shochu* advisor, I am able to introduce Japanese food culture on a much deeper level than other generic food tours," Sakamoto points out. "By the end of each tour, our clients will have a much deeper appreciation of seasonal ingredients, Japanese cuisine and food culture," says the Japanese-American.

Certainly, as I trail Sakamoto, who weaves in and out of the lanes and alleys of Tsukiji, my eyes are opened to a whole new world of ingredients and their roles in Japanese cuisine. Facing my barrage of questions, Sakamoto efficiently answered them in detail. I learn about Setsubun,

a festival where children throw dried soybeans at their *oni* (demon) mask-wearing fathers, while shouting, ‘*Oni wa soto, fuku wa uchi*’ (‘out with the devil, in with luck!’).

She shows me Hicho, one of Tsukiji’s most famous tuna vendors – a family who has been in the trade for eight generations – while pointing out the long wooden boxes used to store the prized catch, which are referred to as ‘tuna coffins’. More importantly, being completely unable to read or speak any Japanese, I had to rely on Sakamoto as my physical bridge between cultures and understanding, allowing me to satiate my curiosity, while giving me a fascinating insight into Japan’s proverbial belly. For those seeking to experience all the delight a morning at Tsukiji brings, do hurry as the legendary market will soon move to a new site in Toyosu by November 2016.

The second portion of *Savoring Tokyo* introduces guests to the wonderful world that is the Japanese food hall, without which no major self-respecting department store would dare be without. Known as *depachika*, its name is an amalgam of the words *depa-to* (department store) and *chika* (basement). *Charlotte’s Web* author EB White may have exhorted us to “always be on the lookout for the presence of wonder”, but you’ll find it easily in any *depachika*.

With a whole floor, sometimes two, devoted to the pleasures of the palate, even adults would experience a childish, in-a-sweet-shop delight at being surrounded by every kind of good thing imaginable; from sweet treats beautifully-wrapped in *furoshiki* (colourful fabric) to stacks of *bento* boxes all ready for the salaryman’s lunch as well as all the wonders of the world of *wagashi* (Japanese confections) can afford, it’s hard to exercise restraint here.

It pays to arrive at the *depachika* early as you’d be treated to a display of justifiably famous Japanese politesse. When the doors open at 10am sharp, every member of the staff will line up to greet you with a deep bow upon entering, while chirpily wishing you *irasshaimase*, the traditional call of welcome.

Take your time to browse through the *depachika*’s different sections. With Sakamoto by my side, I am introduced to seasonal delights like cherry blossom *anpan* (a Japanese sweet roll) as well as regional treats, like Ginza-style *tonkatsu* from Bairin, one of the oldest and most celebrated *tonkatsu* purveyors in Japan, as well as sushi, pressed in the unique Kyoto-style. I also marvel at the selection of wagyu, where certain cuts of beef even come accompanied with the cow’s birth certificate (usually a “nose print”) as proof of its origins and quality. Packaged gift sets are also available as tokens with which to present potential hosts.

Each *Savoring Tokyo* package comes with your choice of a *prix-fixe* lunch or dinner at the Palace Hotel Tokyo’s Wadakura restaurant, named after the moat that surrounds the Imperial Palace. After the tour, as I hungrily tuck into seasonal dishes like bracken and bean soup, sesame tofu and grilled *sawara* (Japanese mackerel), I couldn’t help but look out onto the restaurant’s namesake moat and think, how fitting that my culinary tour would



end with a sumptuous meal in a restaurant named after the waterway that was the primary source of transporting food when the palace was still Edo-jo, the former castle and seat of the Tokugawa shoguns.

I may only have experienced a tiny fraction of the wonders of *washoku*, but, as the saying goes, experience is the teacher of all things. I am glad my *Savoring Tokyo* experience left me, not just nourished by food, but also enriched from all that I’ve learnt, each speck of knowledge adding to my love for this magical country and all the elements that contribute to its fascinating culture. It looks as if my friend was right. *Washoku* does feed both body and soul. *Kokoro kara.* ㊦

At press time, a new Wanderlust Weekend package was also unveiled, which combines three quintessential Palace Hotel Tokyo experiences – water, wine and washoku – and includes a seasonal kaiseki lunch at the property’s signature Japanese restaurant, Wadakura, a wine-paired meal at the Michelin-starred Crown restaurant and treatments at the hotel’s Evian Spa, the only one of its kind in Japan.



09 Haul yourself out of bed to witness the excitement of a tuna auction at Tsukiji.

10 The Palace Hotel Tokyo is also within walking distance of Tokyo Station - your gateway to the rest of Japan’s wonders.

SAKAMOTO-SAN SUGGESTS...

Yukari Sakamoto’s Top 10 *depachika* favourites.



“The Ginza Mitsukoshi is where I most often take *Savoring Tokyo* guests as it’s very close to the Palace Hotel Tokyo. It is actually spread out over two floors, so make sure to explore both or you will miss out!”

- 01** There is often a saké brewery pouring out samples for customers to taste in the saké shop. It’s a great way to try before buying as well as to speak with the brewery staff on what makes their saké unique.
- 02** *Kouign-amann* at **Johan Bakery**. The Breton pastry is made with butter and sugar so it caramelises as it bakes. Be warned – it is addictive!
- 03** Roasted sweet potatoes at **Cadeau de Chaimon**. Simple is sometimes best.
- 04** Seasonal salads from **RF1** are both colourful and nourishing. I find a lot of inspiration for recreating the salads at home by observing the ingredients and combinations used.
- 05** *Tonkatsu* at **Maisen**, one of my favourite pork cutlet shops in the city. The main store in Omotesando is popular, with long lines. This is a great way to get it without having to queue.
- 06** Tempura from **Tenichi**. The *kakiage* is a mixture of vegetables deep-fried into a cake. I often buy this to eat at home, served atop a bowl of hot soba.
- 07** *Omusubi*, rice balls filled with savoury seasonings, make perfect meals-on-the-run and epitomises Japanese comfort food. **Yume Omusubi** has seasonal offerings, like bamboo shoots and roe. I find it hard to resist any kind of roe, including *ikura* (salmon roe) and *mentaiko* (spicy pollack roe).
- 08** *Wagashi* (traditional Japanese confectioneries) may be the best way to savour the seasons. **Taneyaya** has a colourful selection with the most exquisite packaging.
- 09** **Matsuzaka Senbei** offers sweet and savoury crackers. They make nice gifts to bring home for friends and, if you’re travelling throughout Japan, they are a great snack when riding on the Shinkansen bullet train.
- 10** Japanese fruit is amazing. While I cannot afford a musk melon in a wooden box, I love treating myself to a glass of juice – made with fresh fruit and blended ice – at **Sun Fruits Juice Stand**.