

## A taste of Sushi Saito in KL

By Pauline Ng

**M**ALAYSIA'S culinary delights and street food are a major draw for many. But a trip to Kuala Lumpur with the sole intention of dining at a particular restaurant?

Chef Takashi Saito is certain many will beat a path to Taka by Sushi Saito – his maiden sushi restaurant outside Tokyo – when it opens its doors in April.

At an estimated average dining cost of RM1,000 (\$338) per head, such well-heeled visitors are the very segment that Kuala Lumpur hopes to attract more of in its bid to increase tourism receipts. (Those hoping to catch chef Saito when he makes an appearance during the first few days will need to shell out RM1,400 and RM1,700 for sushi-only and omakase sets respectively).

The youngest sushi chef to be awarded three Michelin stars says loyal patrons are already impatient to know when bookings can be made. "Every day I get calls from overseas, people calling from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore," he says during a recent visit to Kuala Lumpur to check the progress of the restaurant.

So popular is the sushi chef – Sushi Saito was ranked one of San Pellegrino's Asia's 50 Best Restaurants – even die-hard enthusiasts have to endure a wait of 4-6 months for a place at his eight-seat counter Sushi Saito in Roppongi, Tokyo. Taka by Sushi Saito will have double the number of counter seats and three Japanese chefs – including head chef Satoshi Uehara – all hand-picked and trained by chef Saito to ensure standards are exactly the same as at his Tokyo restaurant.

All ingredients will be air-flown from Japan and millions of ringgit have been spent to set up the restaurant including its traditional finishes and rare hinoki wood counter. His local partners – former stockbroker turned business tycoon Chua Ma Yu and his family – are reticent about the investment. "It's a trade secret," declares his eldest daughter Carmen.

As it is located in the six-star St Regis Kuala Lumpur which they partly own, the restaurant will offer a different kind of ambience. "I have never seen such a gorgeous restaurant, such high ceilings and space," exclaims chef Saito of his maiden overseas outlet.

Even so, he assures his Edo-style sushi will be prepared to the same exacting standards that garnered him



### CHEF SAITO

His maiden overseas outlet will open only in April but loyal patrons are already impatient to make bookings.

the coveted Michelin stars. (He transformed a preference for slightly more dainty cuts of fish and a tad more salt and milder red vinegar in the rice, into his signature style).

Indeed he revealed it was Ms Chua's shared passion and philosophy for Sushi Saito that eventually won him over and convinced him to go into a joint venture with her family. "Over the years, many people from Singapore, Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan had asked me to do the same, but they only wanted to use my name."

The Chuas do not discount establishing an outlet in Singapore in the future. "If an opportunity arises, why not?" Mr Chua says. Even so, he thinks there are already too many restaurants and sushi outlets dotting Singapore's burgeoning F&B scene.

Mr Saito is more familiar with Singapore than Malaysia, having visited the island state more often, but is cautious of spreading himself too thin lest standards slip. Such is his attention to detail, he closed his Roppongi outlet during his recent visit to Kuala Lumpur.

Will there be sufficient patrons to Taka by Sushi Saito happy to fork out four figures for a meal? Ms Chua does not think it will be an issue. Beckoning to her siblings – two out of three present at the interview – she is confident demand will be robust, not only from overseas sushi connoisseurs but many expectant locals. "Between the four of us and our friends alone . . ." she laughs.