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Morimoto Napa opens at Riverfront



"I am 55 years old, I have blood type B and I grew up in Hiroshima, Japan," was the good-natured reply to the question, "Who is Morimoto?"

A celebrated restaurateur and TV chef whose appearances on *Iron Chef* have given him instant name recognition, Masaharu Morimoto took a half hour last week to sit down and talk about himself and his first West Coast restaurant.

Morimoto Napa opened at Napa's Riverfront complex Thursday to an eager crowd of fans who began making reservations weeks ago.

While most of us know Morimoto from his humble, successful turns on the popular TV culinary competition, *Iron Chef*, little is known about his early years, the years he spent deciding on a career in his native Japan.

"I had two dreams," the soft-spoken chef recalled. "One was baseball player. I was pretty good."

He said his family was not rolling in dough; in fact, he used the term "poor" to describe their financial status.

"Once a month we went to a sushi restaurant, the whole family," he continued. "I was very happy (when he was surrounded by family in this setting)." He was impressed by the talents of the sushi chefs as well as their crisp, clean white hats, jackets and aprons. It was an image he couldn't get out of his head.

Morimoto admits he would have pursued the baseball dream had he not severely injured a shoulder.

But then there was the other dream — the dream of becoming a sushi chef. He altered his life plan, entering a culinary school in his hometown of Hiroshima. At the age of 24, Morimoto opened his first restaurant. It specialized in sushi but was also the place where his seamless integration of European and Western cooking techniques and preparations crept into his dishes.

Anxious to continue a pursuit of East meets West in the kitchen, Morimoto sold the Hiroshima restaurant five years later and headed to the United States.

"I purchased a one-year open ticket (that allowed various stops in the U.S.)," he continues. "My first stop was New York — I stayed there."

Once he received a green card allowing him to work in this country, Morimoto was hired to operate a one-man sushi bar in the exclusive Sony Club in Manhattan where he fed all manner of celebrities daily. It was here that he was introduced to Nobu Matsuhisa, another Japanese chef whose star was ascending in America. In the mid-'90s, Nobu opened a restaurant in New York City and invited Morimoto to join the team as executive chef.

Settling in Napa

Morimoto could have opened his first West Coast restaurant in San Francisco or Los Angeles. But he already has five other restaurants in big cities — New York, Philadelphia, Tokyo, Mumbai and New Delhi.

He visited Napa and found he liked the weather, was impressed with the Riverfront location and, most importantly, he found great product for his extensive menu. "The vegetables, the fruit are terrific," he declared.

And he liked the "big challenge" of a growing market, where his clientele could grow along with the tourist business, as a good percentage of visitors coming to Napa Valley are coming as much for food as they are for wine.

"I will be here as much as I can," he added. "The Napa project is important to me." He did point out, however, that come September he'll open his seventh restaurant, Morimoto Waikiki, in the new Ian Schrager/Marriott Edition Hotel overlooking the Waikiki Yacht Harbor. So, we can expect to find him on the West Coast quite a bit now through early fall.

Morimoto assures us he does not install copycat eateries around the world. He pointed to his restaurants in New York and Philadelphia, where both design and menu are completely different.

The menu in Napa will include some signature dishes, and a few tweaked just for this market, as well as dishes designed just for Morimoto Napa.

He expects to see a lot of visitors to the Bay Area coming to Napa this summer. And his mission, he maintains, is to "spread my philosophy to locals."

Asked to expound on that philosophy, the amiable chef singled out dishes in his own country that have come from other cultures. Curry rice, for example, can be traced to India, and many Japanese people eat ramen noodles, which originated in China, he pointed out. Yet, today, many consider these dishes to be Japanese.

Some people enjoy tasty raw fish as sashimi, others order it as carpaccio. "What's important is that people eat it (not what the dish is called)," he added.

"I have only one rule — there's no rules. No rule is good."

Behind the scenes

Through his many appearances on the Food Network's Iron Chef and Iron Chef America, fans have enjoyed Morimoto's bringing together of ingredients, styles and techniques of Eastern and Western cuisine.

Morimoto's appeal, says business associate Mark J. Stone, "is a little Japanese mystery. He does use unusual ingredients and has original ideas and dishes. I think viewers respect him as one of the real chefs on TV. His style of cooking is unique and he's built up a popular following (as a result)."

Stone is president of MM Management, the holding company for the chef's interests, overseeing all aspects of the Morimoto worldwide empire.

He says the 7,500-square-foot Riverfront features an 80-seat main dining room, a private dining area that can accommodate 70 and patio dining for 40. A sushi bar seats nine. Insiders maintain Morimoto has invested in excess of \$5 million in his first West Coast operation.

Executive chef Jeffrey Lunak has a kitchen staff of 50 to execute Morimoto's extensive menu, while general manager Michael Galyan relies on 47 men and women to provide the kind of service Morimoto demands.

Dominated by an apropos Napa Valley wall sculpture of seasoned zinfandel vines behind glass, the main dining room blends rustic tradition with beaded modernity, combining wood-textured concrete with dramatic wrought iron chandeliers to appealing advantage. White oak shelving, wood dining tables (some works of art under glass) along with lemon-colored lounge chairs and sofa warm up the large space designed by noted hotel/restaurant designer Thomas Schoos.

North Dakota native Jeffrey Lunak, who is running the kitchen here, first hooked up with Morimoto in 2001, serving as chef de cuisine for Morimoto Philadelphia. Although he left that post five years ago, he kept in touch with Morimoto and the two often talked about a West Coast project.

Considering the quality of available product, the location and the people involved, Lunak said it would have been "impossible to turn down" the offer to work in Napa. "It's a lot easier to turn out great food when you have access to great product."

Lunak said he has a young daughter and felt Napa would be a good environment in which she could be raised.

We asked Morimoto if he would share a recipe for one of his signature dishes — something people could try at home. He suggested the tuna pizza with anchovy aioli, made with sushi grade tuna and tortillas.

When chef Lunak was asked to put together a dish for a photo, one designed just for the Morimoto Napa menu, he looked at Morimoto and said: "I was thinking about the sea urchin carbonara (udon noodles tossed with smoked bacon, crispy shallots, English peas and uni)."

"Good," replied Morimoto. Then, with a slight grin, he added: "Our mothers are Italian."

Eat this

An obvious focus of the Morimoto Napa menu is seafood. The new restaurant's seasonal, ever-changing seafood offerings come from both East and West Coast purveyors as well as overnight deliveries three or four times a week from Tokyo's famed Tsukiji fish market.

The extensive sushi and sashimi menu runs the gamut of toro to yellowtail, mackerel to sea eel, scallops to abalone and king crab. The caviar lineup includes sea urchin, snow crab tomalley and roe from salmon, cod and flying fish. There are 17 different maki, including a deep-fried soft shell crab roll with asparagus, tobiko and scallions. Morimoto-style chirashi sushi features a dozen tasty fish and vegetable offerings.

New for the Napa menu are Morimoto bone marrow (a 12-14-inch lateral cut of beef bone prepared in a traditional French style and flavored with the chef's signature seven spice mix and teriyaki sauce), foie gras Takoyaki (a riff on popular Japanese dumplings, made with foie gras instead of octopus), fig tempura (fried local black mission figs served with foie gras-infused chunky peanut butter sauce and housemade pomegranate syrup), duck meatball soup (juicy meatballs made of ground Liberty duck with mountain yams in duck broth), plus a frozen iceberg wedge (Morimoto's take on a classic that combines half a head of iceberg lettuce that has been frozen 24 hours topped with creamy blue cheese, hot smoked bacon dressing and pickled local baby bell peppers).

Some of his entrées include a new twist on Duck Duck Goose — playfully showcasing local duck prepared five different ways: duck confit fried rice, seared duck breast, confit leg, duck meatball soup and duck egg cooked sunnyside up, garnished with gooseberries, and Morimoto pork chop and applesauce, a double cut pork chop brined for 24 hours then marinated in miso for another day, braised and served with warm bacon kimchee and ginger apple puree.

Sure to be popular with local diners will be the whole roasted lobster "epice," succulent Maine lobster dusted with garam masala and served with lemon crème fraîche.

If you just can't eat one more piece of fish, Morimoto and company are willing to plate up a nice Australian Wagyu steak, but it'll cost ya — \$55 for filet, \$75 for ribeye and \$80 for a New York strip.

Morimoto Napa has a full bar, with a wine list that leans heavily on local cellars but extends to sparkling and still wines from the Old World. There's an extensive sake list with more than 30 Japanese labels, including Morimoto's own line of premium and aged sake. (The Napa restaurant will be the first to sell these bottlings to take home when a retail arm of the operation opens shortly, featuring everything from takeout to pottery, cookbooks to fresh fish.) Local craft and house-brewed draft beer and the Morimoto line of beers, produced by Rogue Breweries, are also available.

At present, Morimoto Napa is open only for dinner, served from 5 to 10 p.m. weekdays, 11 p.m. weekends. A late-night lounge menu and sushi bar will be available from 10 p.m. to midnight weekdays, from 11 p.m. to 1 a.m. weekends.