

WHEN YOU WISH UPON A STAR

Well, make that three stars. Three Michelin stars. Gourmets, rejoice, as one of the world's greatest sushi masters, Takashi Saito, is bringing his revered take on the Japanese art of Edo-mae sushi to Kuala Lumpur as Taka by Sushi Saito opens at the St Regis Hotel Kuala Lumpur next month.

TEXT DIANA KHOO PHOTOGRAPHY EDMUND LEE ART DIRECTION PENNY CHEW

Sushi enthusiasts in Malaysia and around the region can now let out a collective whoop of joy as one of the greatest sushi masters, the relatively youthful Takashi Saito of Tokyo's three Michelin-starred Sushi Saito, readies to open his first-ever outpost outside of Japan at the new St Regis Kuala Lumpur in April 2016.

THE PREVIEW

Ever since a coup of immense culinary proportions was scored by Kuala Lumpur, which pipped rival cities more famous and established for its cuisine scene, namely Hong Kong and Singapore, gourmets around the region have already stopped petulantly asking 'Why Malaysia?' and, instead, 'When can I secure a reservation?' With Saito-san's eponymous Roppongi restaurant offering just eight seats, those choosing to dine in KL can double their chances of sampling the sushi *sensei's* signature offerings, particularly his *awabi* (abalone), *akami* (tuna), *anago* (sea eel), *kohada* (gizzard shard) and *tamago* (Japanese egg omelette), as the St Regis restaurant, Taka by Sushi Saito, will offer a 16-seater counter.

I counted myself among the privileged few to have been invited to preview what the soon-to-open Taka by Sushi Saito at the St Regis Kuala Lumpur will offer. A special dinner had been arranged by Tan

Sri Chua Ma Yu, owner of the new hotel, at his residence. Sitting down at a makeshift sushi counter in the middle of his expansive dining room, it felt a tad surreal, I can tell you. In front of me, two chefs, Satoshi Uehara and Masashi Kubota, both personally handpicked and trained by Saito-san himself and who will helm Taka by Sushi Saito, were deftly slicing up pieces of whole, glistening abalone as we sat underneath a ceiling of crystal birds designed by the famous modern lighting company, Lights of Vienna, who, incidentally, will also be creating pieces for the hotel lobby as well as crystal chandeliers for the St Regis' grand ballroom. As we sat down to an 18-course *omakase* dinner, we were informed that the exact same menu was being served that night in Saito-san's Roppongi *sushiya*. The feast began, naturally, with Sushi Saito's signatures of octopus and abalone, which we enjoyed with Dom Pérignon and the Chua family's cache of rare Dassai 23 and Mori No Kura sakés, before moving on to mackerel, codfish milt, rockfish, several variations of tuna, sea urchin, conger eel and, finally, ending with his world-renowned *tamago* and a bowl of flavourful *miso-shiru*.

THE CHEF

In the popular reference book, simply titled *Sushi* by Kazuo Nagayama, Hiroshi Yoda and Kazuhiko Tajima,

they write: "The signature flavour of sushi, produced by the masterly but uncomplicated craftsmanship of the sushi chef, is what makes Edo-mae sushi so special and the whole secret to its irresistible, delectable appeal." And if what you do is a reflection of what you are, it's not surprising then that Takashi Saito is as humble and unassuming as they come. Born in Chiba in 1972, Saito-san remains the youngest sushi chef in the world to have been awarded the near-divine status of three Michelin stars. (Only three sushi restaurants in Tokyo can boast of such an exalted ranking; the other two being Jiro Ono's Sukiyabashi Jiro, made famous by David Gelb's 2011 documentary,

ABOVE
Takashi Saito poses with, aptly, a fish-themed artwork by Yorgos Kypris, which belongs in the private collection of Tan Sri Chua Ma Yu, whose company, ONE IFC, is the developer of the St Regis Hotel here in Kuala Lumpur.





CODFISH MILT

Soft and creamy, *shirako* is not to everyone's taste.



SEA URCHIN

Saito-san's version is worth popping the cholesterol meds for.



TUNA

Taka by Sushi Saito offers several variations, including *akami*, *chutoro* and *otoro*.

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF SAITO-SAN

Far from the rock 'n' roll persona exuded by chefs of other cuisines, the world of a sushi chef is as precise and dedicated as the edible works of art he creates. Here is a glimpse into Chef Takashi Saito's daily routine.

0600hrs Chef Saito wakes up at his home in Tokyo.

0700hrs Makes his way to Tsukiji Market, where he personally selects the best produce on offer that day.

1000hrs Travels to his restaurant in Roppongi, where lunch prep begins in earnest.

1200hrs The lunch customers are welcomed into the restaurant.

1400hrs Only after the last customers leave do Chef Saito and his team eat lunch.

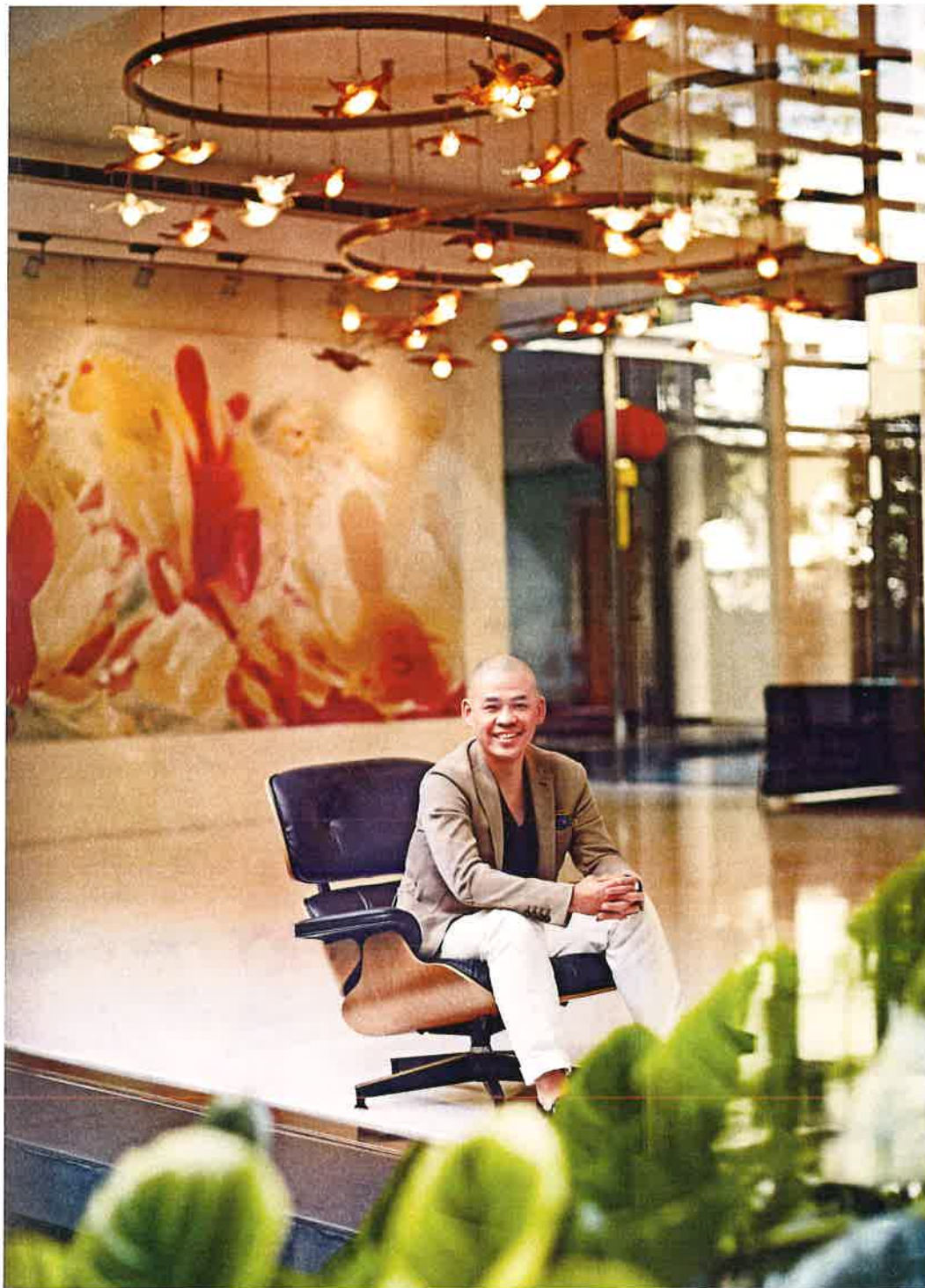
1500hrs Prep then begins for the dinner service, which can last a couple of hours.

1800hrs Guests for the first dinner service begin to arrive.

2030hrs Guests for the second seating arrive.

2330hrs The team then cleans up for the day.

0030hrs After cleaning up, Chef Saito and his team can look forward to grabbing something to eat or heading someplace nearby for a drink before it all begins again in about six hours.



Jiro Dreams of Sushi, and Sushi Yoshitake.) Exceedingly genial but speaking little English, we sat down for a chat when he made a fleeting visit to Kuala Lumpur recently, as Yuji Maeda, a long-time friend of the Chua family, kindly volunteered to act as translator. When asked if he feels the pressure to maintain the rating, he smiles his trademark broad grin and says: "There is no pressure as sushi is not like other cuisines, which change as time goes by. Sushi is a very traditional food and, hence, I don't feel any pressure. My philosophy has always been to maintain the same quality and taste."

Waking up every day at 6am in order to get to Tsukiji Market

to personally select the seafood, Saito-san will extend this ritual to also cover the produce used at the KL outpost. "The most important thing is my own eyes and judgement," he explains. "Tsukiji is home to so many traders and part of the secret of any good sushi chef is to maintain good suppliers. Only once you have them in place, can you select the best ingredients" – a home truth echoed by *Sushi's* authors who write: "The taste of sushi is largely determined by how well the ingredients are chosen". Displaying the dedication and attention to detail that makes it easy to see why Michelin reviewers could get a whiff of the young chef, doggedly track him down to his restaurant,

then located inside a car park ("Why a car park? Very simple – no money," Saito-san roars with laughter), and promptly awarding him three stars – a feat he has maintained every year since 2009 – it seems incongruous that one of the youngest, most celebrated sushi chefs in the world never dreamt of treading the culinary path, preferring, instead, to entertain dreams of being a baseball player (Saito-san, incidentally, shares the exact same name with the current Tohoku Rakuten Golden Eagles and former Boston Red Sox's pitcher). It was a chance encounter at the age of 16 that the young Saito paid unusually close attention to the chef who was preparing his sushi meal. "I

was observing him and it felt like a very good job to have as it looked so easy... just cutting fish and putting it on top of rice," he laughs, sharing his naïveté then.

THE JOURNEY

Since that fateful meal in Chiba, Saito-san has cut his teeth with some of Japan's most famous sushi chefs, training at the famous Ginza restaurant, Kyubei, as well as with

of ONE IFC and the catalyst behind Saito-san's decision to open in Kuala Lumpur: "Very few sushi chefs can master the art of preparing rice that is light as air, sushi that literally melts in your mouth."

"It was Carmen-san's idea, really," elaborates Saito-san. "She came to eat at my restaurant so often and, after talking with her many times, she asked me to open in Kuala Lumpur, according to the

handpicked chefs he has tasked with the great honour and responsibility of flying the Saito flag high is as close as you can ever get to the Tokyo experience. Saito-san himself will be making no less than four visits to Kuala Lumpur each year, to ensure standards are well up to par. From a garage to a Roppongi dining room and, now, his first overseas foray with the luxury St Regis brand, it would seem that, when the young man

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Shinji Kanesaka, whose Ginza restaurant holds two Michelin stars, and who also maintains an outlet within the Palace Hotel Tokyo's famous Wadakura restaurant and another in Singapore's Raffles Hotel. "The senior chef at Kanesaka was a very good guy," he says, in his Japanese-accented English, "and I followed his style. You could say he mentored me. From my time in Kyubei, I learnt about customer service and how to entertain guests. From Kanesaka, I learnt how to make beautiful sushi."

And, judging by the picture-perfect morsels placed deftly in front of me by his disciples that evening, 'beautiful' seems too simple a word to describe Saito-san's brand of sushi. Fans already know of and appreciate his signature style: mildly vinegared rice (using red vinegar instead of regular rice vinegar) that is light-as-air, and which highlights the quality and freshness of the *neta* (the fish or other chosen topping) and to ensure its flavour fills the mouth roundly and voluptuously. "There are only four components in sushi: rice, the produce, wasabi and soy," points out Saito-san. Adds Carmen Chua, CEO

same style and standards of Sushi Saito in Tokyo." "This joint venture," continues Carmen, "is borne out of our mutual friendship and a sincere appreciation for his skill and style of sushi." Certainly, Saito-san has no shortage of admirers. In fact, it was none other than Joël Robuchon, named 'Chef of the Century' by Gault Millau and, with over a dozen acclaimed restaurants around the world – from Monaco to Macau – holder of a total of 25 Michelin stars, the most of any chef in the world, who proclaimed Sushi Saito as "the best sushi restaurant in the world." Upon hearing the name, Saito-san smiles and lets slip that "he is coming next week to Tokyo to eat."

Sushi connoisseurs might also have noticed a recurring trend among sushi chefs to sport a cleanly shaven pate – a trait Saito-san shares as well. "This is to represent cleanliness, purity and devotion," he explains. His followers are also well-aware of the fact that Saito-san's dedication to ensuring each guest has only the best experience extends to closing his restaurant should he not be present. For guests of Taka by Sushi Saito, however, rest assured that the three

from Chiba chooses to upgrade, he does so in quantum leaps. So, come April, be sure to look out for Kuala Lumpur's latest temple of haute cuisine, built around an altar crafted from 300-year-old *hinoki* wood at the city's shiniest new hotel. Jiro might have famously dreamt of sushi but, together with the Chua family, Takashi Saito has just made it a reality for the region's connoisseurs. ㊦

A TASTE OF TWO CITIES

Where to sample Takashi Saito's culinary craft.

TOKYO

1F, Ark Hills South Tower, 1-4-5 Roppongi, Minato-ku, Tokyo.
Tel: +81 3 3589 4412
Capacity: Eight pax.
OH: Daily 1200hrs-1400hrs; 1700hrs-2200hrs, except Mondays.

KUALA LUMPUR

3A, St Regis Hotel Kuala Lumpur, 6 Jalan Stesen Sentral 2, Kuala Lumpur.
Tel: To be confirmed.
Capacity: 16 pax.
OH: 1200hrs-1430hrs; 1800hrs-2300hrs.