



Fine Fusion

Kurobuta, in the heart of Chelsea in London, is giving traditional Japanese food a flavour-packed makeover. Giselle Whiteaker picks up chopsticks

Kurobuta kicked off at the end of last year as a pop-up eatery in a bare-bones space on Chelsea's Kings Road. Find the diminutive storefront and you'll head into a narrow, split-level dining space that's likely to be packed to the rafters. The word is out. And that word is *umami*.

"Umami is the fifth sense on our palates," explains Australian chef Scott Hallsworth. Scott should know. After working across a number of high profile restaurants in his country of origin, he wound up in Nobu's kitchen in London where he learnt enough to launch Nobu into Melbourne, Australia. "Apart from managing a giant kitchen and a huge team, the top of the list was flavour," says Scott of the



Scott Hallsworth



pork in Japan comes from an ancient breed of pig known as Black Berkshire. The meat is regarded as the highest quality pork in the world, with its origins tracing back to Reading. The royal family at Windsor Castle maintained a large herd of Black Berkshire and the strains of the breed in Japan trace back to a gift from the English Royals. It's no surprise then that it's the pork that Scott cites as one of his favourite dishes – pork belly buns. "It's just a great bun. I never get tired of it," he says.

Biting into one of the soft buns, on a taste test at Kurobuta, the pork melting on my tongue in a burst of flavour, I can understand Scott's affection for the delicious morsels. Accompanied by a strong, chunky peanut sauce every bite packs a flavour punch. I'm tempted to order another of the sharing plates, but we've already selected a range of dishes from the menu that have yet to come, so I decide to hold off and see if I can fit more in at the end of lunch.

"Oh wow. I think that might be my favourite," says my friend Steve, gesturing towards the plate of squid *kara age*. I'm expecting the tidbits to bounce off my tongue, but they are soft and subtle, the accompanying jalapeno sauce giving a gentle nod to warmth, leaving the subtle spices in the squid coating to shine through. I can't imagine what's going to top this...until I bite into the tea-smoked lamb.

Given the reverence lamb is awarded in Australia, it's no shock that the Australian chef does lamb to perfection. The two chops are balanced on a pile of smokey *nasu*

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most important points he learnt in his time with the Michelin-starred chef. "I learnt how to make the most of umami and really work the flavours."

Scott always had a love affair with Asian cuisine. "I'm not sure where it came from. It's probably a little bit from being a chef in Australia. There was that shift in ingredients. Then that was really cemented in Nobu. I really fell for the cuisine then," he admits. It is this love, combined with a dollop of umami and a sprinkle of flair, that keeps diners rolling through Kurobuta's door.

Even the name has flavour. Kurobuta translates as "black pig", a prestigious meat in the Japanese food lexicon. "It has a tie-in with both countries," Scott explains. Kurobuta

(aubergine). The seared meat is a delicate pink that belies the sharp spicy Korean miso flavour that attacks the tastebuds in the most spectacular way.

A bowl of *edamame* – immature soybeans that are a popular beer-accompaniment in Japan – are made distinctive, the traditional salt none other than Maldon, seared with lemon, butter and sake to a crisp, zesty delight. These tide us over until the eel and foie gras rolls arrive. These could have easily been overwhelmingly rich, but somehow the flavours have been subdued to a rich yet subtle aftertaste.

Glancing into the tiny open kitchen space I see a chef, blow-torch in hand, advancing on a plate. I suffer from immediate food envy and wonder what it is so I can add it

to our order. The waitress deftly swipes the plate from the counter and delivers it to our table. It's our order of miso-grilled baby chicken, the subtle seasoning a salve to our palates.

"One more?" I ask Steve, pleasantly full, but reluctant to forgo any of the delicious dishes. He gives a quick nod, and before we know it we are dipping into a plate of salmon gravadlax and avocado tartare with dill mayo, and fresh Yuzu zest. We scoop portions onto the accompanying rice crunchies, and let the fresh essence of the salmon melt on our tongues, washing it all down with a light lunchtime cocktail.

"That was brilliant," Steve declares, licking his lips. I have to agree. I can understand why Kurobuta is failing as a pop-up – it's too good to not be permanent. Scott has recognised this and is negotiating to keep the space on, even after the "bigger, brighter, shinier version" opens in Marble Arch. "We started the pop-up to keep the momentum going, but it's been so popular that we'd be foolish to walk away from it," Scott admits.

"Is there one magic ingredient?" I ask Scott before we part ways. "Not really," he grins, but he admits that he holds *konbu*, the giant kelp found around Japan's northernmost island of Hokkaido, in high regard. "It's that taste that you can't put your finger on, but it boosts all the flavours," he explains. Whatever it is, it is worth heading to Chelsea for. Or Marble Arch. Or wherever Kurobuta pops up next. ■



Kurobuta is currently in Chelsea at 251 King's Road, London, SW3 5EL and coming soon to 17-20 Kendal Street, London, W2 2AW. See www.kurobuta-london.com.



Kurobuta's Crunchy Rice with Avocado-Jalapeño Dip

Avocado

2 ripe avocados, skinned, seed removed and chopped into large chunky pieces

1 medium to hot fresh Jalapeño chilli or other large green chilli, chopped up finely, remove the seeds for a milder flavour if preferred (taste the chilli to determine whether or not to remove the seeds)

20ml fresh lime juice or if available, 15ml salted yuzu juice

1 tbsp crushed, toasted white sesame seeds

1 tsp white miso paste

Sea salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

Top with freshly-toasted white sesame seeds and a splash of yuzu or lime juice

Put all of the ingredients into a large mixing bowl and (with latex kitchen gloves on) squish the avocado into the other ingredients until everything is well combined but leaving descent chunks of soft avocado.

Crunchy Rice

Take a cup of sushi rice and without washing place directly into a pan, covering with 5 cups of cold water. Add a small stick of kombu to give it that umami boost (optional). Bring to the boil and stir well, then continue to simmer until the rice becomes a gluggy porridge; you may need to add more water as you go. The porridge mix needs to be fairly wet.

Cool the mixture then spread evenly over a non-stick baking sheet and leave to dry overnight in an oven on very low or with the pilot light on. Once the rice has dried, it will look like a translucent plastic sheet.

Heat a pan of rapeseed oil until it begins to smoke, around 220 degrees Celsius. Break small pieces from the rice sheet and drop into the oil; the rice will immediately puff (like a prawn cracker) and triple in size, so don't fry too much at once.

Serve with the avocado in a small bowl on the side to accompany the home made rice crunchies. For quick home-made canapés, top with smoked salmon, tuna sashimi, avocado, and the likes.