

London's most successful restaurants

15 Aug 2008 by Nick Lander/Business Life

Hakkasan serves contemporary Chinese food in a basement off a cul-de-sac in a rather nondescript location just behind Tottenham Court Road tube station. **Nobu** delivers modern Japanese food on the first floor of the chic Metropolitan Hotel overlooking Hyde Park, while **Zuma**, which also draws its main inspiration from Japan, is located in an altogether more humdrum street next to a Post Office but one that is, crucially, tucked away in well-heeled Knightsbridge.

Asia is obviously a common factor linking these three very busy restaurants and so too is the phenomenon of how difficult it is to get a table at any one of them. But while these are the two more obvious common factors, a third is their best kept secret, one that even their owners and management are reluctant to discuss – with turnovers in excess of £13 million per annum each, these three restaurants have the highest sales of any in London.

How this has come to pass is almost as intriguing as why. I've been closely involved with the restaurant business for the past 28 years and if anybody had asked me to take a wager even five years ago that the three busiest restaurants in London would be serving Asian food I would have taken it immediately. Back then Asian food was becoming increasingly popular but was then predominantly confined to much smaller and far less glamorous settings.

There are numerous other very popular restaurants in the capital - **The Ivy**, **Langan's Brasserie**, **Scott's** and **The Wolseley** - where bookings are equally difficult to come by, and some of which have turnovers around the £10 million mark. So what marks the difference between these highly successful restaurants and Hakkasan, Nobu and Zuma?

Speed of service and a resulting increase in the number of meals served is obviously a major factor linking Nobu and Zuma. Both specialise in sushi and sashimi, which, as they are served cold, can be delivered much more quickly than the hot dishes that are the hallmarks of French and Italian cooking. Equally important is the sushi counter, my favourite place to eat whenever I am on my own near Nobu or Zuma at lunchtime, where you can sit down for half an hour, watch a highly professional chef at work, eat extremely well and walk away feeling well-fed and not unhappy with parting with £25 or £30.

The fact that eating raw fish, once considered so exotic and even dangerous, has now become so commonplace and even safe has been in part due to these restaurants' growing popularity, and also a contributing factor in them. But so too has been their location. Nobu has attracted a chic crowd since it opened in 1997, particularly in the evening, whereas Zuma's location was definitely more risky (it was beforehand a failed hamburger joint). But where both prosper is that each attracts a wealthy lunchtime crowd too, whether from the offices or those shopping nearby. If you can afford the shops of Mayfair or Sloane Street, you can afford lunch at Nobu or Zuma.

While Hakkasan does not enjoy the same plush surroundings nor, as a Chinese restaurant, the highly profitable Japanese stratagem of the multi-course tasting menu (known as omakase at Nobu, which serves around 200 a week at £75 per person), it does maximise one other feature which makes these restaurants so lucrative, and that is their bar.

Hakkasan's bar wraps around the entire eating area and conveniently provides a place to watch the action either before or after your meal. It also provides the work space for up to as many as 13 barmen who can be working there simultaneously mixing cocktails and serving bar food until the early hours of the morning. Whether this makes Hakkasan a restaurant with a bar attached or vice-versa I'm not sure, but this combination is undoubtedly good for business.

These three restaurants also share two other common ingredients. Their design is extremely modern; their approach combines good food and service with great fun – even if this is something never mentioned on the menu.