

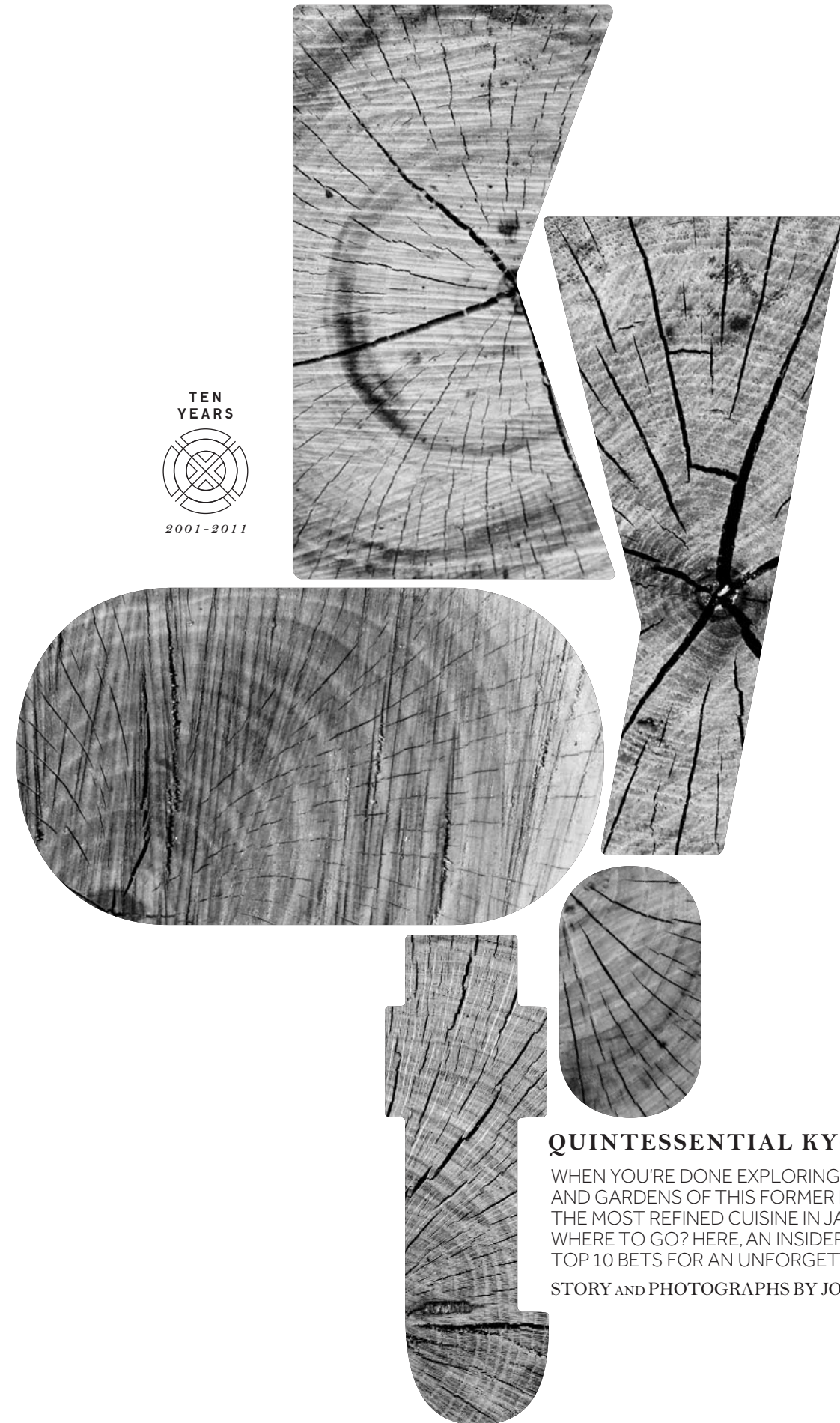


SCREENING ROOM
One of the four tatami rooms at chef Kenichi Hashimoto's elegant Ryozanpaku.

TEN
YEARS



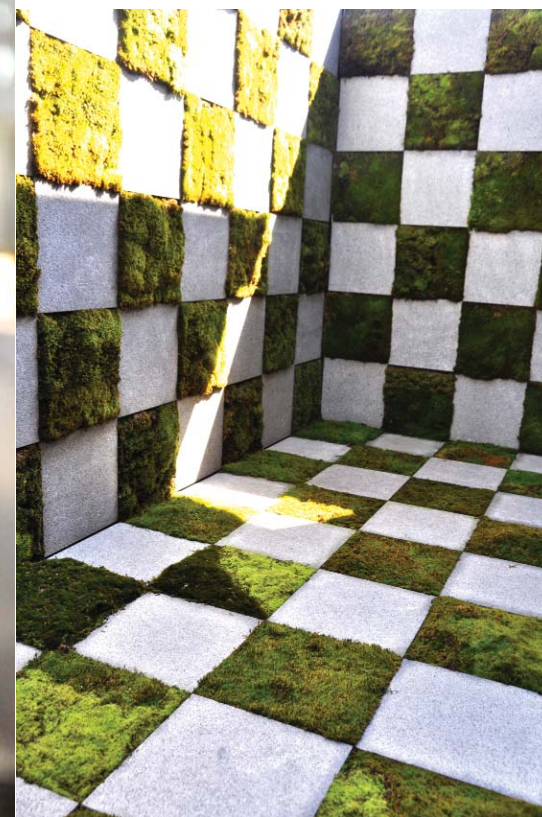
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QUINTESSENTIAL KYOTO

WHEN YOU'RE DONE EXPLORING THE MONUMENTS AND GARDENS OF THIS FORMER IMPERIAL CAPITAL, THE MOST REFINED CUISINE IN JAPAN AWAITS. BUT WHERE TO GO? HERE, AN INSIDER'S PICK OF KYOTO'S TOP 10 BETS FOR AN UNFORGETTABLE MEAL

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN ASHBURNE



IT WAS BORN, WROTE THE ANCIENT POETS, AS THE city of celestial spirits, where temples outnumbered the gods and the very water that sprang from the earth was purer than the dew on the lotus leaves in the gardens of Nirvana. Its fame “spread to the four known corners of the terrestrial earth.”

Alas, somewhere along the line, something got lost in translation. Although tens of millions of domestic tourists visit Kyoto annually to marvel at its temples and shrines, its stone gardens and geishas, and its impossibly elegant *ryotei* (traditional fine-dining restaurants), Japan’s ancient capital attracts a relatively scant number of foreign visitors. Most heinously, the great star in Kyoto’s cultural firmament—its incredibly sophisticated and alluring food—has, until recently, passed beneath the global tourist radar.

The city’s signature cuisine is *Kyo-ryori*, a catch-all term that encompasses the sophisticated multicourse *kaiseki* and *chakaiseki* feasts associated with the tea ceremony, as well as the nuanced vegetarian fare that constitutes the Buddhist—in particular, Zen—culinary arts. Directly translated, it simply means “Kyoto food,” yet the phrase is synonymous with the ultimate in quality, service, refinement, *omotenashi* hospitality, and luxuriant style.

Kyo-ryori emerged from a unique combination of historical, artistic, and geographic factors. An abundance of natural

spring water and fertile soil provided the essentials. However, the inland city’s remove from the ocean posed, in the centuries before refrigeration, a serious logistical problem. Kyoto chefs had to find new ways of salting, preserving, and pickling seafood, and using soybeans and local vegetables to satisfy the dietary demands of the ubiquitous Buddhist clergy. Thus, from its very outset, *Kyo-ryori* has been associated with innovation.

When, in 794, Japan’s imperial capital moved to Kyoto, the city’s kitchens and markets had to fulfill the needs of even more important customers—the emperor and his court. Despite the paucity of raw materials, chefs were obliged to produce new and evermore entertaining cuisine. As master chef Toshio Murata of Kikunoi explains, “It was a difficult and dangerous business. If a cook’s dishes displeased the imperial retinue, it was ‘Off with his head!’”

The threat of imminent decapitation proved an effective spur to culinary creativity, but it was a gentler, more benign influence that was to move *Kyo-ryori* to even more exalted heights. The newly emerged aristocratic art of the tea ceremony demanded a culinary accompaniment that incorporated *wabi-sabi*, the Japanese aesthetic system that finds beauty in imperfection and impermanence. Thus was born *chakaiseki*, the beautifully crafted antecedent of all formal *Kyo-ryori* meals.

Centuries later, Kyoto’s cuisine may have finally arrived on the inter-

TASTE MASTER

Above, from left: Michelin-starred chef Kunio Tokuoka testing *dashi* stock in the kitchen of Hana-Kitcho; the same restaurant’s rooftop moss garden. Opposite: One of Tokuoka’s specialty dishes, *shioya*, features seasonal fish and prawns grilled under a dome of salt.



national stage. In 2009, the *Kyoto-Osaka Michelin Guide* awarded 84 of the city's Japanese restaurants the sum total of 109 stars, with six receiving the coveted three-star accolade. Earlier this year, another French tastemaker, fashion house Louis Vuitton, went even farther with its first edition of the *Louis Vuitton City Guide Kyoto/Nara* (for which, it should be noted, I was a contributing writer), showcasing 90 eateries that reflect the city's unique "cultural DNA."

And so it should be. But if I had to pick only 10 experiences that best exemplified the cuisine of Kyoto, my home for the past two decades, it would be these:

SAVOR THE SEASONS AT KIKUNOI

Presided over by three-star Michelin chef Yoshihiro Murata, this exceptional ryotei is arguably the most famous restaurant in Japan, and an obligatory stop for any Kyoto-bound gourmet. Its tranquil tatami rooms are beautiful, many looking out onto Kikunoi's gardens; the intimate Yakatabune room was designed by Murata himself to evoke the experience of dining on an old-fashioned pleasure boat on nearby Lake Biwa.

Kikunoi, which has been in Murata's family for three generations, is the epitome of refined luxury in everything from its bespoke lacquerware to its delicate *ikebana* flower arrangements. But it is Murata's beau-

tifully crafted kaiseki that has brought him much-deserved acclaim. Borne by kimono-clad waitresses, every element in the nine- or ten-course banquet is perfectly matched to the seasons. On my latest visit, *Kamasu no Sugiita Yaki*, a 17th-century recipe for grilled barracuda that Murata himself rediscovered, made for an amazing autumn specialty. Presented on the plate with freshly fallen leaves and a piece of smoldering cedar, it recalled a picnic in the Kyoto forests of yore. *459 Shimogawara-cho, Kawaramachi-dori, Yasakatoriimae-sagaru, Higashiyama-ku, 81-75/561-0015; kikunoi.jp; dinner for two from US\$410.*

EXPLORE ARTISANAL COOKING AT RYOZANPAKU

Dining at Ryozanpaku is like being invited into the home of an impossibly tasteful and wealthy friend. You enter through a carved wooden gate, walk across a stone path, slide back the *shoji* door, and pass into a realm of flower arrangements, gallery-worthy art, and wondrous food.

In the case of Ryozanpaku, your host is the genial master chef Kenichi Hashimoto. His two-Michelin-star restaurant is named after the legendary Chinese mountain lair from which a band of righteous outlaws waged war against an evil regime. The only battle going on here, however, is for the captivation of your taste buds. Everything, right down to the soy

AUTUMNAL OFFERINGS

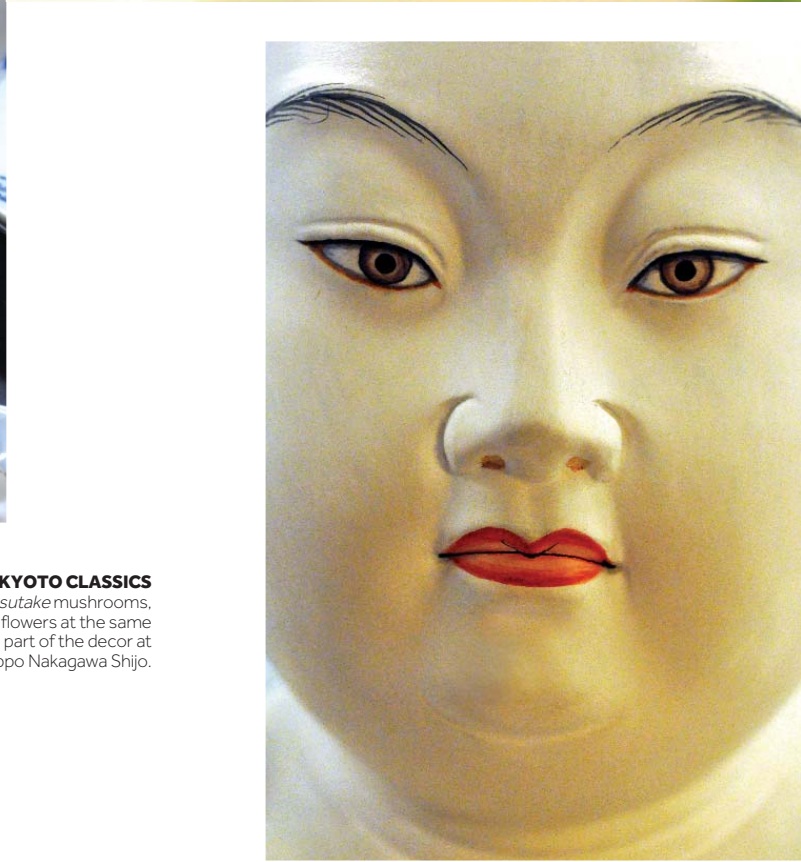
Above, from left: The *Kamasu no Sugiita Yaki* at Kikunoi presents grilled barracuda on a plate with autumn leaves and a piece of burning cedar; a flower arrangement at the same restaurant. Opposite: Kikunoi's gardens are reflected in the lacquered tabletop of a tatami room.





FLAVORS OF THE MOMENT

Clockwise from left: *Kaiware* (cress) sushi at Sushidokoro Man; salmon roe with simmered green chili leaves, part of the *hassun* kaiseki course at Hana-Kitcho; chef Yoshihiro Murata at Kikuno; *nagaimo-dofu* (pounded yam in gelatin) at Ryozanpaku.



KYOTO CLASSICS

Clockwise from above: *Nodoguro* (tilefish) with *matsutake* mushrooms, included in the seasonal kaiseki at Ryozanpaku; dried flowers at the same restaurant; nodoguro sashimi at Ranmaru; part of the decor at Kappo Nakagawa Shijo.





sauce, is handcrafted on the premises, where Hashimoto was born and raised. His home-turned-restaurant even boasts its own source of pure water, dubbed Izumidono ("His Highness, the Well"), for which the chef modestly credits his culinary success. The 15-dish *hassun* (the second course of a formal *kaiseki* meal in which the chef expresses his full creative flair in a selection of hors d'oeuvres) is a visual and edible delight. But it is Hashimoto's signature *misozuke*—a magical, sake-infused mix of broiled scallops, mackerel, and white miso—that keeps Ryozanpaku regulars coming back for more. 5 *Izumidono-cho, Yoshida, Sakyo-ku; 81-75/771-4447; ryozanpaku.net; dinner for two from US\$270.*

DINE ON CONTEMPORARY KAISEKI AT HANA-KITCHO

For all that he bears an uncanny resemblance to the former bad boy of sumo wrestling Asashoryu, Kunio Tokuoka is as urbane and charismatic as celebrity chefs come. With four Michelin stars under his belt and a restaurant group founded by his grandfather to oversee (including an eponymous dining room in Singapore's Resorts World Sentosa), Tokuoka still manages to be a charming and entertaining host. But once he exchanges his Armani suit for his chef's whites, he's all business. He runs his kitchen with precision, issuing a multitude of orders and testing stock with a clearly practiced eye and palate.

unique *shioya*, a dish that features succulent, partially grilled prawns and seasonal fish served in a dome of salt. 3-2 *Taira-cho, Yamato-oji Shijo-sagaru, Higashiyama-ku; 81-75/531-1500; kitcho.com; dinner for two from US\$156.*

TRY SOMETHING FISHY AT RANMARU

Chef-owner Taiki Sato runs this fantastic, intimate restaurant near the Heian-jingu shrine in Kyoto's Shogoin district. His speciality is fish, be it grilled, steamed, deep-fried, or raw and supremely fresh. "I became a chef because I can't do anything else," he professes with a grin. And that's just as well: in all the years I have been going to Ranmaru, I've yet to be disappointed.

This is the best place to sample *nodoguro* (literally, "black throat"), or tilefish, a Kyoto specialty known elsewhere in Japan as *gyuji*. It is excellent as sashimi or deep-fried. Nor should you miss the feather-light tempura of *wakasagi* (ice fish) smelt or

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KITCHEN CONFIDENTIAL

Above, from left: Chef Masahiro Nakamura at Kappo Nakagawa Shijo; the restaurant's speciality, *hamo* (pike conger) cooked shabu-shabu style. Opposite: Another highlight at Kappo Nakagawa is the *tokobushi*, or Japanese abalone, which is steamed in its shell.

KYOTO

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the Ebi to Tako Escargot Fu—prawn and octopus baked and served with freshly toasted French bread in an escargot dish. Ranmaru also has a fine sake collection: try the Kintsuru, a lovingly crafted brew from the island of Sado. 28-5 Sanno-cho, Shogoin, Sakyo-ku; 81-75/761-7738; dinner for two from US\$90.

SATIATE YOURSELF WITH SUSHI AT SUSHIDOKORO MAN

It is said that the finest sushi in the world can only be found among the legendary *itamae* (sushi chefs) of Tokyo. So much for conventional wisdom. Sushidokoro Man is a true gem, tucked away in the relative obscurity of the Ebisugawa furniture district, just a couple blocks north of City Hall.

The restaurant's cheerful owner, Akira Umehara, likes to keep things low-key. He shuns the media, relying instead on word of mouth to publicize his small, elegant establishment. It's proven a successful strategy. Reservations are essential here: Umehara's sushi is some of the most sublime that I have ever tasted. Staples such as *toro* (fatty tuna belly), and *tai* (sea bream) are superb, but be sure to try some of his seasonal *nigiri* sushi, such as the *shiroika*—a species of white squid from Nagasaki—and pickled cress. The latter may sound mundane, but, in fact, it is a gustatory revelation. Take that, Tokyo! 305 Taxaraya-cho, Ebisugawa-dori Yanaginobanba Higashi-iru, Nakagyo-ku; 81-75/223-3351; dinner for two from US\$260.

EMBRACE THE EEL AT KAPPO NAKAGAWA SHIJO

Hamo—a.k.a. the daggertooth pike conger—is emblematic of Kyoto cuisine, and nowhere is this eel served with more loving care than at Kappo Nagawa Shijo. Chef Hikko Nakagawa pioneered eating hamo in the shabu-shabu style at his restaurant in the Gion district, and his son Masahiro Nakamura has continued the tradition for the last 18 years in the relatively informal setting of this branch in downtown Kyoto.

What really sets Kappo Nakagawa apart

is the quality of its *dashi*, a characteristic stock of *konbu* (kelp) and *katsuo* (bonito) shavings whose exact formula is a closely guarded secret. The hamo, which you simmer all so briefly in a hot pot of stock at your table, is ready when it curls into a white arc of succulent fishy flesh. You can also try it grilled over charcoal in the *sumibiyaki* style. *Nishi Kiyamachi-dori Shijo-sagaru, Shimogyo-ku; 81-75/352-3511; kappou-nakagawa.ecnet.jp; dinner for two from US\$170.*

TASTE THE TOFU AT SHORAIAN

During the Heian period, Arashiyama, a leafy district in the western outskirts of the city, was the playground of Kyoto's nobility, who would gather here to attend moon-viewing parties, write elegiac verse and indulge in a spot of cormorant fishing. The area today is a mecca for domestic tourists, who swarm to its bamboo groves and the magnificence of Tenryu-ji temple. For the gourmet traveler, however, the real attraction is the tofu specialty restaurant Shoraian. Perched above the banks of the Oi River, this beautiful wooden building is owned by master calligrapher Fuyoh Kobayashi, who has filled the space with her graceful Zen-inspired artwork.

The delicate, silken bean curd here is just as remarkable as the decor; explore it in all its varieties with the set *tofu kaiseki*. Reservations, especially during the autumn maple-viewing season, are essential, but there's no finer spot to kick back with a glass of sake and watch the river flow by over a long, leisurely meal. *Kanyuchi-nai, Saga Kameno'o-cho, Ukyo-ku; 81-75/861-0123; only open for dinner on weekends; lunch for two from US\$80.*

EXPLORE NISHIKI MARKET

To the locals, it is *Kyo-no-daidokoro*, or "Kyoto's Kitchen," and the Nishiki-koji Ichiba market arcade has existed on this central site since 1615, serving the inexhaustible appetites of the imperial court and the high-end ryotei restaurants. A visit here is a must, as the full span of Kyoto food culture is represented in the family-run businesses that line the narrow, covered alleyway that runs for 300 meters between Takakura Road and the Nishiki Tenmangu Shrine. Highlights include the local pickles at Uchida Tsukemono (free samples available); the knives and kitchenware at the legendary Aritsugu; the gourmet vegetables on offer at Kanematsu; and the inexpensive, freshly grilled shellfish at Daiyasu.

This is one spot where eating on the hoof is tolerated in Japan, though many of the shops also provide takeaway bento boxes. And if you fancy a sit-down meal, the *oyako donburi*

(rice topped with chicken and egg) at Maruki Shokudo canteen is excellent, and a steal at around US\$8. Also recommended is Yaoya no Nikai, a restaurant above Kanematsu that serves a set lunch made with locally sourced heirloom vegetables such as Shogoin daikon, Kujonegi leeks, and Kamonasu aubergines. *kyoto-nishiki.or.jp; stalls open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.*

ORDER NOODLES FIT FOR ROYALTY AT HONKE OWARIYA

Famed for its soba, this Kyoto institution dates back to 1465, and is reportedly Emperor Akihito's favorite spot for a bowl of buckwheat noodles when in town. Another of Kyoto's specialties, *nishin soba* (noodles in broth topped with cured herring), is in fine form here. Better still, order the signature *hourai soba*, an elaborate dish presented with shiitake mushrooms, sliced egg, sesame horseradish, seaweed, leek, deep-fried prawns, and grated white radish. 322 Kuramaya-cho Nijo, Nakagyo-ku; 81-75/231-3446; *honke-owariya.co.jp; the hourai soba will set you back US\$27.*

SIP GOURMET GREEN TEA AT IPPODO

Ippodo has been retailing the finest green teas in Kyoto for nearly three centuries, its name synonymous with the highest quality and service. At the main store's Kaboku Tearoom, even the most discerning of tea connoisseurs will find plenty to delight in, while helpful staff are on hand to guide novices through the brewing and tasting process. Start with the simple Kaboku *sencha* at about US\$9, then, if you are feeling adventurous and deep-pocketed, splash out on the *tenka-ichi gyokuro* (US\$23). The name of this aromatic decoction means "the finest under heaven," and you'll soon know why. *Teramachi-dori Nijo, Nakagyo-ku; 81-75/211-3421; ippodo-tea.co.jp.* ©



THE DETAILS KYOTO

—GETTING THERE

Kyoto's international gateway is the Kansai International Airport outside Osaka, a 75-minute train ride away. If you're coming from Tokyo, bullet trains leave Tokyo Station every 30 minutes, and

arrive in Kyoto two and a half hours later.

—WHERE TO STAY Hyatt Regency Kyoto

The town's top Western-style hotel. 644-2 Sanjusangendo-mawari; Higashiyama-ku; 81-75/541-1234; *kyoto.regency.hyatt.com*; doubles from US\$325.

The Screen

Ryokan-meets-modern design hotel at this 13-room gem. 640-1 Shimogoryo-omae-cho, Nakagyo-ku; 81-75/252-1113; *screen-hotel.jp*; doubles from US\$387.