

TOJO:



Tuna Tataki – seared tuna with Tojo’s special sauce.

Tojo (right) ensures that every diner shares his appreciation of freshness and originality.

Vancouver’s Zen Master of Sushi

Lawrence Grobel

If one ever needed a reason to go to Vancouver, eating at Tojo’s new restaurant at 1133 West Broadway is reason enough. Tojo, you see, is not just a master sushi chef, he’s the veritable Picasso of sushi chefs. He can bend a slice of raw fish over a rectangle of rice in a way more satisfying than David Beckham can bend a soccer ball towards the goal on a free kick. He can colour your palate with delicacies that make you want to sing a high C like Pavarotti. He can honestly say to newcomers sitting at his sushi bar for the first time, “You’ve never eaten here before? Then you’ve never had sushi.”

It is not his ego talking, it’s his charm. He’s a Zen master of sushi, a grand sommelier of sashimi, a Cezanne of crab, a Lamborghini of lobster, a Zorro of zucchini,

a genie of giant clam, a sorcerer of scallops, a titan of tempura.

Think I’m exaggerating? Not even close. Am I stretching hyperbole to the limit? Absolutely not. I’ve eaten at Tojo’s on three different trips to Vancouver, and believe me when I say that if I only have one night in that city before moving on, that night will be spent sitting across the sushi bar from Tojo. I won’t order a single item. I will let him prepare my dinner in small portions on artful plates until I can’t swallow another piece. After all, he’s the one who spent the morning selecting fish and crustaceans, so who better than he to choose the freshest, tastiest morsels to satisfy my palate?

How do I know he does his own fish shopping?

Photos: John James Sherlock/Sherlock Studio



Because I went along with him one fine August morning. I figured if he allowed me to accompany him I'd get some insight into his mastery. It would be like watching a great athlete prepare for a game, or a great actor for a part. It took a number of emails to make the arrangements, but once Tojo agreed, we knew we were in for something special. Luckily, my wife Hiromi is Japanese, so she could help with any translation if necessary. And the fact that my wife agrees with me about Tojo's culinary expertise gave me that much more assurance that spending a morning with Tojo was the best way to spend our day in one of our favourite cities. Spending the evening eating the food we spent the morning collecting made it all the more special.

"We'll go to Chinatown first," Tojo said when he picked us up outside the Metropolitan Hotel in his Toyota Highlander hybrid.

Tojo often goes directly to where the fishermen dock to find his fish, and sometimes the fishermen bring their catch to him, but on this day he wanted to check out the crab, lobster and shellfish in the one seafood store he likes above all others in Chinatown. On the way I asked him how he came to settle in Vancouver. He was born in Kagoshima, south of Kishu, Japan in 1950 and learned to cook at an early age in Osaka. He apprenticed for 3½ years at the Oynoya restaurant where they served ryotei – high-end traditional cooked food, including tempura. He then worked at a strictly sushi restaurant for eight months, but he wasn't happy. Japanese restaurants were all very traditional. "They always served sashimi in the same order: tuna, white fish, octopus, salmon, squid. I didn't like the Japanese system. Every restaurant, same food – no originality. It was too much stress, I wanted to be more creative." So in 1971, at the age of 21, Hidekazu Tojo crossed the Pacific and landed in Vancouver.

He found work in a restaurant, then in another, and soon was able to open his own. Diners who came to his restaurant became loyal disciples and through word of mouth Tojo soon became an institution. "Sometimes Japanese people would come and complain that I did not serve in the traditional way," he said, "but that was OK. I told them it's Tojo Traditional." Part of Tojo's tradition was the creation of the California roll, now a standard in American and Canadian sushi restaurants.

Before we arrived at Gar-Lock Seafood & Meat Ltd in Chinatown, I asked Tojo how he judged a sushi chef. "I look how they cut a radish," he said. "I watch for the pure, smooth use of the knife. And I taste the clear soup, which seems simple but it's hard to make. That's how I judge. When you go to a restaurant, the number one thing you look for is that the food is safe. Number two is that it tastes good. And number three is that it looks good. Same like when you buy a car."

"What about the tamago, the cooked egg?" I asked. "I've always been told that one can judge a chef by that?"

"Not really," Tojo laughed. "Tamago is for children. The 'A' sushi is uni (sea urchin), toro (fatty tuna), ikura (salmon egg), big shrimp, and anago (sea eel). Then comes the 'B' sushi: yellowtail (hamachi), regular tuna (maguro), tako (octopus), tai (red snapper), and unagi (freshwater eel). We call the 'A' sushi 'father' and the 'B' sushi 'mother' and the tamago, or 'C' sushi, 'child.'"

As he began looking at the fish on ice at Gar-Lock he said, "Very fresh fish smells like watermelon and cucumber." He picked up a fish and inhaled. My wife joined him. To me, fish has a very fishy smell, but to these two, it was as if they were comparing roses and orchids.

Then he turned over a plastic crate and used it as a step-ladder to reach the tanks where the lobsters and crabs were napping. He reached in and pulled out a crab and said he liked that one because it weighed around a kilogram, so there was a lot of meat inside. With the lobsters, he turned them over to identify their sex. He preferred the males because they had more meat. With the females, there was space for their eggs, which meant less pure meat. With the giant clams he poked around a tank and found a nice fat one. "Watch," he said as he squeezed it, shrinking it considerably as the water came shooting out. "You do this before they weigh it, costs less," he laughed.

As he picked and chose among the various tanks his phone rang. One of his suppliers at Angel Seafoods in East Vancouver was calling to let him know that they just brought in a bluefin tuna. This was exciting news for Tojo, who finished his business at Gar-Lock, where he estimated that he spent \$10,000 a month, and we headed over to Angel's to take a look at the bluefin, which could cost anywhere from \$5,000 to \$30,000 depending on the quality, the freshness, and the oil content.

"Do they always call you first?" I asked, wondering about the pecking order among Japanese sushi chefs in Vancouver.

"They know I will come right away," he said. "It's good to get there first."

Just how good we soon found out. The tuna's head and fin had been cut but not the body. They were waiting for Tojo to arrive. He inspected the fin, to judge the fat and oil content, and then once they cut the large fish in half they handed us a few slices to eat. The dark red flesh practically melted in our mouths. It was so tasty there was no need for soy sauce or wasabi. "Don't worry, you'll have more tonight," Tojo promised.

Tojo figured that he buys 16,000 kg of albacore tuna and 7,000 kg of salmon each year. The bluefin tuna is the most expensive fish and is also in danger of extinction because it's so highly prized. He told us that the Food Channel wanted to send him to Japan to film him there and that he had a lot of offers to spread his name – by opening up a chain of Tojo restaurants or by packaging "Tojo" sea food – but his wife didn't like the idea and neither did he. "I have a house, a car, what else do I need? I have 14 chefs at the restaurant, I make money, I share with everyone." He also has a daughter who is a city planner in Vancouver and a son who works for Lehman Brothers in Japan.

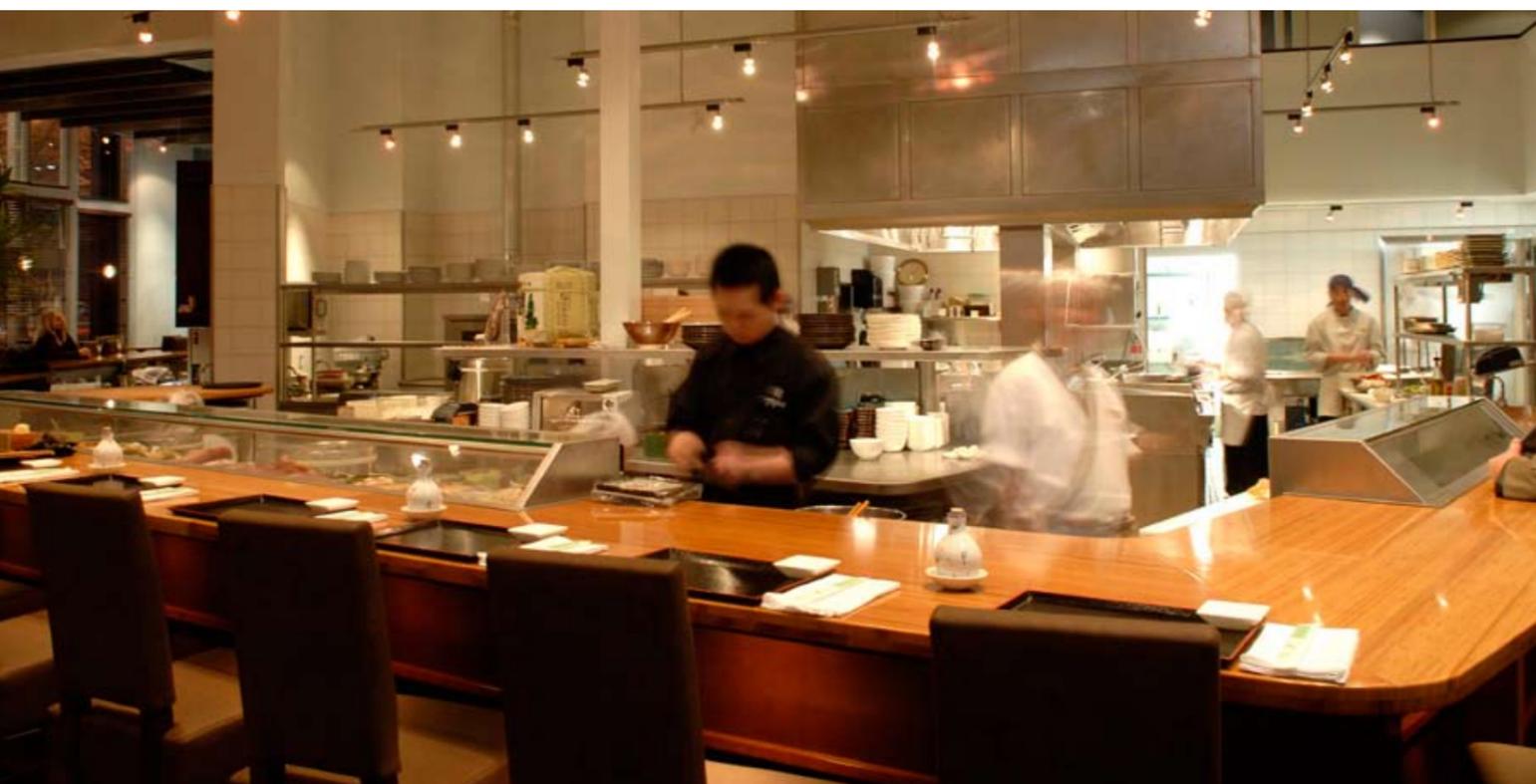
"Let's go to Granville Island," Tojo said happily. "We can look at the fish, fruit and vegetables, and then I will show you where they make sake locally."

You could see why Tojo loved Vancouver. He maneuvered through the city like an old pro, knowing which streets to take and which to avoid, as well as where to park. He might just be the world's happiest man. He rarely went to the movies or watched



The world's happiest man? Tojo enjoys finding the freshest, tastiest fish and produce – including the giant bluefin tuna from Angels Seafoods.

Photos: Lawrence Grobel



Photos: John James Sherlock/Sherlock Studio

television, he told us. He liked to golf or go fishing with friends on their boats or at their private clubs. He could make a good living anywhere in the world, but has no desire to live anywhere but where he lives. He's content doing what he does, what he loves to do.

He examined the colourful produce in the market but didn't buy any vegetables because he grows his own, to ensure that they're fresh, safe and not chemically treated. But the sake store, run by a former employee of his, was a delight because they made good rice wine. "I will show you tonight," he said.

When he dropped us off at our hotel he warned us, "Don't eat much for lunch."

He didn't have to worry. We planned on leaving a lot of room for dinner.

Before Tojo moved to his new restaurant he worked on the same street on West Broadway, across the Granville Bridge from downtown Vancouver. It wasn't a hip area like Robson Street, where tourists gathered to shop and visit the Art Gallery and eat at the dozens of fancy restaurants. Tojo's previous location was so low-key you felt like you were entering an office building, which you were, and taking the elevator to the second floor.

The booths were ordinary, the sushi bar took up the center of the room, and first-time visitors had no idea that they were entering the domain of a master chef. The new restaurant is very different inside, though outside it's still a bit obscure. At over 6,000 sq m, it can seat 160 people. There's a separate comfortable bar to quench your thirst as you wait to be seated. And if you're lucky enough to get a seat at the sushi bar you can watch Tojo and his sushi chefs at work.

If Tojo serves you, he will ask you first, "What did you eat today?" "What don't you like?" is his next question. Then he will ask you if you have ever eaten at his restaurant before. If you trust him – and you should – then you will let him feed you. That's what we did.

It started with shots of three different sakes from Granville Island's Artisan Sake Maker. The first was "fresh" – a clear liquid like vodka. The second was "pure", also clear but stronger. And the third was "unfiltered" – a milky grey color which I liked second to the fresh one. Tojo said he preferred the "pure" which didn't surprise me – like beer and cigar connoisseurs, stronger is often an acquired taste.

The first dish he presented was scallop, giant clam, and bluefin tuna sashimi on a bed of organic lettuce and drizzled with a citrus and sesame seed dressing. This was followed by his zucchini flower scallops to be dipped in a tempura sauce. Then an iced blue glass filled with crab, seaweed, mushroom, and cucumber. Three dishes, served on bamboo, ceramic, and in a glass: a treat for the eyes as well as the palate.

The people sitting next to us asked what we had ordered. "Who ordered?" I said with a dreamy smile. "We're in heaven here. God is serving. He knows what's best."

They trusted that I knew what I was talking about, having seen the first three dishes we were served, and told Tojo, "We'll have what they're having."

There is a word for entrusting your chef to arrange

your meal. It's *omakase*. It's similar to a tasting menu only more personalized. Prices range from \$60 to over \$100 depending on how many dishes it takes to satisfy your hunger.

"Tojo," I said, "does it keep getting better or does it all equal out?"

Instead of answering he handed us a smoked Canadian sable fish and Alaskan black cod baked in paper. Once unwrapped he suggested we squeeze lime over it and eat carefully because it was very hot. It was also very delicious.

"This one is special for you," he said, handing us what looked like a small dish of beef stew. "It's the part of the bluefin tuna they usually throw away. I chop it up, add onions, cook, and make very tasty. You will never get this anywhere else. You've got to do things different!"

"I think we've just added 70 days to our lives," I said. Hiromi told me of this ancient Japanese belief, that if you eat something you've never tasted before, you will lengthen your life by those many days. If you've ever been in a Japanese supermarket you might live past 100 if you're daring enough.

After some more sake, Tojo gave us hand rolls of giant clam, one of my wife's favorites, but the chewy, crunchy texture coupled with the image I had of Tojo squeezing the water out of such a clam that morning made it something worth trying but not as easy to swallow as the crab, scallops, tuna, cod or sable fish. But that was OK, it felt like we were on a journey of discovery and this was one of the dishes that helped reveal something about ourselves.

While we chewed Tojo prepared an egg crepe filled with salmon, shrimp and scallops. It was another masterly touch to offset the challenge of the giant clam. Tojo didn't just make different dishes, he balanced them. He understood the yin and the yang of eating.

"Do you realize that we're sitting at the sushi bar," Hiromi said, "and we haven't eaten sushi yet."

"Do you think he considers what he's been serving as appetizers?" I wondered.

"I don't think so," Hiromi laughed. "I'm already full."

I don't know if Tojo was listening to us, as he was also serving others at the bar, but the next pieces he laid before us was the bluefin tuna sushi, exquisitely cut, on a bed of white rice. "Remember this?" he asked.

Who could ever forget? This might be the dish one asks for on one's death bed. I can just hear some death row inmate pass on the pizza or steak when asked what he'd like for his last meal. "I'll have some bluefin tuna sushi please. Served by Tojo. You can fly it in, I'll wait."

As our stomachs began to fill, Tojo hit us next with a roll of lobster tempura and pineapple. Oh Lord, this was becoming a meal to remember! This was on its way to being the meal all future meals in Japanese restaurants would be compared to.

A few swallows of green tea, a nibble of ginger to clean the palate, and some tai sushi, followed by sardine sushi, and then by char. Three more fish we weren't used to eating, all tasty, with the big surprise being the sardines, which tasted a bit like pickled herring. Who eats sardines at a sushi bar? But Tojo knew to give it to us when we started to fidget, trying to make room for more food. We could have stopped eating halfway

A tightly-knit team of gifted young chefs from around the world assist Tojo behind the sushi counter and in the kitchen. They compete with one another to concoct new dishes, new sushi and deserts to match the example of their master.

A seafood salad – Ceviche-style, with smoked salad and other delicious tastes from the sea.



Photo: John James Sherlock/Sherlock Studio

Tojo's is where you should sacrifice yourself to unsurpassed culinary skills, and be rewarded with great favourites such as Canada's famous sable fish.

through this two-hour meal and we would have been satisfied.

"You like more?" Tojo asked. He was ready. But we weren't. We've eaten like gluttons in Japanese restaurants before, but we hadn't eaten such variety, such subtle flavours, such beautifully prepared food.

And, rather than a simple orange slice to put an end to this special meal, we were served a small bowl of watermelon ice, pineapple sorbet, and vanilla ice cream surrounded by blueberries and strawberries.

I didn't know if I should bow, applaud or sing hallelujah! when we said goodbye to Tojo to walk the three kilometres back to our hotel (we didn't want to take a taxi because we felt we needed exercise after

such a sumptuous meal). I had told him earlier in the day that Hiromi was a great cook and as we left I invited him for a meal at our house the next time he visited Los Angeles.

"Oh, I would like that," he said gleefully.

Hiromi put her hands together and thanked him in Japanese. And when we got outside she said to me, "You idiot. What could I ever cook for him? I'd be too embarrassed."

"Don't be silly," I said. "When the Buddha comes to your house, you welcome him. He won't care what you serve. And I'm not worried – you'll think of something."⁴⁸

www.tojos.com