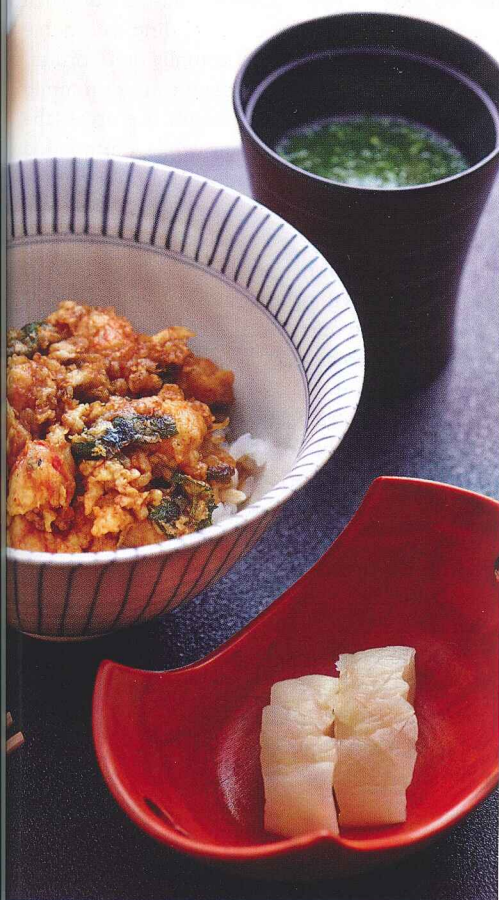


LACQUERED
MID-PAINTED DOORS
VIDEO A GRAND
EXPERIENCE



PHOTOS BY KAHMUN / MYTHSTUDIO

KAKIAGE IS BEST PAIRED WITH TENTSUYU SAUCE



Master at Work

The arrival of GINZA TENKUNI, Malaysia's first tempura specialist, marks the dawn of a refined craft that falls on the ideals of perfection, writes JULIE YIM

TO SOME, PERFECTION is overrated but the notion certainly does not apply to the Japanese culture known for its pursuit for perfection. It is this quiet pursuit for perfection that has led to Japan's rise in culinary excellence, a feat indisputable by chefs around the world, placing rank as the city with more Michelin stars than Paris. Years of meticulous refinement that stems from the specialisation of one craft and a fervent dedication to perfecting it together with an emphasis on fresh ingredients and technical precision contribute to this culinary supremacy.

Ginza Tenkuni, renowned tempura specialist in Tokyo, exemplifies this notion quite evidently so, serving customers with their 130-year-old

traditional recipe of edo-style tempura. Since its inception in 1885, the tempura establishment located at the Ginza main street has evolved from its humble beginnings as a small street stall to a six-storey building, earning them the moniker "Tenkuni, veterans of tempura". The opening of their first establishment outside Ginza, right here at the brand-spanking new St. Regis Kuala Lumpur marks the arrival of Malaysia's first tempura specialist.

Hideyuki Kikuchi knows a thing or two about the art of perfection. As the executive chef at Ginza Tenkuni, a position he has helmed for 10 years now, Kikuchi believes every chef has a master to learn from. Armed with 30 years of culinary

PRAWN TEMPURA



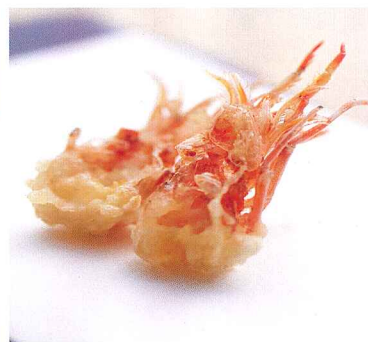
SHIITAKE MUSHROOM TEMPURA



THE SWEET POTATO TEMPURA IS THE HIGHLIGHT FROM THE MENU



SUCCULENT SHRIMP HEADS



experience, the award-winning master carver boasts an impressive repertoire, formerly serving the royal family in Japan. To ensure the quality in Ginza Tenkuni's new Kuala Lumpur establishment, Kikuchi has personally handpicked a team of four dedicated chefs from the original Ginza restaurant to perpetuate the restaurant's legacy.

In order to introduce the authentic experience from Ginza to Kuala Lumpur, every ingredient in the restaurant is flown in, right down to their special oil blend and signature *tentsuyu* sauce. The gastronomic experience begins the moment the grand hand-painted lacquered doors depicting colossal waves dramatically open to reveal the best seat in the house – a 12-seater counter made from 300-year-old lacquered Hinoki wood. With matching Hinoki wooden chopsticks and artfully curated tableware from Japan to match, Ginza Tenkuni boasts all the makings of a fine dining restaurant.

"Ginza Tenkuni serves edo-style tempura, which gained popularity during the Edo period. Tempura originally began as a fast food concept served at roadside stalls, but over the years it has been refined to fine dining," Kikuchi explains earnestly. The tasteful omakase menu at the restaurant is curated according to seasonal ingredients that are available to highlight the best that Japan has to offer. "In Japan, each tempura specialty restaurant will have their own special ingredients and style. If one small ingredient is lacking, then the dish will turn out completely different," he adds on further.

Kenichi Ishikawa, one of the tempura chefs handpicked by Kikuchi, has a few tricks of his own up his sleeve. His daily routine is hot and intense, as he cooks with a handmade copper cauldron filled with the restaurant's signature premium oil blend. "There are three things essential to produce the perfect tempura. Our original blend of premium oil consists of sesame oil and corn oil mixed together. Secondly, the batter requires chilling and will be mixed in a technical way to infuse air inside the flour. The measurements vary according to different ingredients. Lastly, our signature *tentsuyu* sauce for dipping remains one of our best-kept secret as only

two selected chefs hold the recipe to produce the sauce," Kikuchi states.

The crackling sound of hot oil punctuates the silence, signalling Ishikawa's cue to dip in the shrimp heads he had prepared earlier. His hands move deftly, as the oil roils around the shrimp batter until it turns a beautiful shade of pale golden yellow. "A skilled chef will be able to tell how hot the oil is just by listening to the crackling of the oil and dipping their chopsticks with the ingredient inside the oil. They will be able to adjust the temperature and know when the tempura is done," Kikuchi explains while keeping his eyes on Ishikawa's work. As a final touch, Ishikawa lifts the shrimp heads from the hot oil and does a quick flick with his chopsticks. The reason behind this is to remove any excess grease from the tempura batter.

A few condiments including a slice of lemon, plum salt and Ginza Tenkuni's signature *tentsuyu* sauce have been prepared on my table. When Ishikawa sets the shrimp heads down on the counter, the first thing I notice is the missing grease, which Kikuchi credits is due to the premium oil blend they use. Though there are no rules to pairing the condiments with various tempura ingredients, Kikuchi's favourite condiment is the plum salt that goes nicely with a glass of sake in hand.

At first bite, the thinly coated shrimp heads are succulent and sweet, boasting the right balance of crispiness, a surprising case considering how tempura is often misperceived as a mixture cloaked in thick, doughy batter that drowns out the natural freshness of the ingredients. What's truly remarkable is how Ginza Tenkuni's tempura allows the ingredients to shine on its own without being overwhelmed by the superfluous batter. This is especially apparent when it comes to the snap peas and shiitake mushrooms as the crunchy earthy flavours are a delightful robust mix that brings to mind the arrival of winter in Japan.

For Kikuchi, this is what Ginza Tenkuni aims to achieve, by introducing the authentic experience of tempura made from fresh ingredients. This refined version is the reason tempura has been championed

as a craft on its own, distinctive enough to be on par with sushi's sacred status, commanding a fine dining experience that is equally as appealing.

The highlight from the omakase menu is the *satsuma imo* or sweet potato, which takes the longest to cook. Caramelised on the outside, the golden yellow centre reveals a sweet-yet-light flavour, providing the ideal balance. We end the omakase meal with *kakiage* served on a bed of fluffy rice bowl, which Kikuchi recommends is best paired with their signature *tentsuyu* sauce.

The attention to detail and meticulous refinement that goes onto a plate of tempura certainly requires a skilled chef to master the craft. According to Kikuchi, it takes more than 10 years to train as a tempura chef, as mastering the rice alone requires three years, while learning the right timing to place the sauce on the rice bowl will require another three years. Though there has been plenty of hype surrounding the art of sushi, this may be tempura's moment to shine. **P**

CHEF KENICHI ISHIKAWA,
CHEF HIDEYUKI KIKUCHI &
CHEF SATOSHI UEHARA