

Interview

Masaharu Morimoto

A portrait of Masaharu Morimoto, a middle-aged man with grey hair, wearing black-rimmed glasses and a black chef's jacket. He is smiling and has his arms crossed. The background is a textured, golden-brown wall. The text 'Masaharu Morimoto' is embroidered in red on the left chest of his jacket.

# TRANSLATING TRADITION

*Claudia de Brito* speaks to Masaharu Morimoto about how he's making authentic Japanese cuisine more accessible, ahead of the opening of his first Dubai restaurant

Photography: Ausra Osipaviciute and Evan Sung

It's little wonder why Masaharu Morimoto was a hit with audiences on The Food Network's Iron Chef America. His personality and his telegenic dishes were made for TV. Although he initially envisioned a career in baseball, an injury steered him towards the kitchen. After honing his craft for seven years in his hometown of Hiroshima, Japan, he opened his own restaurant which he ran for five years before moving to the US. Morimoto was soon hired as the executive chef at Nobu Matsuhisa's first restaurant and in 2001, opened his first eponymous restaurant in Philadelphia. Now, 16 years and 14 restaurants later, he is preparing to enter the Middle Eastern market with the imminent opening of Morimoto Dubai.

We sit in what will be the lounge area of his new two-storey restaurant set on the 23<sup>rd</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> floors of Renaissance Downtown Hotel, Dubai. The restaurant comprises 250 seats across an indoor dining and lounge area, as well as a bar area, teppanyaki, sushi counter, three private dining rooms and four outdoor terraces overlooking the Burj Khalifa.

Morimoto's food has been described as eclectic and, at times, eccentric, but he describes his style as: "Everything."

He continues: "I like to say 'You better have big dreams and a big foundation at the same time.' The people I work with – chefs, managers and so on – need to have a deep foundation. Any food is ok, Italian, French, Greek, Brazilian but you need a deep foundation. A little bit of everything means you need some tradition. My executive chef's foundation is Spanish cuisine. I'm Japanese so I know traditional Japanese cuisine. My job is how do I make people happy with my food, the atmosphere, my philosophy."

The chef's mission is to make Japanese cuisine more accessible to people who may be hesitant to try it: "How do I make the entrance wider so you can come in? For example, my signature dish is tuna pizza. You know tuna and you know pizza. I use tortilla dough not pizza dough, thin slices of tuna on top, I garnish with red onion, black olives, tomatoes and the sauce will be anchovy aioli." Morimoto adds: "Everything you know, it looks beautiful and then you try it. You don't even know what's in it but



Morimoto Dubai.

you eat it and afterwards you ask what's in it."

The combination may seem strange on paper but there is method in his madness: "You try raw fish once, then you trust me and the next time you say 'What about sushi? What about sashimi?' That's my job. I can make authentic sushi, sashimi tempura, kaiseki cuisine but I make tuna pizza. That's my concept."

Due to open in Q1 of 2018, Morimoto Dubai is Morimoto's first opening in the UAE. It follows the success of his 14 restaurants around the world, which are located in some of the most vibrant cities including New York, Mumbai, Delhi, Tokyo, Philadelphia, Napa, Bangkok, Maui, and Mexico City.

Despite numerous locations around the world, the chef is keen to avoid a cookie-cutter approach to his restaurants: "I'm researching what's good. Not just tuna pizza, I'm also focusing on the local palate. I bring Morimoto signatures to every single location and then add local flavours."

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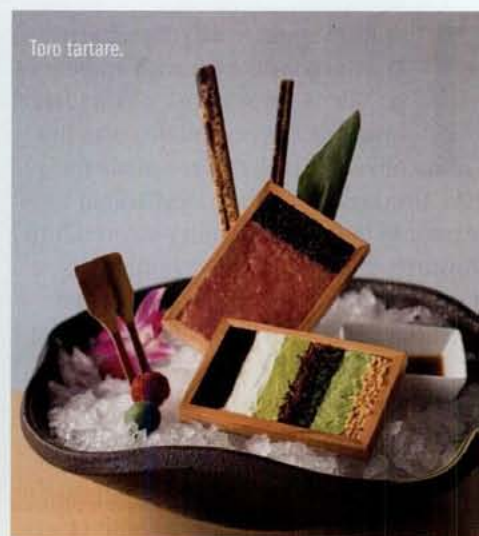
Morimoto is known for creating a bridge between the culinary traditions and ingredients from native Japan and the West. Though this is his first restaurant in the UAE, Morimoto has visited both Dubai and Abu Dhabi many times. For the chef, this

foray into the Middle East is a way of sharing culture through his food: "There's a lot happening with the Expo 2020 and a lot of stuff coming. Here, a lot of people come from a lot of different areas so there are a lot of different food scenes. I'm very excited to learn from and listen to people."

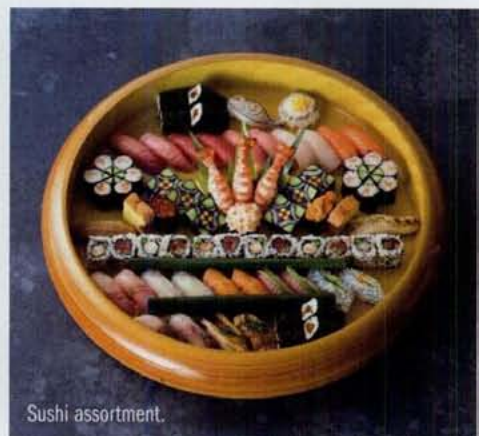
**“EACH TABLE HAS ITS OWN DRAMA, CASUAL PEOPLE, SERIOUS PEOPLE, FAMILIES. IT CAN BE ‘HELLO SIR’ OR ‘HEY GUYS’ SO WE HAVE TO GIVE EACH TABLE ITS OWN ATMOSPHERE.”**



Tuna pizza.



Toro tartare.



Sushi assortment.

In the interest of authenticity, some ingredients, namely the tuna and the wagyu beef, will be imported from Japan and other countries. Still, Dubai's strategic position makes it an ideal location.

When asked if it had been easy to source ingredients for the restaurant, the chef said: "In Dubai yes. It's the easiest country." He added: "I tried some local fish, local vegetables and lots of ingredients. I went to Bhar here at the hotel. It's an Arabic restaurant and the chef is very talented and it inspired me a lot."

Though the dishes on his menu are currently being finalised, the menu will be priced below the restaurant's Japanese fine dining competitors in Dubai's Downtown and DIFC dining hubs. With several players, it's a crowded sector but the chef doesn't seem worried. Morimoto ascertains that, although pricing is important, other factors will determine how frequently guests choose to visit his restaurant: "Most of my places, people

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come occasionally because the prices aren't cheap but here [in Dubai], at this type of restaurant. I think people think more about service and the food."

Similarly, when it comes to defining his approach to service, Morimoto believes in creating a bespoke and personal experience for his guests: "Each table has its own drama, casual people, serious people, families. It can be 'hello sir' or 'hey guys' so we have to give each table its own atmosphere. I try to make them happy and satisfied, and each case is unique."

Heavily involved in the design of the restaurant, the interiors were conceived with the chef's input: "I told the designer what I wanted. This is very special equipment that I have, and the teppanyaki area is very high-end."

The menu will be the result of a collaborative effort between Morimoto and his team with dishes based on their strengths: "I asked the people who work with me. I said 'Napa and New York are like this, but what's your technique?'"

As is the case with most high-profile chefs who open outlets in the UAE, Morimoto is contracted to visit the restaurant three to four times a year but he says he'll try to visit more often than that: "Emirates is very comfortable."

Joking aside, the chef – whose team comprises executive chef Miguel Huelamo, general manager Daniel Ayres and beverage manager Said Ajam – is confident that he's assembled the ideal team to execute his vision in his absence. "I want to be the conductor, putting the right person in the right place," he concludes. ●