



In this exclusive interview, Joël Robuchon, the world's most decorated chef, outlines plans for his new restaurant Yoshi, a concept heavily influenced by his love of Japanese cuisine

Joël Robuchon's favourite sushi bar in Tokyo is the minuscule Jirin which seats no more than 10 diners, and despite its recently acquired three Michelin star status, is unprepossessingly located inside the metro. What's more, he tells me with mischievous delight, the owner doesn't take kindly to non-Japanese eating there as they won't understand the food, "but I'm welcome" he adds gleefully. Thankfully, Robuchon, the world's most honoured chef with 18 Michelin stars to his name, envisages that his new restaurant Yoshi, (the name is derived from the Japanese phrase *yoshi*, meaning great, and used when one has appreciated a good meal) opening 2 December, will be more accessible.

"The restaurant concept is to serve authentic yet modern Japanese cuisine but attuned to the French palate. Freshness of produce will be paramount as will correct technique but, for example, certain jelly-like textures and fermented sauces which the Japanese are very fond of, won't feature among the dishes, as they simply wouldn't appeal to most Western palates."

The location for the 50-cover Yoshi is also far more alluring, a pavilion within the elegantly grand, privately-owned Hotel Metropole in the centre of Monte Carlo where Robuchon already has a two Michelin star gourmet restaurant. Japan has beguiled Robuchon ever since he first visited in

1976 at the invitation of Paul Bocuse who was leading a pioneering French chefs trip to demonstrate at the Tsjuki Academy. He still remembers that eye-opening trip fondly, though he recalls, "I did have an adventure when I was preparing a particular fish dish. I was just starting to cut up the turbot when I realised it was still alive. It started jumping back up at me!"

"It's hard to imagine now but at that time everything was very traditional in terms of ingredients, cooking and presentation. No one in France knew about sushi or sashimi. It was around the same time that Pierre Troisgros and Alain Chapel started to explore Japan too.

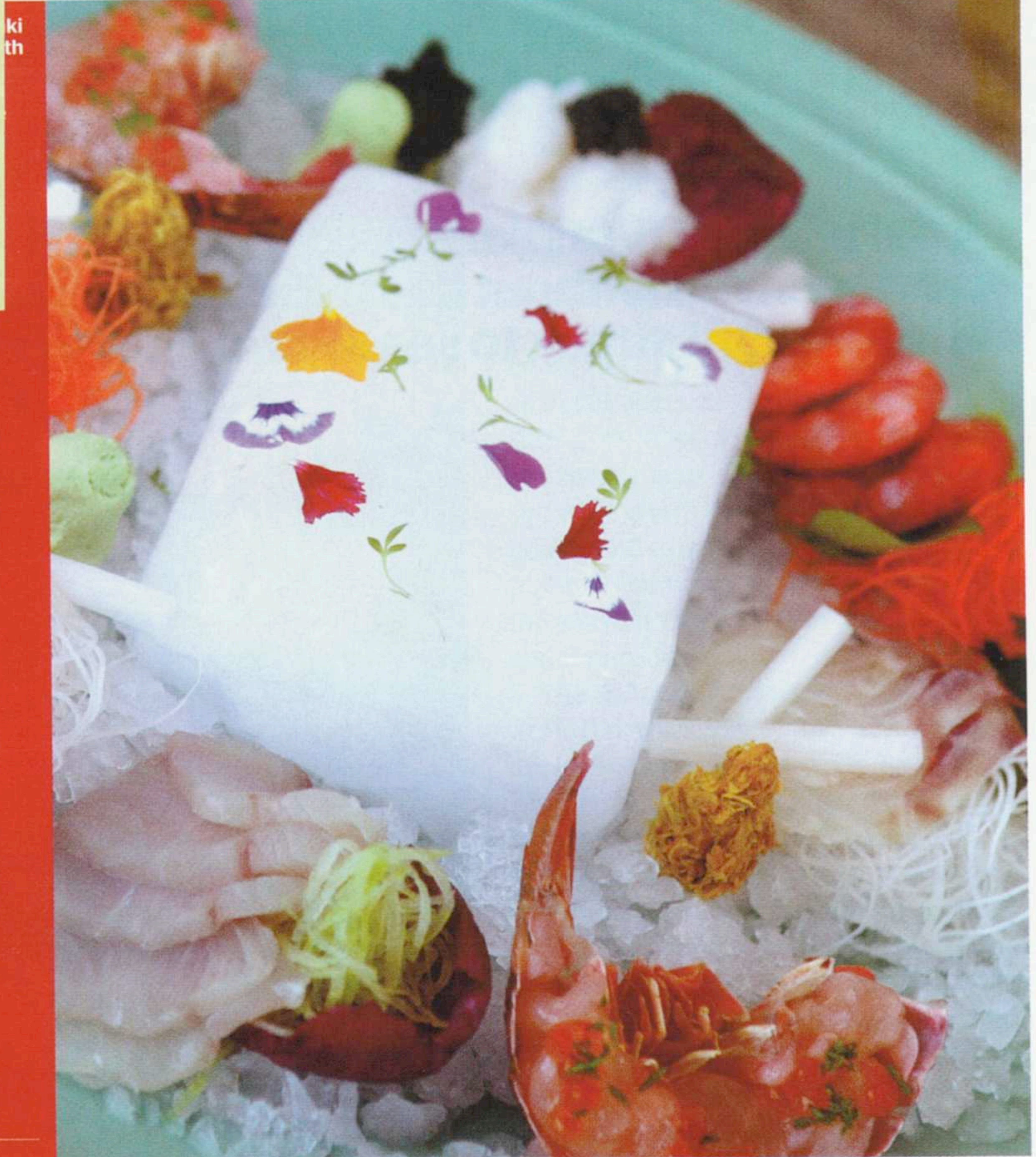
"What absolutely blew me away was visiting Kikunoi in Kyoto, one of the most revered kaiseki restaurants. I was served a succession of small dishes, in itself a revelation in dining, and, more astonishingly, each dish not only corresponded absolutely to the season, but was beautifully and minimally presented on a specific exquisitely designed piece of tableware. Of course, it was thrilling to discover so many unfamiliar ingredients too; the explosion of new flavours really impressed me. Over the years I've returned to Kikunoi many times and I've never eaten off the same plate."

Shortly after his first visit to Japan, in 1978, Robuchon became head chef at Nikko, the first restaurant in a modern (and Japanese-owned)

hotel in Paris which quickly gained two Michelin stars. Here he introduced degustation menus. "This was the beginning of my exploration with Japan." He recalls, "I caused a scandal by serving asparagus al dente. It was not the done thing at the time to serve vegetables lightly cooked. Nor did customers like the lack of fuss in my presentation."

These days Robuchon has three restaurants in Japan plus patisseries and boutiques, and calculates he spends at least four weeks a year there. He feels that he has gradually gained a deep respect for and a thorough understanding of the cuisine. Robuchon is not surprised to learn that, according to Zagat's latest worldwide survey, Japanese cuisine is the fastest rising in popularity. "Much of the appeal is in its purity, never losing sight of the essence of the produce - there's not too much *mélange* of flavour on the plate. And, of course, it's rightly perceived as healthy and fresh," acquiesces Robuchon.

However, the decision to open Yoshi was not primarily to do with wanting to be on the crest of a trend or fulfilment of Robuchon's long cherished ambition to open his own Japanese restaurant. Rather, it was a practical response to Hotel Metropole's private Lebanese owner's request for a new restaurant to put into a small villa adjacent to the main hotel, a site that had historically been used for private banqueting but was rather small.



Words
Sudi Pigott

“Initially, the suggestion was to do some kind of Asian fusion restaurant with elements of Zuma or Roka – restaurants I find fun to visit in London. I decided here was the opportunity to do something rather different. A modern Japanese restaurant with a French sensibility.”

When I visited in mid October, six weeks prior to Yoshi’s opening, Robuchon was still in the midst of an intensive period of trying and reworking dishes for the menu with Takéo Yamazaki, whose exemplary CV includes working with Paul Bocuse and at Alain Ducasse’s Louis XV in Monte Carlo, and has joined from Robuchon’s Tokyo restaurants Taillevent Robuchon and L’Atelier de Joël Robuchon.

Eric Bouchenoire has also worked closely on the project (he spends much of his year in Japan as Robuchon’s roving right hand man/consultant chef) along with Christophe Cussac, executive chef of Joël Robuchon at the Hotel Metropole in Monte Carlo, who’s worked with Robuchon for 32 years. Explains Robuchon of Cussac, giving him an affectionate hug, “We’ve known each other longer than many a marriage and I probably spend more time with him than my wife.” Chef-sommelier Norié Herada, who previously worked for Ducasse in both Tokyo and New York, has put together a concise list of fine wines and sakes.

“It was thrilling to discover so many unfamiliar ingredients; the explosion of flavours really impressed”

with sake, topped with an intense gelée of dried shrimp, sake and soy, served in delicate pink, white and gold-lidded porcelain bowls on lacquered black plates with gold leaf motifs. Textbook-light, crisp tempura using Mediterranean fish and vegetables is served with a bonito and soy broth.

A sample yakimono (grilled) dish was chicken in a terikyaki-style sauce of soy, sugar and sake. This was followed by miso soup with wakame and fu, a *recherché* wheat protein which absorbs the broth and acquires a firmer texture and is an important ingredient in Ryori Buddhist vegetarian cuisine; and wok-cooked soba noodles with beef and wakame. For Yoshi, Robuchon has also sourced a French-bred version of kobe beef from Countancie in the Dordogne. Japanese desserts with a touch of French refinement are likely to thrill. I tried pineapple with coriander and yuzu, complemented by a wondrously aromatic basil, mint and coriander sorbet and a jaunty ultra-thin square of basil-coated fine chocolate. Robuchon says the menu is still evolving and in intensive tasting.

Dishes currently on trial include langoustine with an oven-dried langoustine powder “to add a really modern and intense tasty flavour which accentuates the freshness of the langoustine” and scallops with a green tea sauce. Already definite are sea urchin, tiger prawns and wakame in bonito

with poached egg, nori and uni (sea urchin). It’s one of Robuchon’s all-time favourite Japanese dishes and is traditionally served for breakfast. Also on the menu will be his interpretation of black cod “with a rather different texture and balance to my friend Nobu Matsuhisa’s,” Robuchon adds enigmatically.

Key to Yoshi’s design by French interior architect Didier Gomez, known for Le Mood, an Asian-inspired restaurant in Paris and his work for prestigious names such as Ferragamo and Louis Vuitton, will be a small, intimate sushi bar seating a maximum of 10. It will serve sushi and sashimi using locally caught fish such as sea bream, john dory, seabass, mackerel and scallops. Yoshi will be entered via a small hall with a grey stone waterfall wall and a glass wall into the kitchen.

Explains Robuchon, “The idea is to be a contemporary vision of a serious Japanese restaurant yet with a more delicate, lighter mood.” The design also features an interior Japanese garden which will be reflected in the mirrored and mikado bamboo latticing of the walls, blurring the distinction between inside and outside.

Will Yoshi follow the expansion pattern of L’Atelier? Robuchon takes refuge in a Gallic shrug. “I want to be sure of its success before we look at more. I feel our strength is our combined expertise in Japanese cuisine, my fascination with its culture and a finely tuned sensibility of what the French want gastronomically from Japan. It’s an exciting new adventure for me.”

Yoshi at Hotel Metropole Monte Carlo
metropole.com reservations + 377 93 15 13 13