

WWD THURSDAY



Here and below: Interiors of Morimoto Napa



MASAHARU MORIMOTO OF "IRON CHEF" FAME IS LOOKING to conquer California with an outpost of his namesake restaurant empire. But instead of choosing an Asian-food-heavy city such as San Francisco or Los Angeles to plant his first flag on the West Coast, Morimoto decided on a spot in wine country, at the new downtown Napa Riverfront complex.

"It is not so common in Napa, so when this opportunity came to me, I decided to pursue it," explains the chef, who opened Morimoto in Philadelphia in 2001 and has other properties in Mumbai, Tokyo and New York City. "I believed Napa would appreciate Japanese cuisine as much as other types of cuisine because people here love great food."

The Napa space, opening today and designed by Thomas Schoos, features an open kitchen and floor plan with an 80-seat dining room, a private dining area that can hold up to 70, a lounge and bar, and a 40-seat outdoor patio overlooking the Napa River. The decor of wrought-iron chandeliers, white-oak shelving and a wood-textured concrete bar allude to the rustic setting.

Although Morimoto's food is not exactly typical Napa fare — "I'm not too conscious of California-style cuisine; I just want to serve my own food in my own style" — the chef has given many a nod to the surrounding natural bounty. Dishes like Morimoto bone marrow and fig tempura draw on local ingredients and most of the menu's produce comes from within a 40-mile radius of the restaurant (his high-quality sushi fish, however, is flown in from Japan). Morimoto even has a small farm where he can grow his own vegetables.

As for how his offerings will pair with the region's famous wines, Morimoto is adamant that they will blend seamlessly.

"People sometimes think that Asian flavors are difficult to pair with wines. I want them to understand that isn't the case, my food is fantastic with wine," he says, recommending in particular his Napa-exclusive sea-urchin carbonara and duck-duck-goose dishes. "Because every single ingredient I can get in Napa is high quality and very delicious, it keeps inspiring me. I regret I didn't come here long ago."

— Vanessa Lawrence

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