

## Chef Morimoto grants glimpse of Riverfront restaurant

### Foodies and fans crowd Opera House fundraiser

By **L. PIERCE CARSON**  
*Register Staff Writer*

A disciple of famed Japanese culinary pioneer Nobu Matsuhisa — whose star he's decidedly eclipsed — Masaharu Morimoto invited friends of the Napa Valley Opera House for a preview of his first West Coast restaurant at Napa's Riverfront Sunday night.

The fundraising event was an immediate sell-out, with 250 foodies and wine country looky-loos jamming the spacious new downtown hot spot as the weekend drew to a sunset-capped close.

Attired in traditional Japanese dress, the star of television's *Iron Chef* — backed by executive chef Jeffrey Lunak and a brigade of talented young cooks — served up enough food to feed Coxe's army, giving all a pretty good idea of what he has in mind for those wandering into Morimoto Napa.

Bob Almeida, president of the Napa Valley Opera House's board of directors, said a third of Sunday's guests were regulars at the downtown Napa performance space, while the rest had come from all over the Bay Area to check out Morimoto's new culinary temple to East Meets West.

Almeida said response to the Opera House fundraising preview had been fantastic. He said a number of people had

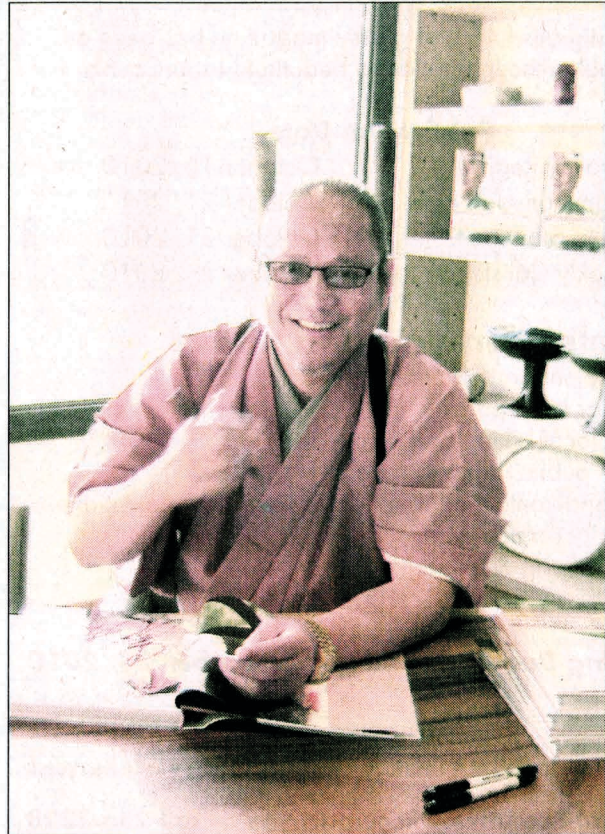
driven up from San Francisco and the peninsula to check out Morimoto's initial venture on the Left Coast.

"You'd be surprised how many people are here because they are fans of Morimoto," he added. Many feel Morimoto, because of frequent appearances on *Iron Chef*, has become the best-known chef in the nation since Julia Child held court on the TV screen.

Sunday evening's crowd spilled from the 80-seat dining room and adjacent private dining space onto a 40-seat patio overlooking the Napa River and the unkempt, slowly disappearing vestiges of World War II-era Auto Row.

Smartly dressed gals and casually dressed guys belied up to an expansive bar for generous pours of Napa and Sonoma wines. Dominated by an apropos Napa Valley wall sculpture of 100-year-old zinfandel wines under glass, the main dining room blends rustic tradition with beaded modernity, combining wood-textured concrete with dramatic wrought iron chandeliers to appealing advantage.

A squad of smartly uniformed (jeans and chocolate-brown shirts) servers continually swept through all areas of the spacious (180-seats) new eatery armed with trays that ran the gamut of sushi to



Popular TV chef Masaharu Morimoto has come to town. He opens his first West Coast restaurant in downtown Napa's Riverfront on Thursday. He was busy signing copies of his cookbook for a preview crowd Sunday. *L. Pierce Carson/Register*

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sweets, scallops tarted up with ginger scallions to pork buns saucily braised with ambrosial fervor.

Guests entered the new restaurant from Main Street and passed by the open kitchen to enter the main dining space. Morimoto busily worked the line before retiring to the entry lounge where he signed copies of his first cookbook, "*Morimoto: The New Art of Japanese Cooking*," for eager fans.

Featuring a menu that includes a wide range of sushi and sashimi, plus signature dishes like crispy whole fish (de-boned, skewered and fried) on a bed of Chinese pickles and pickled green papaya with spicy tofu sauce, and ishi yaki buri bop — yellowtail on rice cooked tableside in a hot stone bowl — Morimoto Napa will open for dinner Thursday at 5 p.m., according to general manager Michael Galyen. The restaurant will serve just dinner for a month or so, remaining open until midnight weekdays, and until 1 a.m. on weekends. A limited sushi, starter and main course menu will be offered late night. Lunch hours will be added at a not-too-distant date.

Through a seamless integration of Western and Japanese ingredients, chef Morimoto has delighted diners with his own unique cuisine — one defined by innovation and inspiration. In 2001, he opened Morimoto restaurant in Philadelphia. In 2004, Wasabi by Morimoto opened to great acclaim at the Taj Mahal in Mumbai, followed in 2005 by the Michelin star-rated Morimoto-*EX* in Tokyo. In January 2006, Morimoto brought his eponymous restaurant to New York City. This is his first West Coast restaurant.

Morimoto Napa is located in the new Riverfront development, at 610 Main St., Napa. For reservations, call 252-1600, or log onto [www.morimotonapa.com](http://www.morimotonapa.com).