



# Mastering Sushi

Sushi is more than a cuisine – it's an art and mastery takes time. Giselle Whiteaker seeks out a master in Mayfair.

The proliferation of sushi in the Western world, with the emergence of chain restaurants and pre-packaged supermarket offerings, doesn't do justice to the intricacies of the Japanese cuisine, which merges simple flavours with artistry and flair – there's a reason it takes around a decade to become a sushi master in Japan. Find a true master though, and even sushi doubters can become converts.

In the search for the perfect fusion of flavour, presentation and creativity, my friend Alex and I booked into Tsukiji sushi restaurant. Tsukiji, named after Tokyo's sprawling wholesale fish market, is part of The Westbury hotel in Mayfair, although with its separate entrance, the intimate space that caters for only 20 diners feels like a discreet, private dining room. We're curious to see whether we can taste the blend of Japanese cuisine and Mayfair spirit the restaurant promises. A hint is in the décor, with traditional *noren* curtains hanging over the kitchen door and a deep red wood interior, paired with funky light fixtures looking like giant mesh

spheres and a glass runway with pebbles beneath. It's very Japanese, and yet it's not out of place in this corner of London, where the odd black taxi tootles past the window.

The menu is extensive, fusing traditional and contemporary flavours. It's packed with delicious-sounding morsels and we can't decide what to order, so instead we opt for the eight-course tasting menu. That way we get to sample the creative imagination of head chef Show Choong in bursts. The chef began his career in Malaysia, where he studied the art of Japanese cuisine. Resolving to pursue his passion on international soil, he moved to London, where he has been fine-tuning and mastering his skills in fusion cooking for the past two decades in kitchens such as Chelsea's Azuka, the Seti-Tai and Yan-Baru in Marylebone before Tsukiji. Having lived in Japan, I'm keen to see whether Choong's dishes can sate my sushi cravings.

We're off to a good start with the first dish, *buna shimeji* [small mushrooms], served with green sauce. It's a gentle flavour, the green sauce a hint of the complexities to come. When Alex asks what's in the sauce, our server quickly returns with a list from the chef, including spring onion, parsley, coriander, garlic, grape seed oil and more, but we suspect it's the addition of a dash of Choong's secret special sauce that gives it power.

Next up is Hamachi new-style sashimi with a spicy sauce, called "new style" because it was invented at Tsukiji. Slices of delicate, pink, melt-in-the-mouth fish are wrapped around a medley of crunchy vegetables, including cucumber and micro-radish, standing in a small pool of home-made chili sauce that hints at warmth but delivers pure flavour, the contrasting textures delighting the palate.

The third dish is a Japanese classic, *tataki chu toro* – seared fatty tuna sashimi – although it is paired with a jalapeno salsa that has us both salivating. "That is beautifully done," says Alex. "It just falls apart in the mouth." I have to agree. The flavours are building and I'm wondering when the crescendo hits. I don't have long to think as dish four is served.

The octopus Carpaccio sits on a bed of white radish and fennel, and is doused in a tan-coloured sauce containing truffle oil, Japanese mustard, and *saikyo miso* [soybean paste]. Our eyes widen simultaneously as the first slice dissolves on the tongue. "That's got a kick like a footballer player," Alex comments as the mustard does its work. "Best dish so far," he declares, as his chopsticks tinkle on the bottom of the now-empty plate.

The award for presentation goes to our next dish, a grilled oyster with a creamy sauce propped on a disc of salt, a tangle of black seaweed nestled at the base, on a rough-hewn plate that mirrors the oyster's shape. A sprinkling of *tobiko* [flying fish roe] adds crunch to the soft oyster, the mild saltiness in harmony with the slightly sweet sauce, setting us up for the seared salmon maki to come. The salmon is draped over the top of the rice balls, with cream cheese, avocado and a dab of plum sauce making it sweet and tangy at the same time.



Buna shimeji

When we reach the new-style sushi, I think we've peaked. Tonight, the chef has selected butterfish with spring onion and yuzu ponzu sauce; scallop with yuzu, miso and caviar; and Hamachi with fresh wasabi and tamari soy. I've never heard of butterfish, but I know I'll be on the lookout for it after this dish, and Alex is blown away by his first sampling of sweet, raw scallops.



Green tea ice-cream

Our final savoury dish is black cod in a saikyo miso sauce. A sweet fragrance wafts from the plate and the fish is cooked to perfection, the flakes of pure white flesh rimmed with caramelised miso. We eat slowly, savouring the impact on the tongue.

As a connoisseur of green tea ice-cream, I'm delighted that our meal ends with a generous scoop. I didn't think it could get any better than the creamy tea version, with its trace of bitterness, but the peanut croquant in the centre shifts the flavour and texture into a whole new realm. "I am seriously impressed," says Alex, licking the final drops of ice-cream from the spoon. So am I. Show Choong's understanding of balance, harmony and flavour is evident in every dish. The accolade of Sushi Master is well-deserved in this corner of Mayfair.

For more information or to make a booking at Tsukiji Mayfair, see [tsukijimayfair.com](http://tsukijimayfair.com)



Seared Salmon maki



Tataki Chu Toro

# Four more to watch

## The Crystal Palace Market Oyster and Wine Bar

With the annual oyster season in full swing, The Crystal Palace Market has opened The Oyster and Wine Bar, managed by the owner of French Comte Company Fabien Joly. Previously a butcher and fishmonger, the bar uses old features, including the oyster bar, butchers block and cheese room, adding in chic wooden shelves and metal stools. The Wine and Oyster Bar's small bites have been matched with organic and natural wines handpicked by head sommelier, Jean Louis Naveilhan.

[thewineandoysterbar.com](http://thewineandoysterbar.com)



## Absurd Bird

Absurd Bird is an unpretentious eatery marrying style, taste and design with a dose of fun. Bringing the soul-warming comfort food of the American South to London, the menu is a twisted take on Southern classics. Absurd Bird specialises in chicken, which is sourced from Fosse Meadows Farm and marinated in secret recipe sauces then teamed with irresistible sides. The lounge space downstairs is the perfect hideaway for a sneaky tittle of distilled absurd moonshine.

[absurdbird.com](http://absurdbird.com)



## The Franklin Hotel in Knightsbridge

The Franklin Hotel at Egerton Gardens recently announced Alfredo Russo as their new Executive Chef. The dining experience with Russo's Italian-inspired menu promises to be as decadent as the hotel's eight-million pound redesign by Anouska Hempel. Russo's accolades include opening his first Michelin-star restaurant at the age of 22 and he is known for taking the beautiful simplicity of Italian cooking and turning out playful, elegant and sometimes outspoken dishes. The accent is always on the freshest, finest ingredients and inventive flavour combinations.

[thefranklinlondon.com](http://thefranklinlondon.com)



## Som Saa

Som Saa is set in an ex-garment factory in Spitalfields, but despite the ultra-hip interior, the food is the star. Far from the typical Thai takeaway, Som Saa offers cuisine from Thailand's north-eastern provinces, prepared by Australian chef Mark Dobbie and British 2009 *MasterChef* finalist Andy Oliver. Dishes range from whole deep fried seabass with roasted rice and isaan herbs to jungle curry with fish, Thai aubergines, holy basil and wild ginger. The bar area is worthy of attention too, with a curated drinks list including creative cocktails, unfiltered tank lager and aged teas.

[somsaa.com](http://somsaa.com)