

# Plated

At restaurant Ichigo Ichie, female Japanese head chef Akane Eno creates a unique kaiseki experience with soulful, traditional Japanese dishes.

# Ambition

By Sng Ler Jun Photographs by Tung Pham



FOR MANY HIGH-END Japanese restaurants that serve traditionally prepared cuisines, the chefs often pay homage to some facet of Japanese philosophy. Self-effacing practices often run deep in these establishments and many chefs are known to dedicate a prodigious amount of time and effort into infusing ancient philosophy into their meticulously prepared dishes. The same can be observed at Ichigo Ichie (一期一江).

Loosely translated as “one opportunity, one encounter”, the restaurant, helmed by head chef Akane Eno, is only open on Mondays when it takes over the premises at the Michelin-starred Sushi Kimura on its rest day. This is when, Eno, who is also a sous chef to chef Tomoo Kimura at Sushi Kimura, puts a refreshing spin on traditional Japanese cuisine.

“The name is associated with Japanese tea ceremonies,” Eno says. (The name Ichigo Ichie was reportedly first used by a 16th century master of the tea ceremony.) “But at Ichigo Ichie, I desire to create an original take on traditional Japanese cuisine. I’d like to share my own ‘washoku’ using the experience I gained throughout my culinary journey.”

Eno grew up in Tokyo, Japan. Her foray into a professional kitchen began when she undertook an apprenticeship at the age of 22. Eno cut her teeth in the fine dining scene in Tokyo, and it’s also where she remained for 15 years. The 42-year-old moved to Singapore just over four years ago, and only started assisting chef Kimura in 2017.

Situated inside Palais Renaissance, the 22-seat Sushi Kimura (and hence, Ichigo Ichie) is ensconced within washi paper-covered doors, dim lighting and wooden accents. An open-kitchen counter, made of hinoki (Japanese cypress) wood, sits in the middle, accommodating only a maximum of eight guests at any one seating.

On Mondays, Chef Akane Eno takes over the Michelin-starred Sushi Kimura, and prepares kaiseki-inspired meals in her pop-up restaurant, Ichigo Ichie.



Clockwise from top: Dishes at Ichigo Ichie feature ingredients that are seasonal and most of which are native to Japan; Eno skewering and grilling anago (saltwater eel) over charcoal flames; Japanese vegetables, such as the okahijiki (Japanese land seaweed) and somennankin (spaghetti squash), are some of Eno's favourite ingredients to work with.

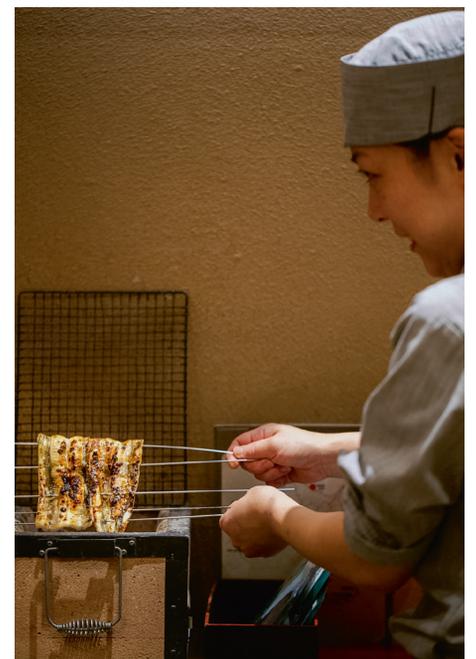
The menu presents itself in an intricately traditional (yet slightly contemporary) kaiseki style; ingredients change by the season and are freely interpreted into unique dishes by Eno. The procession of courses, which spans across eight dishes, is

elaborate, although at times, adjusted depending on circumstances. Here, guests sit in suspense as Eno doles out combinations of dishes that can run from a grilled course (yakimono) to small sashimi platter (tsukuri) to a simmered dish (takiawase), and to a rice course (shokujū).

Having been in the trade for two decades, Eno not only furnishes the plate with fresh ingredients native to Japan, but she also draws inspiration from the experiences she has gained working at prestigious Japanese restaurants and from her travels. "It is always eye-opening to know about the variations and differences in interpreting dishes using the same ingredients," she explains with a smile. "Every time, I try to find the best from these memories."

It is this wisdom and ingenuity that inspire Eno to innovate, reinterpret and recreate dishes she has seen or tasted. Case in point, the Ichigo Ichie's prawn noodle, which is inspired by local prawn noodles. Her version is made up of somen, kuruma ebi (Japanese tiger prawn), shima ebi (Japanese grey prawn), and a house-made sauce. Eno has also been known to recreate the classic "tau hway", or beancurd pudding, using soy milk that has been sourced from Japan to form a delicate soybean custard topped with sweet Japanese pomelo and garnished with black chilli powder.

For those who have observed Eno in the kitchen, they would have witnessed the amount of thought she puts into serving her guests; one with a homey, heart-warming appeal. And it's perhaps this meticulous



attention to detail that encourages people to return. “When I was still an apprentice in Japan, I recall my master telling me that in a restaurant, customers always come first. If the customer decides to have a bowl of ramen after a meal, it means that I have failed to understand the needs and meet the expectations of that customer. I have always kept that in mind and tried my best to ensure that my customers have a satisfying and memorable dining experience.”

It has been eight months since Ichigo Ichie started serving diners, and the rhythm to which Eno runs her kitchen is perceptible; while absorbed at her counter, she is peripherally aware of her staff, while still remaining equally attentive to her diners. The soft-spoken chef is always humbly apologetic when the pauses between dishes served are longer. Watching Eno in action does seem to refute the segregating notion that a restaurant kitchen is testosterone-driven, and thus male-dominated. At Ichigo Ichie, Eno has certainly taken these notions in her stride as she skilfully preps and plates her offerings.

In Japanese culture, patriarchy is deeply embedded in all aspects of life and the culinary realm is no exception, with most professional chefs being men. Even today, Japanese women rarely navigate the gastronomy terrain; they have long been prescribed to roles as cooks and caretakers at home. For the intrepid few who venture into chain restaurants, hotels and larger establishments, such operations rarely grant these women a platform or scope to showcase their abilities. “I am a very lucky case. My master didn’t accept how some elders allow the younger apprentices to do menial chores,” Eno shares. “Because of my master’s progressive thinking, he taught me everything from the beginning and I started working in front of customers from the first day.”

Lifestyle limitations, she says, are often a deterrence that keep Japanese female apprentices from staying. “Restaurants do take in female apprentices for training, but many leave in a few years. There is no nail polish allowed and limited makeup and hairstyles permitted

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due to the hygiene requirements. There are only long working hours with many tasks to complete,” Eno says. “Female chefs, who can bravely face these challenges and overcome them — both physically and mentally — without paying attention to these existing stereotypes, can survive.”

Even while a gender imbalance still exists in kitchens and the scarcity of celebrated female chefs is noticeable today, it is an issue that has barely fazed her. For Eno, she remains hopeful on the subject of female representation in the kitchen. “Everyone is different. Some may say that women have sharper and more sensitive tongues. But I believe that regardless of gender, one’s palate improves with training and experience.”

And as she continues to comb through the gastronomic catalogue of Japanese ingredients and techniques to enact culinary surprises for her guests, Eno reminds us that the experience of a meal is as important as what is served on the plate. It is after all, the experience that incites excitement in first-timers and for those who return, memorable affairs rooted in true hospitality. Dining at Eno’s restaurant is a once in a lifetime experience, just like it’s written in the 16th-century Japanese saying. ▀

Clockwise from top: An appetiser made of watarigani (Japanese blue crab), akauni (grade A red sea urchin), okahijiki and somennankin; a soybean custard dessert that is garnished with Japanese pomelo flesh and Kyoto black chilli powder; Ichigo Ichie’s prawn noodles are Eno’s reinterpretation of a local dish using Japanese somen, kuruma ebi (Japanese tiger prawn) and shima ebi (Japanese grey prawn).

