The Treasured Flavour of the Orient

Posted on
Sizzling chicken served on a hot grill

Japanese cuisine is a global phenomenon that has reinvented Sri Lanka's restaurant culture. Using the plentiful catch of the Indian Ocean, Ikoi Tei has perfected the unique and mild flavours that are the hallmark of authentic Japanese food. Master chef Hikaru Takahashi serves stories of a thousand years.

Words Keshini de Silva | **Photographs** Isuru Upeksha

A short walk over the cobbled pavement and Ikoi Tei is the first door on the right as you enter the rustic Old Dutch Hospital in Colombo. The colonial Dutch-inspired interior complements the venue and the vast collection of art reflects ancient Dutch trade relations with Japan. The name itself foreshadows the laidback ambience of the restaurant – *ikoi* means 'rest'.

For more than half a decade Japanese cuisine has worn the world's gourmet crown. That this cuisine flourishes in Sri Lanka, where the catch is abundant and fresh, is no surprise. Throughout the Island, restaurants dedicated to Japanese cuisine have popped up, yet Ikoi Tei sets itself apart as an eatery that offers the authentically

mild and fresh flavours of Japanese food and the excitement of teppanyaki – food cooked at the table in front of you.

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The restaurant has its own bar serving beverages including fizzy drinks – Madeira Red, Fizzy Orange and Sparkling Apple are always refreshing. They also serve saké – Japanese rice wine – shochu – a beverage usually distilled from barley, sweet potato or rice and Japanese whiskey.

Master chef Hikaru Takahashi

Chef Hikaru Takahashi has crafted the menu to be an inclusive one, catering to a wide price and palate range to offer raw, fried, grilled, deep-fried, teriyaki, rice and noodle options.

“Japanese food is the food I grew up eating and I want to serve our customers that same unique flavour,” says Chef Takahashi. Understanding that not everyone enjoys raw Japanese delicacies, the menu includes a variety of cooked dishes – a few with a spicy or western flair. For example, the generally raw sushi menu includes cooked varieties such as California rolls and crunchy prawn tempura rolls, with a cooked whole prawn filling and a red caviar garnish complemented by a light flaky tempura coating.

The menu even takes into account the local predilection for spice with the inclusion of the spicy tuna roll. Of course the staff are happy to cater to anyone’s palate, whether you want a tinge more of salt or spice, because as the chef says, “keeping customers happy is everything.” Bearing witness to the fact that Ikoi Tei delivers on this ambition are the rave reviews online.

For Japanese food lovers, sashimi and nigiri with a touch of soy sauce and hint of wasabi are an absolute delight, the key being freshness. This is why Chef Takahashi braves the fishmongers at the Negombo fish market to pick the freshest fish, sometimes from the catch that has just been brought in. Chef Takahashi likes working with Indian Ocean fish, especially tunas, as they have less fat than their relatives in the colder Pacific waters.

Chef Takahashi braves the fishmongers at the Negombo fish market to pick the freshest fish

The list of Ikoi Tei's mains is inviting accompanied by a range of appetizers including cold dishes such as edamame – salted soybeans – and hot dishes such as tamagoyaki – rolled omlette. The generously portioned chicken nanban with its creamy sauce is juicy and sweet mouthful. The pork katsudon is as delicious as it looks and the teriyaki chicken offers a shimmering glaze of flavour.

At a time when India was under its rule, the British introduced curry to Japan. Katsu curry has since maintained a permanent place in authentic Japanese cuisine. The spices in the thick curry tantalise taste buds while the steamed white rice offers balance. If you want to mix things up, a bowl of garlic rice is a nice pairing.

To cater to western palates Chef Takahashi has also introduced a few burgers where the chicken, salmon or vegetable kakiage (a type of tempura) are prepared in Japanese fashion. The barbecued pork and garnish comes on a miniature hot grill and are finished at the table. The rich sauce comes on the side. Salmon, the crowning ingredient, is grilled to perfection with the skin sliding off the meat, a succulent bite of the Indian Ocean.

The authentic Matcha Swiss roll with green tea ice cream is the star of the dessert menu. The light sponge is infused with green tea, offering a refreshing flavour while the cream adds a touch of sweetness. The green tea ice cream has a leafy green colour, a pungent flavour of green tea and a really creamy texture. Tempura is a key part of the menu, with tempura ice cream and banana on the list.

The Old Dutch Hospital, with its culture and relaxing ambience, is a popular destination for tourists and a great favourite amongst residents. Complete with a spa and local merchandise, it offers a culmination of everything that is truly Sri Lankan. Marked by the Island's signature hospitality, authentic Japanese flavour and Dutch ambience, Ikoi Tei provides you with a rare experience. So snap those Japanese lacquered chopsticks together and indulge – Chef Takahashi recommends you try everything on the menu.

Ikoi Tei,
Old Dutch Hospital Precinct
Colombo 1

Tel: (+94 11) 244 1275
http://www.hiltoncolombo1.com/IkoiTei