

MOVEABLE FEAST

No Place Like Nobu

By Jeannine Kadow
Aspen Daily News Culinary Critic

Early one evening in deep December, I tuck in next to the fireplace super snug in my favorite Christmas present: a pair of flannel PJs festooned with colorful cartoon images of Sushi. Tuna maki, pink shrimp, gorgeous green rolls, urchins and King Crabs tumble in a frivolous cascade from shoulder to hem. The PJs are highly appropriate attire given the fact that I landed in Aspen for the season because of sushi - or more precisely, because of a sushi encounter at the noble counter of Hatsuhana restaurant in Manhattan where a chef named Seki has reigned supreme for more than twenty years.

Paying homage to Seki alongside me that night was a CEO of an American company intimately tied to a Japanese corporation. He has spent serious time in the country and his palette for its cuisine is highly refined. As we talked, I discovered he is deeply knowledgeable about ski resorts as well. I told him I had decided to spend the winter in the Mountains, but like Seki's sushi menu, there were simply so many potential choices I couldn't decide where to go. The CEO tapped his chopsticks on his sake glass. "Aspen," he said with great conviction. "Living in a ski town is not the same as simply going skiing in a ski town. Go to Aspen. You'll love it. Take my word."

I did and now on this early evening as the year winds down, I am feeling particularly pleased with my new pajamas and Aspen abode. Snug as I am in the gifted flannel, when a friend calls and invites me out, I can't resist. The event, she says, is quintessentially Aspen: a Bacchanal bash

at Bulgari to celebrate the season. "It will be a feast for the eyes," she promises. A resident of Aspen for nearly thirty years, she ought to know. I am new to town but have seen enough to know she is a Diva of style, a woman of natural elegance, humor and class. "Will you join me?" she asks. I eagerly accept. PJs are stripped, Dior donned and a half hour later we are fast walking across town to the jeweler's precious boutique.

The Bulgari's come from a family of Greek artisans who made precious objects in silver. In the mid-19th Century, Sotirio Bulgari moved to Italy and in 1905 opened the store on the Via Condotti that is Bulgari's flagship store today. I suspect that part of tonight's bash is 'homage' to the hundred year anniversary of Sotirio's signature shop.

The Aspen boutique is a jewel of a space, boldly simple in design and divinely intimate. Tonight, tenting covers the sidewalk bordering the shop, providing additional space for the party - a wise move given the fact that the place literally bursts at the seams with Aspen cognoscenti done up in a full on alphabet run of designer delights. I spy Armani, Brioni, Calvin, Dolce, Etro, Fendi,

Gucci and more. In the store display windows, curvy young models pout and pose as they show off rings and necklaces and earrings - a panoply of Bulgari's most eye-popping pieces.

My friend and I eel through the tented throng, in the main entrance, and past ice sculptures that have begun to melt from body heat generated by the crowd. An ice chandelier overhead drips. A voluptuous ice female nude sweats. I would be sweating too, I think, if I were wearing the emerald and diamond piece draped around her neck. The price for the necklace? Nine hundred and fifty grand. Opposite the nude a busty model twists



and turns on a raised dais Mesmerizing the local paparazzi. Like the ice sculpture she is naked from the waist up, however her delicate mammary details are cleverly concealed by a massive diamond and white gold breastplate worthy of a Medici in Ancient Rome. The price? Somewhat less than the necklace, a mere six hundred and fifty thou.

While the male contingency gawks at Bulgari's diamond crusted babe, we females cluster at showcases dazzled by the current collection of jewelry made from precious and semi-precious stones. A row of rings captures my attention and that of my friend: each has a large square cut jewel set in an unembellished frame of gold. The simplicity of the setting shows off the natural beauty of the gems. My friend points to a pink Amethyst, notes that it is her birthstone and asks to try it on. She has a birthday forthcoming in February - and given the infinite largesse of her heart, nothing could be more appropriate for her than St. Valentine's stone. Bulgari understands sophisticated simplicity. The ring enticed us in the case, but on her hand it absolutely does us in. A deal is struck. She buys herself a birthday present and purchases the ring.

By now the twining model in the breastplate is tiring and the melting ice torso has lost its gender and form. An elegant waiter winds through the crowd offering champagne. A second spins by with platters of sushi and our appetites instantly turn away from the bracelets and rings to dinner. We ooze back through the throng where all the Full Frontal Fashion makes me pine for the simple comfort of my new flannel PJs - and when we hit the treet, we march straight to Nobu Matsuhisa on Main Street where the fashionable crowd is no less eye-popping. The culinary offerings are jewels as dazzling as Bulgari's - these, however, are consumable gems.

We open the door and succumb to the sublime. When it comes to Nobu, I confess to being a global fan. I once drove three hours from my home in the south of France to Nobu Milan to sate a craving for his Black Miso Cod. I have routinely feasted at his tables in London, New York and L.A. but must declare that Aspen is his crown jewel.

The restaurant is at the corner of Monarch and Main, in a light blue

Victorian decked with glittering tiny white lights. Inside, however, there is nothing at all Victorian about the space. The upstairs lounge is all sleek wood, sophisticated lines and soft seductive lighting. There are deep slouchy armless sofas and low tables, and tall tables with tall stools for those who prefer to dine straight up. In the second room of the lounge, there are more tall tables and a long sushi bar. Lights are bright there so the chefs can see to work. It is my first choice when dining alone. Watching the knife work is entertaining, the convivial banter at the sushi bar is always entertaining- and you can sample half portions of many of Nobu's renowned specialties at half the main restaurant price.

On this night we bypass the lounge and head downstairs past an undulating wall-sized aquatic hologram into the main restaurant space that is oceanic and primeval all at once. Fiery orange walls at the sushi bar streaked with solar yellow rays evoke a time when the earth was newly born and the seas dominated. A facing wall frescoed with aqueous forms in shades of blue and green again conveys the power of ocean waters.

A deep high standing sushi bar runs half the length of the vast room. Ceilings are high and tables clustered close. The room is packed with the holiday crowd and more huddle at the entry waiting. We have no reservation but we are both known here and are secreted over to a table for two. Water is poured, the menu delivered. We open it and the journey begins.



Nobuyuki (Nobu) Matsuhisa is in his fifties now. He first studied in Japan to become a master sushi chef, then traveled widely to Peru, Argentina, and Alaska before landing in L.A. where he opened the first Nobu Matsuhisa in Beverly Hills in 1987 - an instant hit. While in Peru, he began to integrate South American flavors to his classic Japanese cuisine - the first steps in a culinary evolution that has earned him his just status as one of the world's few truly brilliant visionary chefs.

The menu is divided into traditional offerings (sushi, sashimi, rolled sushi, soups, noodles, and tempura) and the signature dishes that have won Nobu his international status and acclaim. (I admire his menu because he also offers a selection of cooked foods to sate those who do not venture into the raw. Filet Mignon, Free Range Chicken, and Lamb are presented in classic dinners served with vegetables and miso soup and rice.)

For the novice at Nobu, the "Omakase" chef's choice tasting dinner is an excellent way to dine. The first-timer simply cannot really know what the cooking is from the menu. Priced at \$90 or \$120 per person, the tasting is a worthwhile tour. That being said, the wait staff is expert and can make for excellent culinary consultants.

My friend and I are no novices. On the contrary, we are double black diamond Nobu experts. We know this food intimately and quickly come up with a plan. It is more fun to share at Nobu - there are simply too many extraordinary specialties to do it any other way. On this night we conjure up a mix of some classic sushi and signature dishes. Despite the crunch, the wait staff sails through the room remarkably serene. Service is surprisingly seamless and fleet.

I say surprising because there have been several nights in the high season holiday weeks when both the service and food completely fell apart. Consistency of perfection is one of Nobu's global accomplishments - and if Nobu Aspen stumbles in any way, it is on that one point.

From time to time it simply could not handle the massive hungry Aspen crush. Dirty plates sat on the counter, diners complained that drinks and sushi orders never arrived - lost or forgotten - and those dishes that did often disappointed with clumsy rice, haphazard maki (rolls) that were loose and messy, soggy tempura

that had been overcooked. Even a simple salad saddened, with rubbery shitake and wilted leaves all ungracefully tossed together in an obvious rush. On those nights, the roar of the crowd upstairs drowned out the excellent music that gives the lounge so much of its slinky seductive ambience. And the staff, so obviously stressed, evidenced their distress in two ways: with inexcusably curt reprimands to diners or benign neglect.

Now, downstairs on a big night in the holiday stretch, I forgive for we dine divinely. Our first course is perhaps Nobu's most famous; a silky chunk of broiled black cod napped in a dark velvety miso sauce. The fish is so fresh the filet flakes at the first press of the fork. And despite the full dining room, the dish has arrived searingly hot. While Nobu has an impressive wine list, Sake is the perfect match. There is a full list of options - but the top notch house standard is a quick and easy choice, one that universally pleases.

Our second plate is a traditional roll. Sockeye salmon is a special tonight and we have it in a classic maki, simply rolled with Nori (sheet of seaweed) and rice. The fish is a deep ruby in color, more intense than a King Salmon let alone a lesser salmon that has been farmed. The flavor stands alone - a dip in soy is just that, a dip not a bath. Too much soy and all you taste is soy, not the fish. I ask for a pinch of fresh wasabi - all experienced Nobu diners do - because the taste is a deeper, earthier spice than the common green Japanese mustard made from powder or squeezed as ready-made paste from a tube.

King Crab is another specialty served three ways - as sashimi, sushi and tempura. We opt for the latter, and when it arrives we instantly know we were right. Jewel sized bits crackle at first bite - a perfectly light tempura crisp then that gives way to succulent sweet hot crab meat

inside. Sweet ponzu sauce served alongside for dipping has just the right hint of acidic edge. Next we swing back to a sushi classic: a wedge of sizzling broiled eel strapped to a rice cushion with a strip of Nori green. Melts like butter on the tongue. A Nobu signature dish follows, 'New Style Sashimi' - diaphanous slices of yellowtail inset with jalapeño pepper rounds.

When asked to define his cooking, Nobu says that is fundamentally Japanese



with North and South American influences. His cooking is dedicated to bringing out the natural flavors of the very best products he can source. Nobu claims that his dishes are truly like art - energetic vibrant works of color and flavor. Works of artistic balance.

Deep now into Nobu's inventions, we order up skewers of grilled salmon with two sauces: Wasabi pepper and Teriyaki. And finally we forgo the famous Mochi Ice Cream and choose Yellowtail Tataki instead for desert - a delicate wedge of broiled yellowtail served hot with sweet miso and drizzled with crispy strips of leek.

My friend is deft with her chopsticks. The new Bulgari ring sparkles. I think that of all the holiday glitz on parade at the Nell, the Slopeside Lotharios preening

with Bogner Bravado and I decide the real beauty in Aspen is in the quiet elegance; Not Bulgari's diamond crusted breast-plate but this astonishingly simple pink Amethyst; Not the food heavy heaped plates at other big name addresses, but right here in the crisp clean minimalism of Nobu's refined cuisine. His serving plates too are works of art - hand crafted ceramics in all shapes and sizes, oven fired with glazes in gemstone shades of Jade, Lapis-Azuli, and yes, even Amethyst pink.

Just as I am musing on the subject of how complex and devastatingly sophisticated true simplicity can be, a waitress appears tableside with earthenware cups of hot green tea. Her necklace catches my eye. It is a stunning piece, gold beads from Bali with Citrine and black faceted Onyx. Quiet but powerful. "Where did you buy that?" I ask. "I made it," she softly replies.

As we talk I learn that she is Nancy Ho, a highly talented local artist who has been designing jewelry for a private clientele. Now, her work is available in Aspen exclusively at THE HIDDEN JEWEL, the new boutique that carries Kristine Costner's hot handbag line. In coming days when I see more of Nancy's

pieces, I discover that nothing in her jewelry is exaggerated. It is the 'essential visual' - not more, not less. The integrity of the element stars - just like my friend's Amethyst and the dishes at Nobu. In each instance the origin product seduces the senses.

Truly great cuisine invites appreciation for all that is beautiful - whether you wear it, listen to it, look at it or eat it. I study the perfect Amethyst on my companion's hand, the clean gorgeous line of Nancy's multi-jeweled creation, the spare elegance of Nobu's plated glory and think the paparazzi can have Bulgari's diamond-crusted babe. Spectacle stales rapidly - natural perfection dazzles for all time.

For those of us who have the luxury of lingering in Aspen long after the holiday

merry makers have gone, Nobu Matsuhisa delivers visionary culinary Nirvana time after time. It is expensive - but mastery of this level comes at a price. The check depends on the number in your party, what you order and how much. (A simple classic Spicy Tuna Roll runs a modest \$8.50. Order up the mighty Adam Roll and prepare to peel off a crisp twenty.)

There are eleven Nobus now around the world but out of his precious collection, Nobu Aspen is the prize. Why? To spend the day in the embrace of Aspen Mountain where the vistas up top stir the soul, to fly fast and free over the face of Bell, along the ridge and drop down through the verdant glades - and to then end such a day with a quiet stroll down

Main Street, a left turn on Monarch, and easy ascent up the steps to Nobu's main door is idyllic. I hope Nobu's dynasty, like Bulgari's, will one day cross the Centennial mark - long after my flannel Sushi PJs are gone.

Nobu Matsuhisa: 303 E. Main Street, Aspen, Colorado 81611
Telephone: 907-704-9213

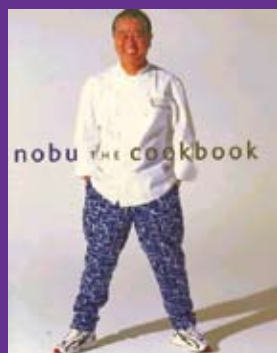
SIDE DISH DOING NOBU AT HOME

No question about it. Sometimes there's nothing better than a quiet night at home. That doesn't mean you can't have your coze factor and your Nobu too! Stroll on over to the restaurant and order the full line of his ready-made sauces. They come nicely bottled for a healthy home shelf life and I would advise you to acquire the full collection of six: Onion Soy Sauce Dressing, Ceviche Dressing, Teriyaki Balsamic Sauce, Jalapeño Dressing, Spicy Lemon Dressing, and Yuzu Dressing. After all, you don't have a robust staff of chefs on hand in your kitchen. This is the best most efficient way to get the burst of his unmistakable flavor in minimal time. While you are at it, stop in at the *Explorer Bookstore* and buy his cookbook too. Having the Master Chef literally alongside you is well worth the \$37.00.

Steer clear of the raw. Sushi, Sashimi and the Rolls take years of apprenticeship training to master. The knife work alone is an art. Stick to things you can gracefully accomplish. There are plenty of cooked dishes in the book. Broil up a wedge of fresh salmon, nap it with his suggested sauce, serve it up on the right kind of plate - and voilà! You're feasting Nobu-style in a snap.

Explorer Booksellers:

221 East Main Street, Aspen CO 81611
Telephone: 970-925-5336



Speaking of plates, here's a table top strategy that's a sure hit. Roll on in to *Amen Wardy Home* and feast your eyes on some of the loveliest sushi serving sets around. Prices, like Nobu's can be deservedly heady - a gorgeous blue glass sushi set for one person selling for \$170.00 - but beauty can be had for far less as well. Take a look at the silver tipped bamboo sushi service for two sold complete with silver chopsticks and a silver chopstick rest. Eight piece service priced at \$75.00. The clean lines of the wooden sushi service for one please with the gentler price of \$25.00. Gorgeous Geisha napkins can be had for another \$25.00

Amen Wardy Home:

210 S. Galena St. Aspen Co 81611
Telephone: 970-920-7700



One of the best Sake selections in town can be had at *Grape and Grain* - ten different varieties priced from a \$5.00 to \$40.00 Cross the street to *Les Chef's de Aspen* and take home a couple of Sake sets for serving - ceramic cups and classic carafe priced at \$30.00

Of Grape and Grain:

319 E. Hopkins Aspen, CO 81611
Telephone: 970-925-8600

Les Chefs de Aspen:

400 E. Hopkins Aspen, CO 81611
Telephone: 970-925-6217

Oh! And for heaven's sake, don't forget the PJs - long sleeve flannels festooned with sushi at *The Freudian Slip*. \$93.00 a pair.

The Freudian Slip:

416 S. Hunter Aspen, CO 81611
Telephone: 970-925-4427



I dare you to not stop in at *Bulgari* and ponder one of those perfect square gemstone rings. \$2300.00 each.

Bulgari: 200 S. Mill Street Aspen, CO 81611
Telephone: 970-925-6225

And finally for the feast, drop into *The Hidden Jewel* and treat yourself (or, if you are a man, treat the woman in your life) to one of Nancy Ho's visual essentials. Prices start at \$60.00 for rings - her creations are far more gentle on the wallet than our Roman friends but no less gorgeous in the clean honest purity of presentation. Simply quality, talent and style, the Nobu way.

The Hidden Jewel:

533 E. Hopkins Aspen, CO 81611
Telephone: 970-544-5242