

Kubo Masao: the Ultimate Gourmand

Article by Elizabeth Kiritani and illustrations by Kiritani Itsuo

ONE of the truly distinctive things about Japan is its food. From the humble rice ball and buckwheat noodle, to blowfish, sushi, tempura, Buddhist vegetarian cuisine all the way to what is known as *kaiseki ryori*, it abounds in variety and exotic ingredients. Japanese eat vegetables, tofu, fish – both cooked and raw – and meat; they also eat ingredients such as seaweed, sea slugs, locusts, silkworm larvae and fish so fresh they are still moving. Among this vast variety of food types *kaiseki ryori* is the penultimate in presentation, delicacy of taste and, yes, expense.

Kaiseki has its roots in the cuisine of the 15th century court aristocracy called *honzen ryori* and the *chakaiseki ryori* of the tea ceremony. But the influence of Buddhism in which meat of fowl and animal is avoided dates back to the 6th century. The emphasis is on bringing out the taste of simple ingredients and on displaying the food in such a way that it provides a feast for the eye as well as the stomach.

Kaiseki dishes are served in minuscule portions, on myriad dishes that are decorated with sprigs of seasonal flowers and leaves. Just a mouthful of each type of food is provided; a *kaiseki* meal involves more of a tasting than an eating. Artistic presentation of the food is a major aspect as is the environment in which it is eaten. For people used to large portions heaped on one plate at much lower prices, the concept of *kaiseki* may be at first difficult to digest. But the experience of partaking a meal is guaranteed to delight.

KUBO Masao has been cooking in the enormous 35-tsubo (about 115.7m²) kitchen at the Japanese restaurant Uozen for 30 years. Before he was adopted into the Kubo family to continue his wife Toshiko's third-generation restaurant's traditions, he had spent about 10 years cooking in the Kansai and Shikoku areas of Japan. Kubo explains that his motivation to become a cook was rather simple. "I was born the 6th child in my family during the postwar period when food was relatively scarce and I was always hungry, always thinking of food. I was a serious wrestler in high school, which made me even more so. Actually it is somewhat



accidental that I became a *kaiseki* chef. At the time, I didn't want to be bothered with foreign words. Had I become a French or Chinese food chef, it would have required using French or Chinese food names that I wasn't familiar with, so I happily stuck to Japanese cuisine."

"Actually *kaiseki* is quite a bit like top level French comestibles which have a certain order to the dishes and also concentrate on presentation. The big difference, I suppose, is the seasonal aspect of Japanese food and the lack of heavy sauces," Kubo continued.

Another big difference that I noted as I was enjoying a special course at Uozen was the especially cultivated

atmosphere. The restaurant dates back to the Meiji period, about 100 years ago, and its rooms reflect a time in Japan where everything was hand made out of natural materials and the aesthetics of room interior were taken seriously. The *tokonoma* or alcove holding a vase with cherry branches is cornered in tastefully grained wood, the ceiling is of elaborately woven bush clover and bamboo. The *tatami* mats contrast with the brilliantly polished lacquered low table. The effect is somewhat akin to the simplicity but severe elegance of a teahouse. A delightful scent of incense wafted up as Kubo's mother-in-law Kazue – second-generation Uozen proprietress – led me to the private dining room and chatted while the first course was being readied. At 84, she is lively and charming in her *kimono* with its beige *obi* sash.

My meal is served on a mobile exhibition of antique tea bowls, lacquer ware and china much of which is of museum-grade level. They took my breath away – the small triangular-shaped white butterfly dish holding just one shrimp stuffed with the egg of a quail and a mini teacup with a whimsical cover of dancing rabbits and frogs that contains citrus, a paperclip size piece of fish and half a mouthful of broth are two examples.

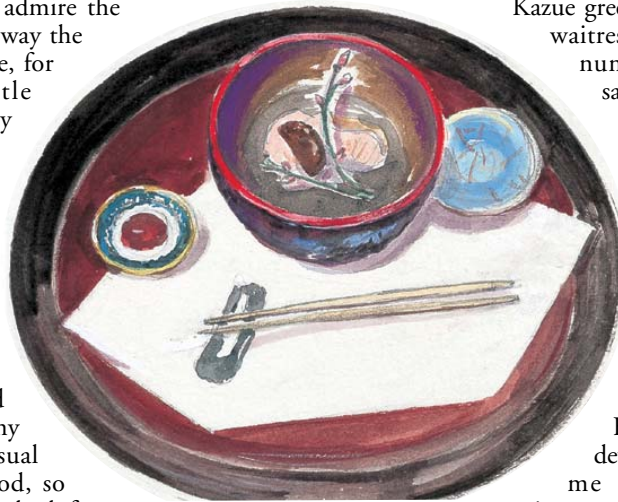
This crafted aspect of *kaiseki* is something I have seen in no other country. The dinner consisted of 17 separate courses, some of which required five serving plates. After each course time is set aside to observe and admire the aesthetics of the designs, colors and the way the food is exhibited. Japanese lacquer ware, for instance, has a wide variety of subtle patina, the contrasts of which are lovely to behold. Myriad leaves, blossoms and sprigs garnish the dishes, which sometimes sit on a bed of salt or a chic gold paper folded to add just a hint of asymmetry. Kazue rattled off some names of potters and lacquer ware artisans who had fashioned this piece and that one. “Sometimes,” she told me, “we order tableware from a certain artisan. Others have been collected slowly, over the years. The women in my family are naturally interested in unusual dishes and bowls that compliment food, so when we take trips, we make it a point to look for special local items.”

I was reminded of an expression that many elderly Japanese use: “*Me no hoyo*,” which roughly means “visual entertainment.” The intervals between the 17 courses were timed. As we neared the end of the meal the intervals widened. By now some other customers were eating in nearby private rooms and muffled voices were just barely audible. The lack of *koto* music ever present at many Japanese-style establishments was appreciated; the only sounds we heard were of other people and the gentle rustling sweep of Kazue's

tabi socks on the *tatami*. Most of Uozen's customers are repeaters and because the four “set courses” range in price from about \$80 to \$150, they are a rather quiet, sophisticated clientele.

At its best *kaiseki* uses the freshest ingredients and retains natural flavors. Two different schools developed: *edo-kaiseki* originating in what is now Tokyo, and *kyo-kaiseki*, developed in Kyoto, the kind that Kubo makes. This cuisine, according to him, uses lots of vegetables and not so many elaborate or fancy ingredients. It is a cuisine based on a minimalism, and by this maximizes the savory tastes. He selects his fish and vegetables at Tokyo's gargantuan Tsukiji fish market every morning. Boiled ingredients are usually prepared a day before to allow the taste to settle. But some ingredients like the “*yubeshi*,” a special citrus garnish, require half a year or more to prepare. The Kyoto type of *kaiseki* cuisine has a lighter taste than the Tokyo type – although both are known for their extreme delicacy of taste. A connoisseur appreciates tonal epicurean essences that took me about 10 years before I could appreciate because I had been used to eating meat and other food with strong tastes – ketchup and mayonnaise are two such culprits – that had ratcheted up my threshold for perceiving the mild nuances of *kaiseki*.

Kubo works with four assistants; Kazue greets the guests and one or two waitresses serve, depending on the number of reservations. Kubo says that he has several projects brewing down the road. He is busy studying water – soft and hard and mineral – to learn how it affects the taste of his vegetables. And another project is to implement low heat cooking, a new technology using steam that helps retain the freshness and juiciness of the ingredients. He says this is now in the developing stages. It is hard for me to conceive how he can improve on the taste, so I will be sure to come back to check it out. And thus I have become one more repeat customer. **JS**



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