

# Ten Restaurants that Matter

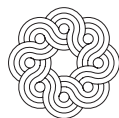
The choices are endless, the decisions fraught, so...don't think twice.

BY YUKARI SAKAMOTO

Flash-fried  
shrimp at  
Tenmatsu

**H**ere's the thing about dining in Tokyo: Everyone has "a guy"—a sushi guy, a ramen guy, a yakitori guy. This is because Tokyo is home to 80,000 restaurants (compared with about 24,000 in both New York and London), most of which are hyperspecific in focus, with chefs showing off their mastery of one cuisine. This is arguably why the city has the world's most Michelin stars. (See "Fine Dining in Tokyo," page 202.) It's also why eating out—even for those who seek the best of everything—is less about what truly tops (because how does one attempt to discern which tuna reigns supreme at the city's 5,000 sushi shops?) and more about finding a spot and sticking to it. For this reason, DEPARTURES narrowed down the field to ten restaurants of varying disciplines that showcase the best of what Tokyo has to offer.





## Yuu

Chicken skewers, or yakitori, are almost always served with beer. For sake instead, go out of the way to Tokyo's Iidabashi district, a ten-minute walk from Nippon Budokan arena. At Yuu, the reward is a sake selection from under-the-radar breweries in Tochigi Prefecture, north of the capital. When ordering a meal, the adventurous should say "omakase" and leave it to the chef to select the different parts of the chicken that are skewered and roasted over Japanese *binchotan* charcoal, which is made from oak and is known to burn at high temperatures with little to no smoke.

SKB Bldg. B1F, 1-9-5 Iidabashi, Chiyoda-ku

## Nihonbashi Yukari

Third-generation chef Kimio Nonaga is an *Iron Chef* champion who trained at Kyoto's Michelin three-star Kikunoi. His evening kaiseki is a nine-course affair with a new menu every month, just steps from Tokyo Station. Watch Nonaga prepare the sashimi and other cold courses. While many chefs can be shy behind the counter, Nonaga is a showman, a quality that pops up even in his self-designed tableware, which ranges from classic lacquer to glassware studded with Swarovski crystals. Dinner always finishes with a modern dessert, like toasted soybean powder ice cream with black beans—an unusual end for a traditional cuisine.

3-2-14 Nihonbashi, Chuo-ku

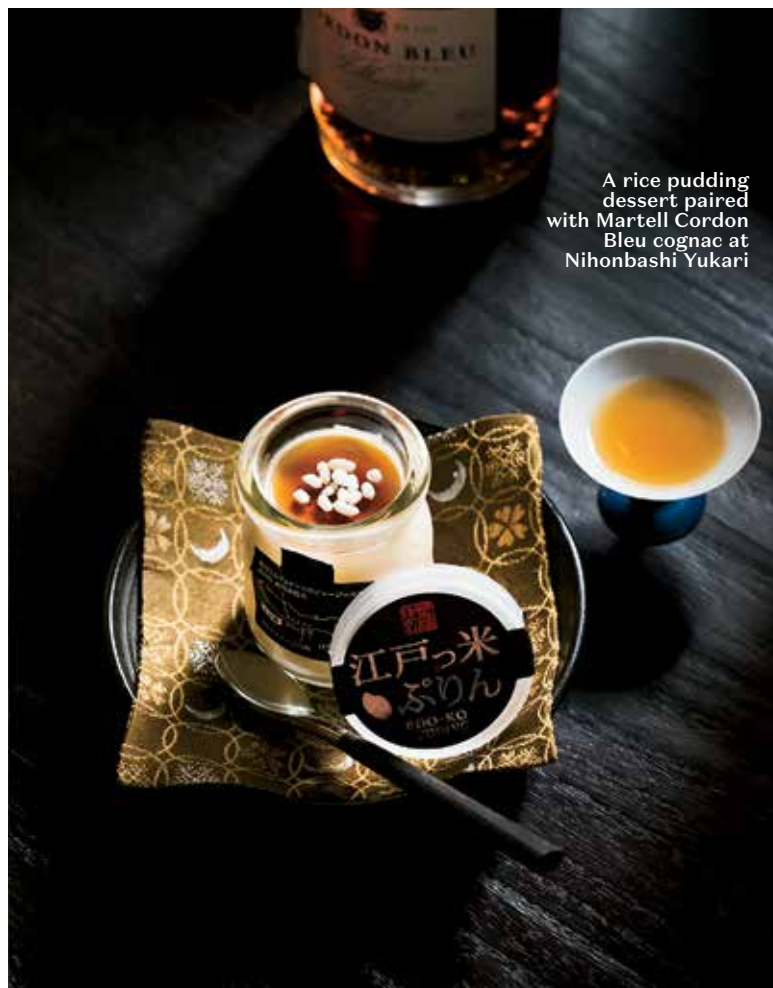
## Sasuga Soba

On a small, less traveled street in Ginza, the understated Michelin-starred Sasuga Soba prepares 100-percent-soba noodles that are rolled and cut by hand each day—notable because other shops add wheat to the dough as a shortcut. Order the *yakimiso* (grilled miso studded with buckwheat) and the *sobagaki agedashi* (fried buckwheat dough) to start. Finish with one of the 11 soba entrées. The cold *goma* soba, served with sesame dipping sauce, and the *kamonan* soba, a hot soup with duck, are standouts.

Toji Bldg. 2F, 2-13-6 Ginza, Chuo-ku; ginza-sasuga.jp

## Shinjuku Takano Fruit Parlor

Locals come to this café, just steps from Shinjuku Station, for special occasions. Fruit is revered in Japan (case in point: In July, a bunch of about 30 Ruby Roman grapes sold at auction for a record \$10,900), and the menu here demonstrates how it



A rice pudding dessert paired with Martell Cordon Bleu cognac at Nihonbashi Yukari

## My Own Favorite

by Matt Goulding, author of *Rice, Noodle, Fish* (Harper Wave)

### Jimbocho Den

"The mad geniuses at this Michelin-starred counter restaurant use kaiseki as a launchpad for inventive meals that might include a sandwich of miso-marinated foie gras, a salad with 20 vegetables, or Dentucky fried chicken. You'll get wrapped up in the energy of chef Zaiyu Hasegawa and the hospitality of his wife, Emi." 2-2-32 Kanda-Jimbocho, Chiyoda-ku; jimbochoden.com.

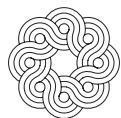
can be flawless, aromatic, and juicy. Order a seasonal parfait of Okinawan mangoes with mango purée and yogurt for \$20, or a concentrated fresh juice made of Shizuoka Prefecture cantaloupes for \$15. In the lower-level fruit emporium, whole melons and cherries are displayed in glass cases and go for hundreds of dollars.

5F, 3-26-11 Shinjuku, Shinjuku-ku; takano.jp/takano/en

### Sushiya

Down a dark, narrow alley—one that makes you wonder if you've got the right place—the door opens into a tiny, eight-seat counter that allows diners to watch the fine movements of 31-year-old up-and-coming chef Takao Ishiyama. The restaurant's name, Sushiya, translates as "sushi shop." While the name is simple, the sushi is not. Bright flavors from chives, shiso (an Asian herb in the mint family), and zest of yuzu (a Japanese citrus fruit similar to lime) are unexpectedly paired with the seafood he bought at Tsukiji fish market that morning. And unlike other popular sushi shops in Tokyo, Sushiya hasn't been overrun with foreigners—yet.

6-3-17 Ginza, Chuo-ku



## Kagari

The creamiest bowls of chicken ramen are made at this shop with two branches in Ginza. Hour-long waits are common at the main location, down an unmarked alley by Apple's Tokyo flagship store, so head to the one in Ginza Station's underground mall for shorter lines. While the staff will not give away its recipe, cartons of heavy cream can be spotted in the refrigerator. Squeeze in between the white-shirted businessmen at—where else?—the eight-seat counter. Ask for a paper bib as the thin noodles splash while being slurped up, and order garlic butter and soft-boiled egg as additional toppings.

*Echika fit Ginza, 4-1-2 Ginza, Chuo-ku*

## Tenmatsu

Request a counter seat at this tempura shop next to the Nihonbashi bridge. The offerings go beyond the usual fried shrimp and mushrooms to include *sansai*—wild, Japanese mountain vegetables such as *udo*, a vegetable similar to white asparagus—that are drawn through a batter, deep-fried, and served hot out of a nutty sesame oil. There is a soy-based dipping sauce with grated radish, but dab the tempura in salt to preserve the delicate crust. At lunchtime, it fills with neighborhood regulars, who order tempura sets with bowls of sashimi tuna and rice.

*1-8-2 Nihonbashi Muromachi, Chuo-ku; tenmatsu.com*

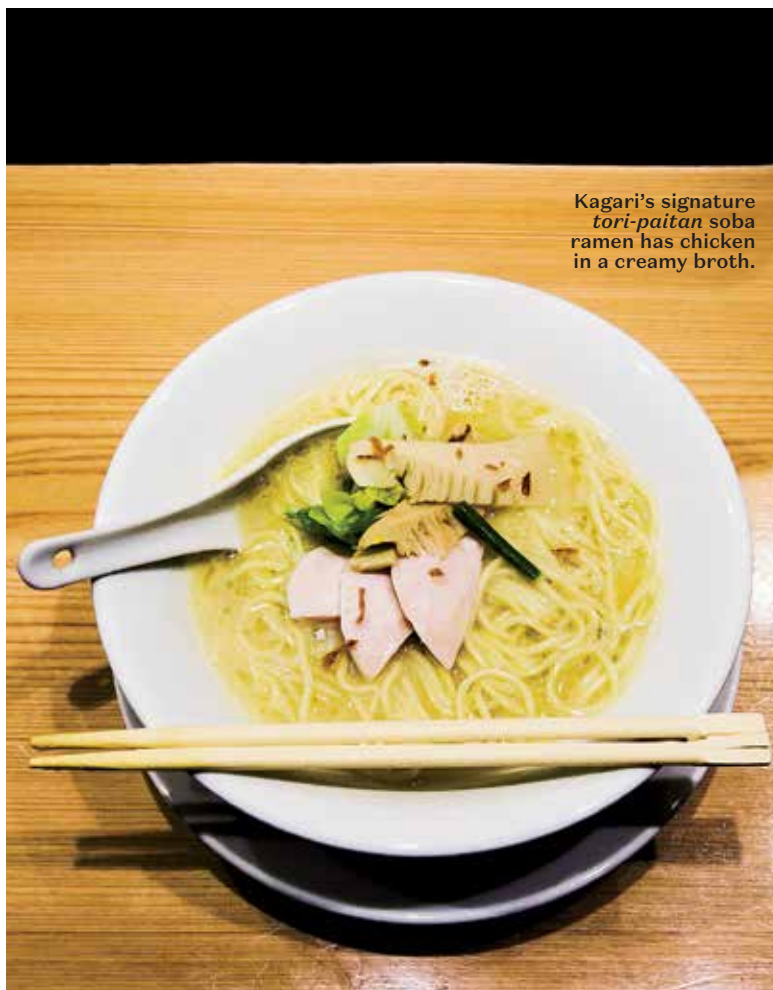
## Kotaro

The friendly *izakaya* on a quiet backstreet in the hip Shibuya neighborhood has an open kitchen where chef Kotaro Hayashi serves small bites to pair with rare sakes. Potato salad is a classic bar food in Japan that is creamier than the American version, and Kotaro's twist includes a smoked soft-boiled egg. Move on to one of his signature handmade udon noodle preparations. Ask to have the sakes served at different temperatures to taste the expressions from hot to cold.

*28-2 Sakuragaoka-cho, Shibuya-ku*

## Tsuruya Yoshinobu

In Kyoto, Tsuruya Yoshinobu has been creating *wagashi*, traditional Japanese confectioneries made from red bean paste and rice flour (see "Not Too Sweet," page 148), for more than 200 years. The designs reflect nature, with creations that look like roses, *satsuki* azaleas, cherry blossoms, and hydrangeas. What's special about the Tokyo



Kagari's signature *tori-paitan* soba ramen has chicken in a creamy broth.

## My Own Favorite

### Obana

"What makes Tokyo's food scene better than any in the world is specialization. Take Obana as Exhibit A. Established in the 19th century, the Michelin-starred spot still dedicates itself entirely to *unagi*, wild eel cooked over *binchotan* charcoal. A simple bowl of rice topped with a fillet is the best way to taste the hundreds of years of expertise." *5-33-1 Minami-Senju, Arakawa-ku. —M.G.*

location, in the Nihonbashi district, is that you can sit at a counter and watch as the craftsman, or *shokunin*, creates a seasonal sweet and complements it with a cup of matcha.

*1-5-5 Nihonbashi Muromachi, Chuo-ku; turuya.co.jp*

### Tonkatsu Katsukura

Breaded and deep-fried pork cutlets, or tonkatsu, are presented on a stainless steel mesh to keep them crispy at this restaurant on the 14th floor of Takashimaya department store. But what makes Tonkatsu Katsukura different is that here diners crush toasted sesame seeds with a mortar and pestle to use as a garnish together with the sweet tonkatsu sauce, which is similar to a mix of Worcestershire sauce and ketchup, and usually accompanies the dish. It adds a roasted, nutty flavor. A mountain of julienned cabbage is served with the store's original aromatic yuzu dressing. After the meal, take the elevator to Takashimaya's basement (see "Food, Glorious Food," page 64) to check out some 30,000 eye-catching grocery items for sale.

*Takashimaya Times Square 14F, 5-24-2 Sendagaya, Shibuya-ku*