

## The Imperial Hotel, Tokyo — Jewel of the Orient

By Mukesh Williams



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The Imperial Hotel, whose main building in its second generation, the Wright Building, was called the “Jewel of the Orient”, has long captivated the hearts of Western elites with its *omotenashi* professionalism, Franco-Japanese cuisine and modern amenities. As its name suggests, it pampers its guests as if they were kings and queens, taking care of their needs and wants. Over the last century the consumer service industry in Japan has evolved a distinctive tradition of providing care and flavorful food, not just accommodation, to its customers and the Imperial Hotel has been a part of this evolving tradition during its 127 years of history. The hotel has seen the ravages of the Great Kanto Earthquake and World War II bombs and has always emerged from the ashes like a phoenix. Today it successfully competes with other Japanese and foreign hotel establishments and continues to provide high-end accommodation to anyone who wishes to organize “parties” and conduct “business”.

During the 1890s, as Japan was evolving during the Meiji Era, it opened itself up to the modern world and sought European expertise. The Imperial Hotel represents the desire for the exotic East in the Anglo-American world with its nuanced ceremonies and kimono culture. It was built at the request of the government in the late 1880s to serve as an official Guest House with a more elaborate structure to

welcome dignitaries, royalty, movie stars and baseball legends from all over the world. To build an imperial hotel, German architects were invited and Japanese architects were sent to Germany. The involvement of the Imperial Household Agency and influential Japanese leaders such as Foreign Minister Count Kaoru Inoue and Viscount Eiichi Shibusawa was instrumental in procuring prime land and leading local and foreign architects.

The design was originally sketched by German architect Heinrich Mänz. In 1886 about 20 Japanese architects went to study the German neo-Renaissance style and upon their return Yuzuru Watanabe was commissioned to execute Mänz's design for a 60-room 3-story hotel of wood and brick, with a stucco facade. The second generation Imperial Hotel was executed by Frank Lloyd Wright (1867-1959) during 1919-1923 around the logo H and I. Wright's disciple Arata Endo (1889-1951) was assigned the task of finishing the building when Wright was fired for exceeding the budget.

The Imperial Hotel's Wright Building, with its art-deco, Mayan architecture and décor, was an attempt to lessen the shock of the exotic East for “foreign guests” — meaning Europeans or Americans. Wright's main building would survive the earthquake and the ravages of World War II. But in May 1945 air raids by US bombers about 40%

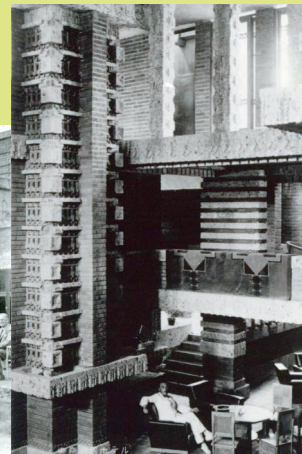
Photo: Imperial Hotel, Tokyo



The Wright Imperial, Main Entrance



Garden, Terrace



Main Lobby

of the building was destroyed. After the war it was taken over by the GHQ and restored. But by the late 1960s the building was in utter disrepair and was demolished to give way to a high-rise building. The present hotel was constructed in 1970. As more and more foreigners have begun to come to Japan the occupancy rate has been rising. The *Nikkei Asian Review* reports that in 2017 its revenue was \$55.81 billion and gross profit \$40.94 billion; its profit margin is 5.66%.

The hotel still retains the renaissance charm of the 1960s and 1970s together with Wright's Mayan-Deco style in the suites and bar. The Frank Lloyd Wright Suite covers 2,140 square feet and features Oya volcanic stone tiles and stained-glass windows, as well as a magnificent view of the Imperial Palace from its two bedrooms, and living room. Fresh flower arrangements and handwritten messages in every room offer a touch of the opulence of royalty.

### Online Reservations

The world has changed considerably since the hotel first appeared at the end of the 19th century. Now international and local travelers book their hotel rooms online through computers or mobile phones and this has led to an increase in the number of foreign visitors to the hotel. Today the hotel's clientele is roughly half foreign and half Japanese. Guests from countries that are developing economically, such as China, have grown in number, bringing new challenges and opportunities. In the last few years, online reservations have increased from 4% to 10% and will continue to increase in the coming years. However, the prolonged recession in Japan has affected big social events, and recently both the banquet and wedding business have dropped by 10-15%.

### Omotenashi Hospitality

*Omotenashi* means to entertain guests wholeheartedly — the art of selfless hospitality. It is marked by attention to detail and thoughtfulness, and Japanese hotels pride themselves on this tradition. The Imperial Hotel not only trains its employees in the art of *omotenashi* but also evaluates their performance in the intricate art of politeness by giving prizes to the best employees selected by staff and customers. The president of the hotel meets such awardees personally to encourage and thank them. The training program is one decade old and selects about 40 employees who are lauded in a ceremony broadcasted simultaneously in Tokyo and Osaka. Since the hotel believes in training employees to be competent and skilled, the turnover rate is “extremely low” among them. This good brand image and tradition does not allow for a large intake of fresh graduates, which usually ranges each year from 60 to 80.

The unique dietary demands of customers based on religious and personal preferences or allergies are met by the hotel with ease. Some customers want vegetarian meals while others want halal. It is

possible to provide these special meals to those who request them. The concept of *omotenashi* has been on full display during earthquakes and disasters, as the hotel has a tradition that allows its staff to respond with alacrity and independence without instructions from the top management. During the Great East Japan Earthquake of 2011 about 2,000 businessmen and shoppers took refuge in the lobby of the hotel and were unable to return home. The hotel accommodated them that night in the lobby and banquet halls, providing them with blankets, water bottles and soup on the following morning. The concern and care that the staff demonstrated for people during the emergency is an Imperial characteristic.

The laundry staff undergo training for four years to master dry cleaning, pressing clothes and stitching buttons. Even the doormen carry 1,000 and 5,000 yen bills to facilitate change for taxis. The staff even do shopping on behalf of the guests if they are unable to do so. Kimono-clad female attendants and suited males take care of the luggage, and the hotel also remembers the preferences of previous occupants regarding interior room arrangement, pillows, fruits and humidifiers. It believes that its laundry service, a pioneering marvel in the early days, continues to provide high-class service to its customers. Guests often praise the laundry section, which can return a shirt with a missing button with exactly the same button sewed in, selected from a stock of over 200 buttons of different sizes and colors. The Human Resource Development of the hotel takes the complaints of each guest seriously and endeavors to do better by factoring complaints into its training programs. The chairman of the hotel, Tetsuya Kobayashi, believes that a first-class hotel needs a fine balance of “hardware, software...and human ware”, and the Personnel Department was created in 2006 to refine “the quality of human resources”. Employees are taught to anticipate and listen to the demands of guests carefully, find answers to them and share them with colleagues.

### Elegant & Efficient

President Hideya Sadayasu is a graduate in economics from Gakushuin University in Tokyo and has been involved with the company since April 2013. He rose from bellboy and housekeeper to become president.

His philosophy, reflected in the running of the hotel, is “to elegantly, correctly and efficiently greet and receive all possible kinds of guests, deftly and discreetly meeting their varying

Photo: Imperial Hotel, Tokyo



Accommodations (welcome service)

Photo: Imperial Hotel, Tokyo



La Brasserie (Chaliapin Steak)



La Brasserie (Gratin of Prawn and Sole Queen Elizabeth II)

and diverse needs and requirements". The hotel has 10 shareholders from diverse sectors, including real estate, beer brewing, financial, insurance and construction companies.

## Food & Other Services

Apart from anticipating the needs of customers, a good hotel should have its own unique culinary delights. The Imperial Hotel was

created for a high-end Western clientele and prides itself on creating mouthwatering Western delights. But by Western cuisine the hotel means French cuisine. The tradition of serving French cuisine at the hotel started with a banquet hosted by Emperor Meiji in 1873 for the king of Italy's nephew. The heart of the hotel is the kitchen, as former general manager of the hotel, Tetsuzo Inumaru, once said. Many hotel chefs were sent to Paris to train under Auguste Escoffier. Even today the hotel sends staff for training abroad and receives trained staff from abroad. The spot-lit Old Imperial Bar provides a romantic renaissance touch. The *teppanyaki* Kamon with its marbled beef on the 17th floor, the Tokyo Nadaman in the basement designed by Togo Murano for *Kaiseki* and Les Saisons for French cuisine, and the tempura Ten-ichi welcomed patrons such as Marc Chagall, Henry Kissinger and David Rockefeller.

Good food and other relaxing amenities such as a nail salon, gym, dental clinic, shopping mall and a convenience store are necessary ingredients of a good hotel and the Imperial Hotel offers all of them. The Imperial Viking Sal serves buffet-style dining, and the traditional lunch at La Brasserie offers a special dish which the Imperial once created especially for Queen Elizabeth II, and it is thoroughly enjoyable. It serves a Chaliapin Steak marinated in onions in honor of the Russian opera singer Fyodor Ivanovich Chaliapin, who stayed at the hotel in 1936, for around 5,200 yen. The story goes that Chaliapin loved beef but during his stay at the hotel he developed a toothache which prevented him from chewing on it. The hotel chef solved the problem by cooking rump steak marinated in onions to soften it, and then put onion sauté on top to replace the sauce. Chaliapin enjoyed the subtle flavor of the soft steak without affecting his aching tooth. Upon

his second visit to Japan, the Imperial Hotel sought his permission to introduce the dish as part of its special menu under the title "Chaliapin Steak". In 1923, manager Inumaru remembered the roast beef he ate during his stay in Europe as a student and created the roast beef wagon, where the beef is carved before the diners. The Imperial Lounge Aqua provides authentic British afternoon tea with a view of Hibiya Park. The rosewood counter, the terracotta walls and patterned Oya stone from Tochigi in the Old Imperial Bar reflect the architectural singularity of Wright's Imperial Hotel of 1923, when it first served its tantalizing cocktail called Mount Fuji made of gin, pineapple, lemon, egg white and cherry.

## The Imperial Representation

Paying attention to detail and creating a memorable past are essential aspects of imperial representation, and the Imperial Hotel is not lagging in this. It has a roll call of important persons whose visits are remembered, whether for the food they ate, the things they said or the rooms they stayed in. Douglas Fairbanks visited in 1931, Charlie Chaplin in 1932, Bob Hope in 1950, Cary Grant in 1953, Marilyn Monroe and Joe DiMaggio in 1954, Alain Delon in 1963, and Marlene Dietrich in 1974. Among other notable visitors are Babe Ruth, Elizabeth Taylor, Helen Keller, Ava Gardner, Josephine Baker, Alfred Hitchcock, Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, Catherine Deneuve, Pierre Cardin, Robert De Niro, Robert Redford and Frank Sinatra. More recent guests have included Jodie Foster, Pierce Brosnan, Jean Reno, Luc Besson, and Keanu Reeves.

## Marilyn Monroe & Joe DiMaggio

Since its reopening in 1923, on the day of the Great Kanto Earthquake, the Imperial Hotel has hosted diplomats, movie stars, baseball players and royalty. Part of the Japanese Imperial House and interacting with world leaders and celebrities, it has developed a distinctive *omotenashi* tradition. On Feb. 1, 1954 when Hollywood legend Marilyn Monroe and her baseball star husband Joe DiMaggio arrived at Tokyo, they were mobbed by 3,000 screaming fans and were secretly led away to the Imperial Hotel by police jeeps. After six hours of dodging the pursuing fans, when the couple arrived at the hotel they were again mobbed by fans who smashed glass windows and were calmed only when Monroe appeared on the 3rd floor balcony. Some of the guests at the Imperial Hotel represent the pre-war cultural exchanges between Japan and the West and the postwar opening of Japan to global influence from the Anglo-American world, the global spread of American culture, the pop star celebrity cult and the American sexual revolution.

Overlooking the Imperial Palace architect Wright had created the magic of Mayan Yucatan's Chichen Itza with a mosaic of stone and open spaces in the Art Deco tradition. Guests arriving at the hotel



would get off limousines at the cedar-surrounded porch and enter the gold leaf-peacock painted lobby of the hotel. Monroe, like other guests, was deeply impressed by Wright's work and would later ask him to design her house with her future husband Arthur Miller. When, after two days, Marilyn developed endometriosis, a *shiatsu* masseur Tokujiro Namikoshi massaged the naked actress who was "wearing nothing but Chanel No. 5" to relieve her pain.

### Babe Ruth & Keanu Reeves

On Nov. 17, 1934 when American baseball legend Babe Ruth visited the hotel, the bellboys and girls got autographed photos of their hero and women met him at the shoe shine and barber's shop inside the hotel. In the American 1995 action thriller *Johnny Mnemonic* starring Keanu Reeves and Japanese actor Kitano Takeshi the mud-splattered hero Reeves finding the laundry service so impressive that he made the proverbial statement in the movie: "I want my shirts laundered like they do at the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo." In the movie when Keanu wants a club sandwich he was probably thinking of the Imperial Clubhouse Sandwich, introduced by chef Bunjiro Ishiwatari who learned about French cooking in Paris from the legendary Ecsoffier, in 1931, the eighth executive chef of the hotel.

### Queen Elizabeth II

When a reception was held at the Imperial Hotel for Queen Elizabeth II in 1975 she was served Gratin of Prawn and Sole at a banquet room by Executive Chef Nobuo Murakami, who kept in mind her liking for seafood. Her Majesty enjoyed the dish with shrimps and ate it completely. The hotel sought permission from the British Embassy in Tokyo to name the dish in her honor as "Reine Elizabeth", which was granted. Today any visitor to the restaurant can find the royal dish *à la mode* for 4,800 yen. The royal dish is also served at wedding parties at the hotel.

### Olympic Games 1964 & 2020

Today royalty and celebrities still exist but the world is marked by different global events such as games and festivals that are covered by the media with a greater frenzy than elite personalities. Global media events are great money spinners. The history of the Imperial Hotel is connected with one such global event, the Olympic Games. In 1964 the Imperial Hotel served as the headquarters for the International Olympic Committee at Tokyo. During this time Murakami, nicknamed "Monsieur Murakami", with nearly 300 cooks created wonderful dishes for global athletes. Now with the approach of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, as many hotels are under renovation, the Imperial Hotel believes that its long-standing tradition of catering to a global clientele will attract customers. It is also looking beyond 2020 to attract more international guests.

Today both Japanese and foreign hotels have proliferated in Japan offering both global cuisine and excellent services at competitive prices. The TripAdvisor website lists many hotels in Tokyo that range from 18,000 yen to 147,000 yen for a single room for one night. The Imperial Hotel's impeccable service stands it in good stead, being neither cheap nor too expensive. The hotel is confident that its long tradition from the late 19th to 21st century, meticulously preserved and handed down over the generations, will continue to shine. Having undergone a number of encounters with magnificent Western cultures and digested their influence, today the Imperial Hotel stands gracefully in Hibiya at the center of business and culture in Tokyo as "a hotel perfectly made in Japan" representing contemporary Japanese values.

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**JS**



Imperial Hotel, 2017



Main Lobby



The Rendez-Vous Lounge, Main Lobby

Photo: Imperial Hotel, Tokyo

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