



TERRY DURACK RESTAURANT REVIEW

A rising son comes good

Shaun Presland: now there's a great name for a Japanese sushi chef. It reminds me of that famous Thai food authority, David Thompson, and that acclaimed Sichuan chef, Neil Perry.

Australian chefs are uniquely positioned to learn at the stoves of south-east Asia, often becoming as obsessed with the authenticity and purity of their chosen cuisines as the masters who taught them.

Shaun Presland is as Japanese as you can get without actually being born in the shadow of Mount Fuji. After two years in a purist ryokan in Yamagata in the mid-1990s learning both the language and the cooking, he returned to Australia to work with distinguished sushi masters at Unkai at ANA (now Shangri-La), later opening the Hemmes family's elegant Sushi e at The Establishment before being nicked by Nobu Matsuhisa for Nobu Atlantis in the Bahamas.

Now he is back, teaming up with long-serving Sydney restaurateur John Szangolies, owner of Lowenbrau Keller and the Bavarian Bier Cafes, to launch an ambitious new restaurant project in The Rocks, just by the Argyle Steps. Housed in a heritage-listed building in what used to be Reds, Sake feels part rustic drinking tavern and part moody cocktail-fuelled club, thanks to some sympathetic design work by local team Luchetti Kreile.

It's a bit of a hike past simple wooden communal benches with

wooden bar stools, a long granite bar and a drama-queen central sushi counter and open kitchen, right through to a striking room of wooden tables, a raised area for traditional shoes-off tatami dining and cosy izakaya-like booths, with a couple of public/private rooms along the way. One wall is built of hand-lettered sake barrels, another of metallic stencil-cuts, an alcove holds a vase of spring blossoms – you get the idea.

Like most modern Japanese restaurants in the western world, Sake's menu owes a great debt to



THE ONE DISH YOU MUST TRY

Hiramasa kingfish
jalapeno with yuzu soy,
sliced jalapeno and
coriander, \$20



Raw talent ... Shaun Presland's Sake at The Rocks. Photo: Quentin Jones

Nobu, with the inevitable new-style sashimi, popcorn shrimp, tomato ceviche and spider maki of soft-shell crab all making cameo appearances. This sort of homage is dispiriting when done without reason or respect but Presland shows both, especially in a beautifully presented kingfish jalapeno (\$20). Delicate slices of Hiramasa kingfish are topped with jalapeno chilli and touched with a sauce of soy and this decade's most tangy new flavour, yuzu, for a citrusy freshness that will kick your head in.

A chef's selection of nigiri sushi (\$45) is a treat, swiftly and precisely fashioned by Presland, proof that he still has the firm, light hand that gained him so many followers. A giant tuna and avocado maki roll (\$14) is an equal treat, with little crunches of tempura crumbly bits inside and that tantalising, lilting hint of rice vinegar in the rice itself.

The food arrives in waves of the kitchen's own choosing, on rough-hewn, glazed Japanese ceramics. Steamed prawn dumplings (\$12) are strangely leathery but burst with prawniness and a small daikon, cucumber and tomato salad (\$10) is suitably crisp. The kitchen's take on Nobu's signature miso cod, on the menu in London at £32 (\$58) and here for \$25, is only

Sake

Address 12 Argyle Street, The Rocks, Sydney, 9259 5656.

Open Lunch, Mon-Fri; dinner, Mon-Sun.

Licensed Yes.

Cost Around \$120 for two, plus drinks and tip.

15/20

halfway there in execution as well as price. The butterfish used is good and meaty but the miso marinade has not had much effect on the flesh, nor has it caramelised in the cooking, instead being served as a wet coating sauce. A couple of skewers of chicken kushiyaki (\$8) are nice and sizzly, more interesting than most around town, including specialist Azuma Kushiyaki.

There are Astroboy and Pink Blossom cocktails and a nicely edited wine list with something for everyone, including an earthy, chocolatey 2006 Heggies Eden Valley Merlot (\$57), but it's the pages devoted to sake that seem the most food-friendly. The restaurant is the sole importer of Presland's favoured Kozaemon sake and the list warrants more attention than I can give it and still remain standing at the end of the night.

Interestingly, only an entry-level glass of the house Honjozo (\$4) is served hot, all others are served chilled as befits high-grade sake. The best advice, apparently, is to chill good sake, warm ordinary sake and boil the hell out of poor sake.

To end, a "deconstructed Russian cream" (\$15), like the chef, is not of Japanese stock. It comes to the table as a buttermilk panna cotta quivering with the weight of its own prettiness, offset with cubes of berry jelly.

Sake isn't cheap but the value is there because the quality is there. It is also young and glamorous in a high-detail, high-energy heritage space, with a great buzz, and the Nobu-licious cooking has been done with genuine respect and high skill.

In fact, we now have our Nobu Sydney, only better – because it's more ours than Nobu's.