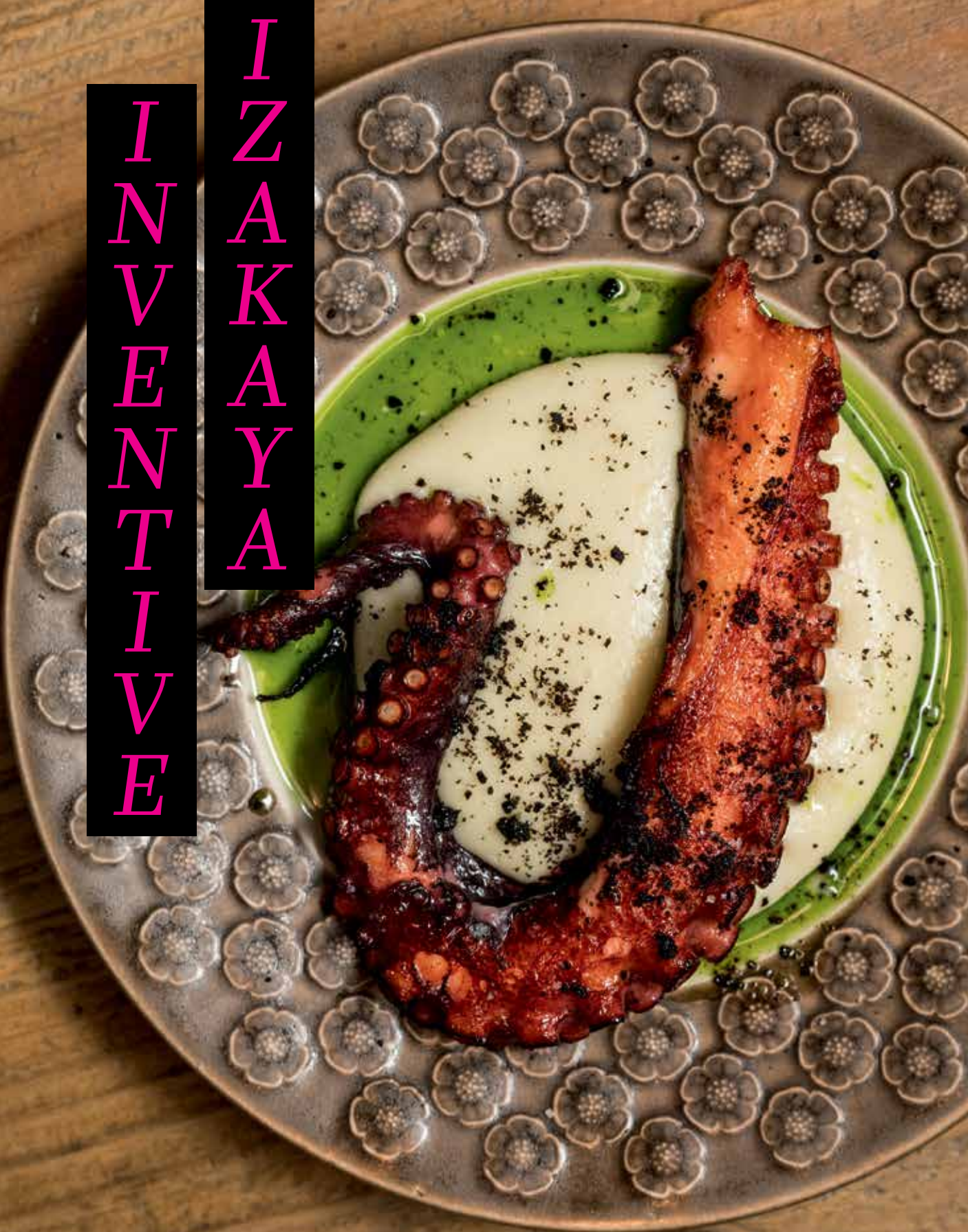


INVENTIVE

IZAKAYA



TOKYO'S CHEFS ARE RETHINKING THE ARCHETYPAL IZAKAYA IN MAD, DELICIOUS WAYS. **DIANA HUBBELL** JOINS A TEAM OF SOME OF HONG KONG'S TOP RESTAURATEURS ON AN EPIC FOOD CRAWL THROUGH THE BEST OF THE OLD AND THE NEW.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY **SHINSUKE MATSUKAWA**



Chef Jowett Yu (left) toasts the team at Jump, a traditional frills-free izakaya. OPPOSITE: Seared octopus on top of garlicky potato purée at Atelier Fujita.

“ This is how you know the hipsters have won—they have avocado toast here, ”

quips Syed Asim Hussain. Yes, the two principle ingredients are present and accounted for, but the resemblance ends there. Beside the baguette rounds sits a ramekin full of the fattiest, freshest *negitoro* you ever did see, mixed with buttery fruit flesh topped with briny roe for a piscine riff on guac that is anything but basic.

It's in fine company, surrounded by other plates of pseudo-junk food that sound simpler than they are, from tempura prawns dunked in liquid *onsen* yolk to mackerel blow-torched tableside until the skin curls while the barely pickled meat stays cool. The surprise bombshells of the bunch are deep-fried, candied bites of what one diner dubs “corn brûlée,” which taste like they escaped from the Iowa state fair and made it to the big city. While the flavors are sophisticated, the setting is anything but. At Shirube, a rowdy izakaya hidden by the rail tracks in Shibuya, Tokyo's salarymen are blowing off steam at full decibel level. Around my table sit restaurateurs Asim and Christopher Mark, and chefs Jowett Yu and Shun Sato.

“Everywhere else, you have to keep your voice down, but here, the louder the better,” Jowett yells as another round of highballs shows up. “An izakaya is a democratic space with few inhibitions.”

As the executive chef at Ho Lee Fook, Jowett draws Hong Kongers to SoHo in droves for his fresh look at their own cuisine. Since 2016, Shun

Sato, inked in a tapestry of tattoos and veteran of some of Tokyo's better kitchens, including Joël Robuchon's Michelin darling, has been working with him to prep for his own star debut.

We're here because a new izakaya, one that combines the visions of these four men, is taking shape. In the five years since Chris, a former executive chef at high-profile kitchens from Tokyo to Shanghai, and Asim, who left a successful career in finance to enter the business, launched Black Sheep Restaurants, they've made their mark on Hong Kong's dining scene with more than a dozen eateries such as Ho Lee Fook, Maison Libanaise, and Belon. This year they opened New Punjab Club, a tandoori grill headed by Michelin-starred chef Palash Mitra, and Osteria Marzia, a coastal Italian in Wanchai's boutique hotel, The Fleming.

This crew's appetite for culinary anthropology can only be sated at the source. That's why they've organized a truly gluttonous field trip to Tokyo. The mission: nine restaurants in four days. The hit-list spans from fine-dining eateries to bare bones drinking dens. We'll test the capacity of stomachs and fortitude of livers in an effort to distill the concept of an izakaya to its essence, to dissect it and then assemble something new from the pieces.

“The classic izakaya is simple. The kanji for ‘izakaya’ translates as ‘stay’ and ‘sake house,’” Shun

Tempura *uni*-shiso sandwich at Tempura Mikawa. BELOW: The Black Sheep gang: Shun Sato, Jowett Yu, Syed Asim Hussain and Christopher Mark. OPPOSITE FROM FAR LEFT: Fresh wasabi root at Tsukiji Market; the tasting menu at Tempura Mikawa; chicken sashimi topped with egg yolk at Lanterne.



a n i z a k a y a i s
a d e m o c r a t i c s p a c e
w i t h f e w i n h i b i t i o n s



Nigiri of fried sardine with mustard, tuna with green onion sauce, and mackerel with seaweed sauce at Kagurazaka GiroGiro.

says. “Now, some Japanese chefs are changing what the concept means—think of it as neo-izakayas.”

In a land where the simplest of dishes are steeped in centuries of history, where there is often a clear right and wrong way to do things in gastronomic spheres, izakayas have always been different, in part because of their informality. Thought to have first appeared in the Edo Period, the earliest forms of these “drinking houses” were sake shops, or *sakaya*, that realized they could make more money by inviting customers to sip inside instead of lurking on the street. Their roster of salty, fatty, umami-loaded, charcoal-smoky or straight raw dishes evolved to complement all the booze and quickly became an equally critical part of the equation. Today, Tokyo boasts thousands of izakayas, where chefs can choose to keep it simple or get a little weird.

Somewhere in the middle is Kaikaya by the Sea, playing fast and loose with borders on items like what the menu describes as “Another-style sashimi,” dolled up with pesto like an Italian crudo or lemongrass, green chillies and fish sauce for a Vietnamese spin. The sign outside this bumper sticker-bedecked neighborhood fixture since 1985 reads: WE DO NOT HAVE ANY “STARS” FROM THE FAMOUS “M” OR “Z” GUIDE. WE ARE JUST AN IZAKAYA, AFTER ALL. HOWEVER, YOU MAY FIND THAT WE DO NOT F@#K AROUND WITH THE QUALITY OF OUR FOOD.

“The owner’s obsessed with surfing,” Chris says of Teruyuki Tange, a beach bum who loves the sea and everything swimming in it. “Places like this are what happens when chefs know they might never otherwise open their own restaurant, but they say, ‘I’m gonna make the food I want to make.’”

That means the sashimi, which is mostly from Kagoshima, comes with a knob of wasabi root for grating and the slow-braised tuna ribs have a luscious, mackerel-esque mouthfeel and a crust like seared beef. Before long we’re ripping off Hokkaido prawn heads and sucking out brains like maniacs.



Atelier Fujita's tomato-topped eggplant. BELOW: A lively late-night crowd at Lanterne. OPPOSITE FROM TOP: Plating the kaiseki-inspired menu at Kagurazaka GiroGiro; the old-school entrance to Jump; crunchy karaage at Lanterne.



By now, we're past full, but there's no stopping. After a whiskey digestif at JBS, where patrons speak in reverent whispers so as not to drown out the warm crackle of vinyl from the owner's vast collection of jazz, we make our way to Narukiyo, which has a blaring rock soundtrack and wall hangings too obscene to print in this publication. The punked-out attitude extends to the tableware, which includes saucers with phallic motifs and custom-crafted skull plates. When I catch Shun eyeing the latter, he explains to me that each is worth nearly US\$400.

"The food here is really simple, but the plates are just wow," he says. "Each izakaya has its own strengths." Simple it may be, but caramelized hunks of Kobe fat or miso-glazed eggplant with a texture like fudge are hardly dull. Best is the sashimi, which comes in greedy slabs that need nothing. "Most sashimi platters are garnished and whatnot," Chris says, gesturing with his chopsticks admiringly. "This is just fish on ice."

THE LARGEST SEAFOOD MARKET in the world has to be the last place any person with a skull-crushing hangover and what we come to call the "fish sweats" would want to go. But Tokyo's best chefs still make the early morning trek, and so we do, too. More than 2,000 tonnes of seafood pass through these halls daily. Supplies thin out over the morning and whatever's left by lunch will be tossed to conveyor belt sushi joints. Not a single scale is wasted.

I catch Shun smiling slightly as we step into a cavernous hall. He worked here in his early twenties to learn more about the industry. Though he was adopted at a young age by a successful chef, it was his first foray into the food business. On our left, a fishmonger is stripping poison sacks from deadly fugu, while to my right two men hack away at the semi-frozen carcass of a tuna the size of a three-seat sofa. The chain-smoking, nail-hard fishmongers are rough around the edges, but they're masters of their art. Tell one of them what time you plan to serve the catch of the day

and they'll insert a rod into a precise point in the fish's vertebrae, slowing the spread of rigor mortis until right before it hits the frying pan. Known as *ikejime*, the practice is why seafood in Tokyo tastes almost alive—minutes before you eat it, the muscles still were.

The future of the institution that is Tsukiji is a precarious one. Sooner or later, the beating heart of the inner market will migrate to Toyosu on the city fringes, leaving only the shops and restaurants that ring the premises. Many of these are justly famous in their own right, but they too are on borrowed time, as we soon discover. I follow Shun, Jowett and Erika Jackish, a resident Tokyo foodie, to Chuka Soba Inoue for bowls of breakfast ramen.

"Maybe we should save room for lunch..." Shun says dubiously.

"This isn't one you want to miss. Trust me," Jowett insists. It's a good thing we do, since this ramen has miraculous curative powers. Just a few slurps of the collagen-rich broth and springy, yellow noodles dispel my throbbing headache. "Come here in the winter months and the line stretches around the side of the building," Jowett says.

Twenty-four hours later, the exact spot where we're standing will be engulfed in flames. With little warning, a fire will rip through Tsukiji and the historic shop will shutter indefinitely.

THE CHEFS AT OUR NEXT STOP must have an in at Tsukiji, because the tempura *uni* sandwiched between two shiso leaves tastes of the ocean. Since fried food and sake are practically soulmates, you'll seldom find an izakaya without it, so we've come to Tempura Mikawa to watch the maestros work. The place is a hushed temple where the chef presents marvels—a parade of miniature marvels—young Japanese ginger, translucent prawns, squid so supple it makes me question why I've been eating erasers all these years. There's nary a sound, save for the low hiss of oil, and no smell, thanks to a powerful ventilation system. Unlike the balloon-like





batter encasing inferior calamari elsewhere, the greaseless, barely there coating here takes a backseat.

“What’s exciting about tempura is that it’s not just about the batter. It’s a way of accentuating the natural flavors,” Chris says. He and Asim are taking mental notes, marking the touch of sesame in the frying oil that lends a subtle fragrance, the sieve to prevent lumps in the batter, the way the chef severs asparagus fibers to keep the stalks tender. “In Tokyo, people think about every detail.”

Witness Kagurazaka GiroGiro, a Kyoto import with an izakaya vibe cleverly concealing its kaiseki-esque ambitions. Presentations here are downright dainty, with edible flowers popping up on a bracing wasabi-dashi gelée with smoked salmon on prawns, and it’s a thrill to watch the staff whip up *unagi katsu* tea sandwiches with watermelon pickles in the open kitchen.

“When it comes to kaiseki, you tend to think it’s only for high-society people,” a chef nicknamed Bonito tells me. He’s stabbing ferociously at an eggplant in what looks like a bizarre form of anger management. Soon, the same vegetable arrives topped with plump tongues of *uni* and more flowers. All the petals are a bit precious for some of the Hong Kong crew, but the dish packs an umami suckerpunch that’s anything but demure. “We want young people, all kinds of people, to be able to enjoy that kind of sophisticated experience.”

This democratic sentiment is echoed by Zempei Fujita, the head chef at Atelier Fujita. “Our dishes are fairly sophisticated for the price,” Zempei says, and he likes to surprise. An amuse-bouche of leaves sandwiching caramelized orange jam and an ungodly amount of high-fat European butter is ingenious, and a coiled octopus tentacle on garlic-saturated potato purée sets hearts aflutter. “I mostly cooked in French restaurants before, so this is my way of incorporating those influences. This is how we’ve evolved from the traditional izakaya.”

Atelier Fujita owes its cuisine to Paris, but it’s Tokyo through

and through. Not every dish sings—a one-note cauliflower side overpowered by dusty cumin leaves us cold—but its popularity speaks volumes about local urbanites’ appetites for the bold and the new.

THERE’S AN ANT ON MY SALAD with its head cocked quizzically. It’s not the only thing on this plate staring at me—there’s also a carrot round cut to resemble a heart-eyed emoji. If you’re looking for the cutting-edge of creative cooking in Tokyo, Zaiyu Hasegawa’s exuberant, irreverent, unconventional take on kaiseki at Den is what you want.

Zaiyu is the polar opposite of a stereotypical stuck-up Michelin-lauded chef. He beams at the Black Sheep crew as he sweeps in with his pampered pooch—who has his own Instagram account—in arm. The chefs have never met, but they greet one another as old friends, with gifts and fist bumps and an epic kitchen selfie. Jowett and Shun have brought along Ho Lee Fook staff T-shirts and Zaiyu immediately puts one on for the service.

“Those ants come from my friend’s farm. Actually, everything here is made by friends of mine, the pottery, the sake cups,” Zaiyu says, as the tart exoskeleton pops against my teeth. “I meet people through the restaurant and I travel a lot. I’ve built up quite a good network of artisans and interesting people.”

There’s a subversive edge to the way everything at Den is personal and made by hand, especially items that usually aren’t. Trompe l’oeil runs rampant, from the custom-made KFC-style boxes with chicken wings stuffed with glutinous rice and edamame, to the familiar-looking forest-and-white espresso cups with the logo STAR COMEBACKS DEN with cappuccino foam concealing a heady pudding of burnt caramel and fresh black truffle—a sly flip of the bird at our culture of mass production.

After that fancy fried chicken we go for its old-school counterpart. Lanterne is textbook izakaya and the *karaage* (fried chicken) is the stuff of drunk-food dreams, with



Burnt bonito, aji with sesame, and sea bream with basil and passion fruit sauce at Atelier Fujita. OPPOSITE FROM TOP: Lanterne’s menu; chefs Shun Sato and Jowett Yu at Tsukiji Market; *uni*-topped eggplant at Kagurazaka GiroGiro.

pinkish thighs blanketed in an audibly crunchy coating. It comes with slithery chopped chicken sashimi, french fries with wriggling bonito flakes, and whole fried fish so addictive that my inebriated notes read only EAT THE BONES scrawled in urgent, barely legible caps.

More refined, but just barely, is Kan, with an industrial look that’s spare, yet warm and inviting. Chefs sear pieces of squid directly on smoldering *binchotan* charcoal on the counter where we sit.

“I think this would make a good date spot,” Erika says. “Oh, if a boy took me here.”

We all laugh, but I can’t help but agree. By now, it’s a wonder that any of us can eat anything and the cumulative effects of a four-day binge are starting to show. But the food at Kan is so simple, so soulful that it hits even our jaded palates in all the right spots. Wagyu comes with nothing more than a slick of mustard and flakes of salt. The dish that I can’t keep my chopsticks away from is the homiest: a soy-braised sea bass with steamed broccoli not unlike what I imagine a Japanese mom might make.

The team is getting down to business, swapping notes on what they loved, what they didn’t, how to integrate the best of the best, and what constitutes the soul of an izakaya. While I started the trip convinced I knew what the answer was, my definition has expanded and blurred. “At the end of it all, izakayas are about enjoyment—good sake, good beer, good friends,” Shun says as we toast another round. “It’s not just about the food.” The food itself is spectacular, but he’s right, of course. Our meals over the past four days couldn’t have been more different, but there’s a feel to the places that goes beyond the plate, one that Jowett sums up rather eloquently.

“Izakayas are the one place in society where Japanese people can feel free.”

As our laughter rises and blends into the cacophony around, as the sake flows and we discover that maybe we could manage just one more bite, we feel very free indeed. ☺

THE DETAILS

EAT
Shirube 1-11-5 Jinnan, Shibuya; 81-3/3463-1010; mains ¥580–¥880.
Naikaya by the Sea 23-7 Maruyamacho, Shibuya; 81-3/3770-0878; *kaikaya.com*; mains ¥800–¥3,680.
Narukiyo 2-7-14 Shibuya, Shibuya; 81-3/5485-2223; mains ¥680–¥1,500.
Tempura Mikawa 6-12-2 Roppongi, Minato; 81-3/3423-8100; set tempura menus from ¥7,128.

Atelier Fujita 3-4-3 Shibuya, 81-3/6416-8241; mains ¥2,200–¥2,400.
Lanterne 3-5-3 Nishihara, Shibuya; 81-3/5738-8068; mains ¥300–¥750.
Den Architect house hall JIA, 2-3-18 Jingumae, Shibuya; 81-3/6455-5433; *jimbochoden.com/en*; tasting menus ¥15,000, ¥22,000 with sake pairing.
Kagurazaka GiroGiro 5-3 Kagurazaka, Shinjuku; 81-3/3269-8010; *fb.com/*

kagurazaka.girogiro; eight-dish set menu ¥4,500.
Kan 2-1-1 Higashiyama, Meguro; 81-3/3792-5282; mains ¥1,200–¥2,400.

DRINK
JBS 1-17-10 Dogenzaka, Shibuya; 81-3/3461-7788.
Jump 1-33-16 1F Otsuka Bldg., Uehara, Shibuya, 83-50/5590-8778.