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Above and above right: Chef Hirofumi may already have you at 'destination dining' as his new outpost is located in an old, abandoned chapel sitting on the grounds of the Amara Sanctuary Resort at Sentosa which has been scrubbed, renovated and turned into a Zen-inspired Japanese house. Right: the Kyoto-esque dining room that's awash with black granite, textured walls and steeped in Japanese symbolism. PHOTOS: AMARA

## Japanese dining scene heats up

At least 5 new eateries are opening over the next couple of months. Here's a first look. BY JAIME RE

**T**HE obsession with Japanese cuisine continues unabated in Singapore, as any hope of a travel lane opening to the most-wanted destination fades with every new Covid variant. The high-end market is where all the action is, as diners play fastest-fingers first or exhaust personal connections to get a seat in any sushi or kappo eatery. It's a demand that Japanese chefs and food and beverage (F&B) investors are enthusiastically tapping into as many of the former are wooed away from their workplaces to strike out on their own, with generous financial backing. We're seeing new players in town too, brought in to bring fresh perspectives to the local scene. From this month onwards, there are at least 5 new restaurants to explore, from destination Japanese dining to sushi, tempura and yakitori. Let the fight for reservations begin.

### IMAMURA

Opens Feb 8

If there's a reason to take you away from the more conveniently located trendy kappo eateries in town all the way to Sentosa, Hirofumi Imamura is making sure it's a good one.

He may already have you at 'destination dining' - in this case an old, abandoned chapel sitting on the grounds of the Amara Sanctuary Resort which has been scrubbed, renovated and turned into a Zen-inspired Japanese house. Before every service, the heat of the grounds is dissipating with a spray of water in a traditional gesture as you amble into the serene courtyard of this fair-faced brick bungalow that transports you to the Kyoto-esque dining room that's awash with black granite, textured walls and steeped in Japanese symbolism.

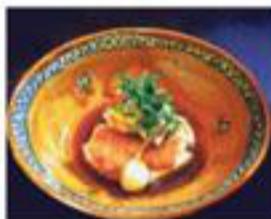
Sitting empty since 2016 when it was last known as St Bon, a high-priced kushishi restaurant, the compact 1,600 sq ft structure has been completely transformed to house a 13-seat counter around a spacious open kitchen, and a private room. Hidden from view is an outdoor garden where Imamura has been growing his own vegetables for use in the restaurant - including the successful cultivation of ginger and shiso leaf. So successful that the garden has become the latest target of the island's peacocks which took a fancy to the fragrant Japanese leaf.

"Before, they never touched anything, but then they had a taste of the shiso and liked it so much, they kept coming back," says a bemused Imamura. "So now we have to put a net over the garden and we also have a glass house to protect the plants."

The garden farm is still a work in progress as "I don't know Singapore's weather yet and what kind of land we have, so we're just trying different things to see what grows well."



Clockwise from above: Chef Imamura, a Fukuoka native, has crafted an experience based on what he calls The Philosophy of Five - flavour, colour, preparation, technique and presentation are built into the set-up; kinoko fish with scallops and lily bulb; fuke sashimi with uni and caviar.



The plan is to grow enough greens for the restaurant's use as part of his semi-sustainable policy to lower the carbon footprint and wastage as much as he can. This extends to the chopsticks, which are made of salvaged cypress wood chips or bamboo, and displayed in a case for you to choose from different lengths, pentagon or hexagon-shaped implements.

The attention to detail is on a level not quite seen in Japanese restaurants on the "mainland", and the ambition is clear on the part of Imamura who says there is no Michelin star awarded to a traditional kappo restaurant like the considers Naku Chin to be more contemporary in style.

His influence leans towards Kyoto kaiseki, which explains the meticulous preparation where everything is made from scratch ("I don't know how to open a package") and he has a collection of 60 different types of salt covering every single prefecture in Japan to match the produce he

uses. "If I use fish from Hokkaido, I will use Hokkaido salt. If it's from Okinawa, then I have to use the salt from the sea there because it's part of the environment the fish lived in." He also has 10 kinds of soya sauce, 8 kinds of sugar and he's adding more to the list.

Diners will be hard put to notice all this as the payoff of the pudding will be in the dining experience created by Imamura who has come to Singapore by way of New York, Las Vegas, Macau, Hong Kong (where he earned a Michelin star) and most recently Manila, where his eponymous restaurant has been closed and replicated in the exact same detail in Sentosa.

The Fukuoka native found his calling at an early age, and learned his craft for 6 years before opportunity came calling from New York. He enjoyed success by the time he was 24, working as an executive chef in a restaurant that was tops in the Zagat guide pre-Michelin.



"I was a snob, thinking that I was the best, until an ex co-worker from Japan who was older than me came to eat, and he said: 'Your food is (expletive). There's no taste, nothing, you just use very expensive ingredients, but for what? Anybody can do this'."

It was a wake-up call for Imamura, who promptly quit and returned to Japan to re-learn his craft, after which Las Vegas came knocking at his door. Now, some 20 years later, armed with a stronger command of English than many of his compatriots and better able to articulate his philosophy, he has crafted an experience based on what he calls The Philosophy of Five.

Flavour, colour, preparation, technique and presentation are built into the set-up which includes his open kitchen where everything from mise en place to stocks and slow-cooking are done in the same place.

Like what he learned from his older colleague 20 years ago, Imamura focuses on quality but not necessarily price. "I've worked with the same suppliers for the past 12 to 15 years," he says. "We do Taste-test every day and I choose what I want. Like my uni supplier who knows I just want the best, but it doesn't mean it's the most expensive."

"Also, consistency is very important and there's a lot of technology available that can be used to achieve what I want. For example, the Japanese fish suppliers have a machine to measure the fat levels of fish. No one cares how fat a fish is, but I need it as the dish tastes the same every time. This is why I also use a salt meter so I can make adjustments depending on the kind of salt I use."

Such precision makes it hard for him to compromise, which is why it took a long time for Atsushi Meiji, the Singapore-based managing director of Japanese hos-

itality group GHS, to convince him to relocate from Manila to Singapore. GHS owns and manages hotels such as the ANA Crowne Plaza in Chitose and Osaka, as well as properties in Hakone and Bali under other hotel brand names. The restaurant Imamura is part of its move into the F&B business.

With dinner prices pegged at \$548+++, it is par for the course for any high end sushi or kappo in town, where menus over \$500++ are more the norm than the exception. They could have easily picked a location in town, but Imamura says they chose Sentosa because, "It's difficult for people to travel, so when they come here we want to make them feel like they are 'overseas' and just forget about real life while they are here".

At a preview tasting, Imamura showed that he walks the talk with an understated menu that belies the elaborate preparation that goes behind each dish. Diners can expect homemade shiso wine with the fresh fragrance of the leaves and some fancy "tricks" such as a prawn steam-cooked in a claypot and thin wagyu slices cooked over a stone slab heated to precisely 62 degrees Celsius and "slow-cooked" to medium rare to preserve its moisture.

Vegetables play an important role in the menu with some 60 vegetables being used, many with their own certificates for traceability. Each dish is preceded with a display of the fresh produce used, and a selection of salt from the appropriate prefecture. Even a simple onion is given the sue treatment, slow-cooking in a salt baked crust that is gently cracked open to reveal its piping hot interior.

Imamura is new to Singapore and brings no preconceptions about the local market with him. With his emphasis on creating an experience beyond the norm, his Sentosa outpost will draw "mainlanders" to what may be the most anticipated Japanese restaurant opening this year.

14 Gamma Lane, Amara Sanctuary Resort Sentosa, Singapore 097468. Tel: 9629 2468. [imamura.com](http://imamura.com)

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Rehearsal Dinner January 2022





Hirofumi Yamura



