

SOME LIKE IT HOT



Facing financial ruin or failing to kick-start a business – where most would falter, Nobu Matsuhisa has set the culinary world ablaze. **Hannah Lemon** reports

I like to imagine myself as a professional chef on occasion. When I have guests coming round for a dinner party or (more probably) my mother on her monthly visit to inspect the state of my kitchen, I dust off the recipe books and take a few tips from my culinary friends. Nigella, Rick, Jamie – all the gang is there – as I attempt to expertly dice vegetables, flambé creme brulée, and bard a chicken. ▶



► This all sounds great in principle, but a cruel reality soon hits home, when I've cut my finger, burnt the dessert beyond recognition and made some inedible sloppy stew – think Bridget Jones' blue soup and you just about have it right.

On reading about the life and works of Nobu Matsuhisa, I doubt a scene like this has ever plagued him. When I ask about his junior years and any disasters that he may have left in his wake, he replies: "During my career, there were mistakes, of course." I breathe a sigh of relief – he is mortal! "I believe that you always learn from your mistakes and I always tried my best." But, he counters this with: "A disaster that marked my career was when my restaurant in Alaska burnt down." Ah. I fear even Bridget Jones wouldn't have gone that far. Joking aside, it was a catastrophe that was the make or break moment of Nobu's career.

Born and raised in Saitama, Japan, Nobu served an apprenticeship at a respected sushi bar in Tokyo. The Japanese-Peruvian owners convinced him to move to Peru to start his own restaurant and without hesitation he followed their advice.

Challenged by the regional ingredients – olive oil, garlic, chilli paste and cilantro – the chef created a new style of fusion cuisine. But his venture was not to be, and after three years in the country, the restaurant went bust. Undeterred, Nobu packed his pots and headed to Argentina only to find that fresh seafood was scarce and the demand slow. On returning home to Japan, he was persuaded one more time to travel the globe and landed in Alaska to open a restaurant, borrowing \$15,000 on top of his already increasing debt.

Disaster struck. On his first evening off, after months of hard work to prop the place up, his partner called him to say there was a fire. The restaurant burnt to the ground. Anyone else might have given up on the dream, but not Nobu. "I was very sad," he says, "but my family helped me to get through this difficult time, with a lot of love and patience." Thankfully, karma was now on his side and Nobu went on to find the success he deserved.

After an invitation to work at an LA sushi bar, Nobu spent six and a half years there perfecting his style – rock shrimp tempura, hamachi with jalapeño, squid pasta, sashimi salad, and (his signature dish) black cod with miso. In 1987, he finally launched the restaurant Matsuhisa in Beverley Hills. So inspired was his cooking, that



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: FOOD AT LE ROYAL MONCEAU; CHEFS NOBU MATSUHISA & HIDEKI ENDO AT LE BAR LONG, LE ROYAL MONCEAU, RAFFLES PARIS @ROMEO BALANCOURT; THE FRONT ENTRANCE OF LE ROYAL MONCEAU, RAFFLES PARIS



actor and director Robert De Niro offered to go into business with him, creating the Nobu brand. The rest, as they say, is history.

So here we are, 30 Nobu and 7 Matsuhisa restaurants later, and the chef has launched yet another – a Matsuhisa at Le Royal Monceau, Raffles Paris headed up by executive chef Hideki Endo. "Matsuhisa Paris shares the same concept and values as other Matsuhisa restaurants," explains Nobu. "It is a beautiful space with a great energy and it features an Omakase bar, where guests will have a bespoke culinary experience, exploring the chef's choice of tailor-made menus."

With the opportunity to fire questions at one of the world's most successful chefs, I am desperate to know his secret to success. "Growing up, I was always inspired by the home cooking of my mother," Nobu reveals. He cites "soy sauce, dashi, and all the home cooking ingredients" as the ultimate tools in his kitchen. But the best meal he has ever tasted? "One that my wife cooks me," he replies, labelling her his "private chef".

Although Nobu is a busy man (his friendship with de Niro led to bit parts in Martin Scorsese's *Casino*, *Austin Powers in Goldmember* and *Memoirs of a Geisha*), he tries to stay true to the ethos of his

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eponymous brands. "I visit most of the locations every year in order to keep the same quality across all of my restaurants. It is very important to grow a family and a team that understands my cooking in order to be able to keep this quality." From Berkeley Street and Old Park Lane to Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas, attention to detail is not something he will let slide. "I continue to travel a lot; more than 300 days a year. I like to see my guests happy. That is my biggest satisfaction."

There is, of course, a Nobu in Tokyo, not too far from the chef's country house in Hakone, west of the city. It is at this branch that his eldest daughter, Junko, is manager. "My younger daughter Yoshiko is a very creative person and helps us in some other aspects of the business too." Like father, like daughters – it seems that the Matsuhisa clan is still setting the world alight, city by city. ■

Matsuhisa at Le Royal Monceau, raffles.com/paris