

FOOD

Attention to Detail

From importing its own seafood to its 300-year-old solid hinoki wood counter, Sushi Taka does not cut corners

By Katelyn Tan



Clockwise from far left: The restaurant's signature tossaki (chopped tuna neck) roll; Sushi Taka's interior; tamago yaki



The best representation of the meticulous care that is present at Sushi Taka could be through its tamago yaki (Japanese omelette), typically served at the end of a traditional edomae sushi course. Mastering the egg omelette, while unassuming to the eye, requires years of practise and skill. If you've watched the documentary *Jiro Dreams of Sushi*, there is a memorable scene when an apprentice's tamago yaki is finally deemed acceptable after 10 years, causing him to break down in tears.

Unlike the cake-like texture I expected, Sushi Taka's tamago yaki is soft and custardy, with a caramelised crust. Head sushi chef Daichi Yazawa, standing on the opposite side of the sushi counter where I sit alongside Sai Men Chua, executive director of One IFC Hotel Sdn Bhd, the company that owns and operates the restaurant, explains, "Our tamago yaki is made from shiba ebi (baby prawns), eggs, and sweeteners in the form of sugar and honey."

The tedious part comes into play with a heavy piece of charcoal that is manually held above the pan for an hour. "It is not an easy process. Charcoal has to be used as it

provides strong heat from the top to penetrate through the egg," Yazawa continues. The charcoal is heavy, and requires constant movement and rotation.

"In the case of edomae-style sushi, tamago yaki is considered the most important component," Yazawa enthuses. "It epitomises whether a chef has served a successful meal."

In Malaysia, Sushi Taka is currently the only restaurant that presents a custard tamago yaki during the meal. Chua adds: "There are different progressions of tamago yaki. The most common and easiest to make is the folded omelette, followed by the cake-style tamago yaki. Then comes the most painstaking—the custard-style."

Such attention to detail is also present in other aspects of the experience at Sushi Taka—some visible, and some more subtle. For instance, we are sitting at a 300-year-old hinoki wood counter made of a single piece of wood, typically only found in high-end restaurants in Japan. "The smell of the wood reduces any odour from the fish, while working to improve appetite," Chua explains. "We are the only restaurant in Malaysia to

have a hinoki counter."

Sushi Taka aims to be on top of its game, especially in terms of the quality of its fish, all of which are wild and caught from the sea. "The most important thing is getting the best and freshest ingredients, which we source from the best suppliers in Japan. For example, our tuna

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is supplied by Yamayuki, which is the most renowned tuna supplier in Japan,” says Yazawa. Typically, each tuna block imported by the restaurant weighs 5kg.

The restaurant is the first in Malaysia to be supported by the aforementioned supplier, and before I have a chance to ask why, Chua pipes in: “Not everyone can work with them in Japan as these suppliers have to be confident in a chef’s ability to handle the fish.” As a country known for its raw seafood, this is understandable.

Such relationships have to be maintained as they are built on trust and communication. “Every night, after dinner, I call the suppliers, who provide constant updates about the sea and fishing port,” says Yazawa. “I make an order based on what is available and what is in season.”

However, working with such quality produce can be rendered pointless if handled improperly during importation. Chua recalls that when Sushi Taka first opened, he met with local suppliers and importers, but was not satisfied with the quality and treatment of the produce. “If each shipment is not handled the right way, or kept at the right temperature, this affects quality,” he explains.

To tackle this, Sushi Taka imports its own fish three times a week on Wednesday, Friday, and Sunday. Basing its menu around supply results in a seasonally changing experience for guests. “The menu can change anywhere from two weeks to a month,” says Yazawa.

While produce is undoubtedly important, equally vital is a chef’s skill, which Chua hopes that patrons of Sushi Taka will come to appreciate. “In Malaysia, the focus is typically on food but in Japan, the chef is honoured as the star of the show,” Chua says. “Yazawa is the only sushi chef with such experience compared to other chefs.”

Yazawa shakes his head, shrugging off the compliments. He

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From left: A meal at Sushi Taka is always consistent, beginning with a chopped tuna neck roll, appetisers, white fish, tuna, and anago as the last sushi; sushi is served at the hinoki wood sushi counter. **Opposite page:** Head sushi chef Daichi Yazawa holds the restaurant’s Hagama rice cooker

has just emerged from the kitchen carrying a clay rice cooker with a wooden lid. “We use a Hagama rice cooker, which results in separate grains that are bouncier, with more texture,” Chua explains, noticing my distracted gaze. “High in starch and sugar, Japanese rice becomes sticky if cooked in a normal rice cooker. It is important to have airiness in the rice, so every grain can be tasted, while it complements the neta (ingredients that top the rice).”

The inner lid of the Hagama is perforated, allowing steam to escape, with an outer lid made of hinoki wood. Time is taken by the restaurant to keep grain size consistent, filtering out any broken rice. “Temperature is also important,” Chua quips. “You may notice that Yazawa lays out all the fish before slicing to bring it to room temperature. Likewise, the rice should not be cold, which reduces the flavour of the fish.”

If you’ve ever taken your time to take photos of the delicate piece of sushi (something we’re all guilty of), perhaps Chua’s next piece of advice might cause you to reconsider: “There should always be a 10-second rule when eating sushi, as the longer it sits, the temperature drops, and the airiness of the rice—which requires a lot of skill to produce—goes away.”



Sushi Taka was conceptualised in 2014 before opening in 2017. “We wanted a signature restaurant for the hotel that could stand the test of time, so we went with traditional edomae sushi,” Chua recalls.

A meal at Sushi Taka is always consistent, beginning with the restaurant’s signature tossaki (chopped tuna neck) roll, followed by the appetisers. Then comes the white fish, tuna (which consists of Akami, Chutoro and Otoro), and anago as the last sushi before the tamago yaki.

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highlights and enhances them,” Yazawa says.

Looking back, Chua believes that Sushi Taka was ahead of its time: “Explaining what edomae sushi was 10 years ago was a challenge, as we were the first in the market.”

The team at Taka took time to interact with guests, displaying fish certificates, and explaining the effort that goes into the art. “Sushi comes at many different levels, and experience and understanding are required for appreciation,” adds Chua. When asked about his dream for the restaurant, Yazawa says: “If someone wanted to experience top quality sushi, I want Taka to immediately come to mind.”