



PHOTOS: SHINJI

Bite into (from left) kohara, aji and toro sushi and imagine yourself in Tokyo.

Raw pleasures

Eats

Wong Ah Yoke



There has never been a more exciting time for Singapore's dining scene than now.

Every month, as has been happening for the past few decades, new restaurants open around the island, bringing in new chefs, cuisines and styles of cooking.

But what is different now is that world-class chefs are taking note of this little island and opening restaurants here, taking the local fine-dining scene quite a few notches higher. And it is not happening in just the two new integrated resorts.

A top chef who recently opened here is Japanese sushi master Shinji Kanesaka, whose restaurant in Ginza – Sushi Kanesaka which opened in 2000 – has earned two Michelin stars.

His restaurant here, Shinji By Kanesaka, opened at Raffles Hotel three weeks ago, taking over the space formerly occupied by Doc Cheng's. And already, it is living up to the chef's reputation.

Dining there, one can easily imagine oneself in Tokyo because so much attention has been paid to ensure the experience is as authentic as possible to a traditional Japanese sushi restaurant.

It is not only that the fish comes from Tokyo's famous Tsukiji market – after all, a number of other Japanese restaurants in Singapore get their supplies from there too.

But it is also all the other details such as the interiors of the restaurant that include a counter carved from the trunk of a Japanese cypress tree and a ceiling covered in traditional hand-woven latticework. There are two sushi counters and two private rooms, seating a total of 42 people.

Then there is the staff, who include a team of five Japanese chefs led by master chef Koichiro Oshino, who has been making sushi for 22 years.

And of course, there is the food. Shinji offers only an omakase menu, which

means the chef customises a selection of items for each day's guests based on the best ingredients available. The only choices are the number of items you want to eat, with corresponding prices.

Lunch ranges from \$75 to \$180, while dinner ranges from \$220 to \$450.

I chose the \$300 dinner menu, which I felt best represents what dining at Shinji is all about as it includes various courses of sashimi, sushi and cold dishes. It comprises about 20 items, including 10 pieces of nigiri sushi and maki sushi.

My meal started with cold items such as Japanese yam jelly and raw shrimp topped with marinated chopped snapper belly, before moving on to sashimi that included yellowtail and sea urchin.

Everything was of top-grade quality, but it was the sushi that was the highlight of the meal. Ranging from chutoro (medium fatty tuna) and otoro (fatty tuna) to karei (flounder) and aji (horse mackerel), every morsel was a perfect balance of rice and fish.

And I liked that the rice was slightly warm – a Shinji signature touch. It brought out the flavour of the fish just that little bit more, I felt.

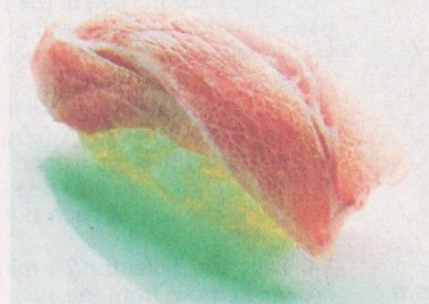
The sushi needed no dipping sauce, as the chef brushed the restaurant's own blend of sauce lightly over the fish before serving it.

The maki was no less magical, especially the uni (sea urchin) where the combination of chilled uni, warm rice and crispy seaweed triggered off a battery of sensory pleasures on the palate.

In fact, a meal at Shinji creates such heady pleasure that one wishes one can return to the restaurant again and again. Sadly, however, unless one has deep pockets, sobriety quickly returns when one is presented with the bill.

Since my pockets are limited, I will probably go for lunch instead when I feel like giving myself a treat. If it is any consolation, at least it is cheaper than going to Tokyo.

LifeStyle paid for its meals at the eatery reviewed here.



MUST TRY

Otoro sushi

Oozing with aromatic oils with every bite, this is one piece of pleasure you wish never ends.



SHINJI BY KANESAKA

380 North Bridge Road, 02-20 Raffles Hotel, tel: 6338-6131

Open: Noon to 3pm, 6 to 10.30pm (Mondays to Saturdays). Closed on Sundays

Food: ★★★★★

Service: ★★★★★

Ambience: ★★★★★

Price: From \$75 for lunch and \$220 for dinner