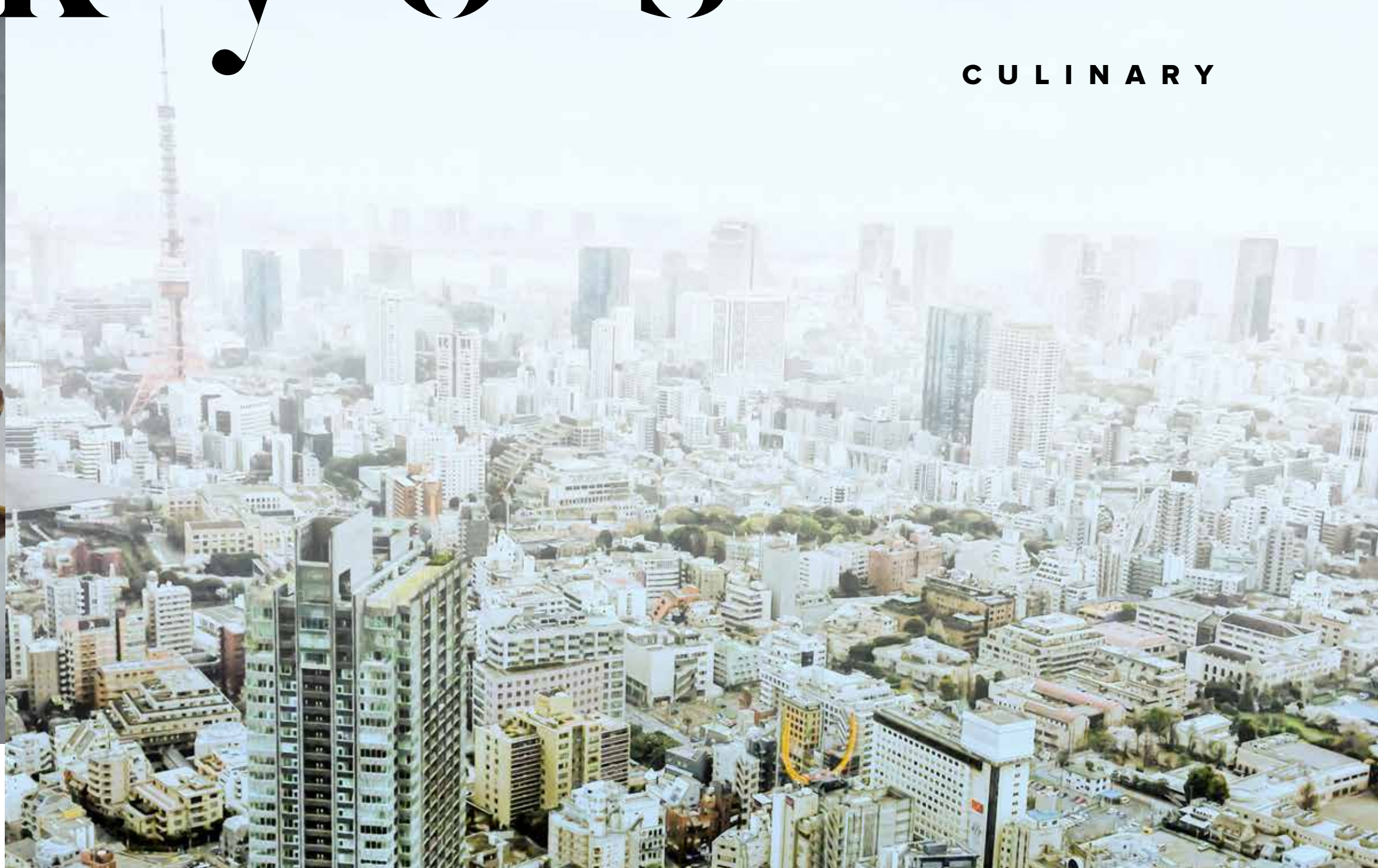


Tokyo's

CULINARY



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PHOTOGRAPHS BY KEN KOCHÉY



HEIGHTS

JAPAN'S LOVE OF GALLIC FARE REACHES A NEW APEX
WITH THE MICHELIN-STARRED AZURE 45, HELMED BY
THE ARTISTICALLY EBULLIENT SHINTARO MIYAZAKI.

When



FRENCH CONNECTION

From left: A detail of Azure 45 Chef de Cuisine Shintaro Miyazaki's exquisite plating; Chef Miyazaki. Previous spread, from left: French suckling veal; the view from the restaurant's dining room.

international travelers arrive in Tokyo, they often share one goal: to eat the best Japanese food of their lives. And why not? It's a city where chefs are known to keep to the very highest standards, whether they're cooking at five-star hotels or hole-in-the-wall pubs. And because Japanese restaurants tend to focus on one particular dish or style of cooking — from sushi and ramen to yakitori, tempura, donburi, soba or kaiseki — a visiting foodie on a week's vacation can barely make a dent.

But here's a tip: If you want a more complete picture of how the Japanese really eat, look for the foie gras.

Japan has a long-standing love affair with French cuisine, dating back at least to 1913, when Tokuzo Akiyama, who had trained under Escoffier in Paris, was appointed master chef of the Imperial Court. In the 1970s, during the blossoming of France's nouvelle cuisine, many top French chefs journeyed to Tokyo to open restaurants. (In fact, the legendary French restaurant L'Osier, founded in Tokyo's Ginza neighborhood in 1973, is still thriving.) And in the early 1990s, Hiroyuki Sakai, a charismatic French-trained Japanese chef known as the Delacroix of the cooking world for his artful presentations, became a national celebrity on the televised cooking competition "Iron Chef."

Take a stroll through Tokyo today and you'll find bistros, brasseries or patisseries in almost every neighborhood. There's even a French Quarter, near Kagurazaka's Iidabashi Station, that draws French expats. On the fine-dining side, Tokyo is home to a number of restaurants helmed by legendary French chefs, including Joël Robuchon and Michel Troisgros. "The Japanese have an incredible respect for food and extremely high standards for the quality of their produce," says Thierry Marais, the French-born executive chef of The Ritz-Carlton, Tokyo, who moved to Japan three years ago. "In this way they are very much like the French."

Last year The Ritz-Carlton, Tokyo celebrated the awarding of a Michelin star to Azure 45, the hotel's contemporary French restaurant helmed by Chef de Cuisine Shintaro Miyazaki. The 40-year-old chef, who previously earned a star for Tokyo's Au Goût du Jour, is at the vanguard of a new generation of Japanese culinary lights who trained in France and returned home to reinterpret Gallic gastronomy. In the hands of Chef Miya, as he is known, local ingredients are transformed using classic French techniques, and French products acquire a subtle Japanese inflection. Miyazaki can transform Japan's famed wagyu beef into something resembling foie gras, for instance, or treat duck from Pierre Oteiza (one of the finest purveyors of pork and duck in France) with an incredible purity and lightness of touch.

"Being Japanese, I think I can cook something that only a Japanese chef can cook," says Miyazaki. "But it was my years apprenticing in France where I refined my techniques and opened my eyes to the best French products."

"The strength of Chef Miya is how he is able to integrate French techniques like slow cooking and French ingredients with Japanese ingredients and his Japanese sensibility," says Marais. "His food is also consistently beautiful."

The soft-spoken native of Chiba admits that he grew up "totally uninterested" in food. "My main interest was soccer," recalls Miyazaki with a laugh. "My

favorite foods were probably hamburgers and fried shrimp. On special occasions my family might go out for a steak." But when he was in high school, Miyazaki, like many of his countrymen, got hooked on watching "Iron Chef." And it was Chef Sakai who particularly captured his imagination. "I remember watching him just whisking a sauce or roasting a rump of beef and thinking that he was very cool," he says. "I was impressed by how much respect he got from his work." (Today Sakai, 74, runs the Tokyo restaurant La Rochelle.)

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the Tokyo Seishin Cooking School, Miyazaki specialized in French cuisine and then worked in the Tokyo patisserie La Bambouche for three years. “I never actually wanted to do pastry,” he explains. “But when a culinary apprenticeship I had planned to do fell apart, I just took the open position at the pastry shop.” Miyazaki ended up staying for three years, an experience that informed his famously artistic approach. “In pastry, everything must be precise and beautiful,” he says. “I think my presentations today have benefited from that training.”

After working in French restaurants in Tokyo for several years, Miyazaki decided he needed what he calls a dose of “authentic French training.” In 2004 he arrived in Paris determined to find a *stage* (unpaid internship) in a first-rate kitchen. He knew nobody in the city and his knowledge of the French language was mostly confined to culinary terms. But he was undaunted. “I bought myself a ‘Michelin Guide’ and I simply started knocking on the doors of the Michelin-starred restaurants,” he recalls. “I showed whoever answered the door a handwritten note in French that basically said: ‘I am a chef from Japan. I am 30 years old. I am looking for a job.’”

The first restaurant to take him on was the well-regarded Restaurant Laurent in the 8th arrondissement. “They started me out cutting fish,” he says. “Because I’m Japanese they knew I could do that!”

Miyazaki went on to live in France for two years, apprenticing in restaurants large and small and also traveling to the countryside to meet farmers and producers. “It was France where I first tasted pigeon, wild

rabbit and many kinds of cheese you cannot get in Japan,” he says. “In Bordeaux and Champagne I visited the vineyards. And in the Basque region I met Pierre Oteiza and saw how he raises his pork and ducks. It was a wonderful education.”

Not long after his return to Tokyo, Chef Miya returned to the kitchen of Au Goût du Jour, the intimate restaurant near Tokyo Station where he had previously worked. He led the kitchen to its first Michelin star, a distinction he maintained for seven consecutive years. In May 2014, The Ritz-Carlton, Tokyo coaxed him to take the reins at Azure 45, with *carte blanche* to remake the restaurant in his own vision. In just a year and a half the restaurant earned its star.

On a weekday afternoon on the 45th floor of The Ritz-Carlton, Tokyo, the dining room of Azure 45 is filled with dark-suited businessmen and impeccably groomed ladies tucking into gorgeously composed dishes. The expansive windows reveal a jaw-dropping view of the city — from nearby Tokyo Tower to the Rainbow Bridge to Haneda Airport — but the diners seem more focused on the plates before them. Perfect cubes of foie gras arrive bathed in silky red rhubarb jam, starkly graphic against a white china plate. Zucchini grown in nearby Shizuoka accompanies the entree of roast French suckling veal; each jewellike piece of zucchini is a different shape and color. Desserts are no less memorable. Chef Miya’s twist on tiramisu is an architectural reworking of the classic dessert



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AT YOUR SERVICE
From left: Azure 45 attracts Tokyo’s local elite looking for impeccable cuisine and service; foie gras terrine with rhubarb jam.

using a disc-shaped base of sponge cake and an inverted half-dome of mascarpone that is finished tableside with a drizzle of warm chocolate sauce.

“I get inspiration by looking at and touching ingredients,” says Miyazaki. “Right now, rhubarb is in season, so I use it to make the fresh jam.” He changes his menus seasonally (and his selection of amuse-bouche almost daily) to take advantage of whichever produce is at its peak.

“We give him full freedom to order whatever he wants, at whatever price,” says Marais. “So this could be blue lobster from Scotland or Bazadaise beef from France. These feel like discoveries for our diners, who come here for meals they can’t get everywhere else.”

The well-heeled patrons — a few arrive with hair still damp, as after a workout — have the casual languor of regulars. John Rolfs, the hotel’s general manager, explains that a number of them live at The Park Residences, the exclusive rental apartments maintained by the hotel, or are members of the hotel’s luxurious fitness club. (Memberships at hotel fitness clubs are a status symbol in certain Tokyo social circles.) Indeed, there are very few foreigners present; in this way the restaurant actually feels more Japanese than many Japanese restaurants in the city.

“We don’t even get that many of our own hotel guests, as hotel guests naturally prefer to explore the city,” says Rolfs. “But eating at Azure 45 is a little-known way for a visitor to Tokyo to see how some of the locals really live.”