Sake No Hana - Japan in St James's Street

21 Feb 2008 by Nick Lander/FT

Alan Yau, the restaurateur behind the new Sake No Hana in London's St James's Street, has already conceived of and established wagamama (the Japanese noodle chain he subsequently lost control of); Busaba Eathai and Yauatcha, the good-value Thai and dim sum restaurants, and Hakkasan, the extremely successful upmarket Chinese restaurant which he hopes will soon become a global brand.

But the short journey from north of Regent Street, where Yau has been based for the past 15 years, to this new site in Mayfair has been far more difficult than he had envisaged despite these past successes.

Yau explained over a glass of sake late one afternoon, as the sunlight poured into the restaurant's elegant interior designed to mirror a Japanese temple by architect Kengo Kuma, that he had once been piqued by a magazine comment that had described him merely as 'a restaurateur for the proletariat.' So when he was approached by Jamie Barber, who held the lease on this Grade I listed building that used to house The Economist, with the tempting offer of Eugueny Lebedev as a significant Russian backer if collectively they could establish a restaurant worthy of its location, Yau was hooked.

I could tell that Yau has been hurt by some of the criticism levelled at the restaurant since it opened (not only from my colleague Kimiko Barber). Several aspects of it, such as the absence of coffee, he intends to redress immediately. But a greater part of its improvement will come incrementally as the kitchen settles down, the waiting staff become more accustomed to what is a difficult space over several floors and Yau reveals another vital aspect of a restaurateur's role, and one in which he has hitherto excelled, that of post-opening menu development.

This may sound a clinical, cold process but it is vital if a restaurant is not only to become popular but also to repay its shareholders. And Yau is beginning to appreciate that in creating Sake No Hana he is going to put his own so-far-well-known capabilities in this field to the test. "What I am trying to do here is create something between Nobu, which has created a new style of communal Japanese eating where the dishes arrive simultaneously, and the kaiseki style, which has its home in Kyoto, where the food is served in a fixed format although the origins of the dishes move from the sea to the land and then to the mountain," he explained. "If possible, I want to create a new form of dining etiquette but one that, like kaiseki, has its roots very firmly in the freshness of the ingredients we use. I do what I do best, I think, post-opening but that involves putting the right resources behind the kitchen and then tasting, tasting and tasting until everything is as it should be."

Sake No Hana will only begin to realise this ambition once the elegant sushi counter on the ground floor is open in March which in turn depends on Yau finalising the design for the island unit inside it which will serve grilled food similar in style to Masa in New York. (Although this London version will never be cheap, it will be considerably less expensive than Masa!) It will also have to wait for Yau's return from Japan where he is conducting final interviews for the second in command of his hot kitchen and for the forthcoming sushi bar.

Shortly before Sake No Hana opened, Yau pulled off an extraordinary deal selling his two restaurants, Hakkasan and Yauatcha, for £30.5 million to Tasameen, the property arm of the Abu Dhabi Investment Authority, a deal that will see branches of Hakkasan open in Istanbul, Abu Dhabi, Miami and Shanghai over the next year. Yau believes, perhaps with some justification, that Hakkasan has the potential to be one of a handful of restaurant brands, alongside Nobu, Zuma

and L'Atelier du Joël Robuchon, which has the strength, and now the funding, to stand alongside established retail brands such as Chanel, Hermes and Prada in new developments . (London will also see a Hakka Berkeley in Berkeley Street specialising in Peking duck in 2009).

Simultaneously, Yau is going back to his roots and to what is the most exciting challenge for any restaurateur, that of creating inexpensive good food for the masses, the market called 'fast casual' in the US.

March will also see the opening of his first branch of Cha Cha Moon in Gayton Street, just off Carnaby Street, in essence a Chinese noodle house similar to the Japanese wagamama he created but one that is in Yau's words ' a transition from a Mark 1 model to a Mark 2 prototype'. One of its distinctive features will be an I Pod style menu that will allow those waiting in the queue to order before they sit down. As that comes to fruition Yau is finalising plans for something even less expensive, an Asian challenge to McDonalds and Burger King, he hopes, but of which he will sadly disclose nothing at present.

Those who have backed Yau, still only 45, have seen spectacular returns despite what can also only be described as a hair raising ride along the way. In his search for the most efficient, ergonomic yet striking design Yau has consistently gone over every single capital expenditure budget that has ever been set for any of his restaurants and yet he has always managed to convert a seemingly huge overspend into a handsome return for his shareholders, evinced most conspicuously perhaps by the permanent queue of customers outside Busaba Eathai in Wardour Street.

The word is that Sake No Hana has so far cost over £6 million with the inevitable losses from the first year's trading still to come. But I, for one, would not bet against Yau making the food at Sake No Hana as impressive as its interior.