

NOBU RULES

Surmounting initial failures, Nobu Matsuhisa has expanded from his eponymous restaurants in Beverly Hills and New York, and is now the brand name behind a hotel chain, a TV show, cookbooks – and even a homeware collection.

STORY APPLE MANDY
PHOTOGRAPHY TAI MAN-WAI

MAINPHOTO
Nobuyuki "Nobu"
Matsuhisa

Nobuyuki "Nobu" Matsuhisa arrives bright-eyed and bushy-tailed at Nobu InterContinental Hong Kong. He cheerfully waves at his floor staff as he walks into the sushi bar to check on things. He has just finished weeks of gruelling travel, flying from his base in Los Angeles to Melbourne, Kuala Lumpur and Manila, spending at least three days in each city. But jet lag is not in Nobu's dictionary.

The 66-year-old reckons he's on the road 10 months every year visiting his eponymous Nobu and Matsuhisa restaurants as well as scouting for new locations and businesses. Today, the Japanese celebrity chef owns a portfolio of 37 restaurants – 31 of which are Nobu branded and six are called Matsuhisa – dotted around 31 cities across five continents. The latest Nobu recently opened at the Crocus City Mall in Moscow, while a new Matsuhisa will open soon at the Mandarin Oriental in Munich.

"Our management teams and chefs have grown in size in the last 20 years," says Nobu, who now has some 2,000 employees around the world. "Communication is very important and I make sure to meet each team to ensure consistent food quality."

MAKING OF A SUSHI CHEF

Nobu was born in Saitama, Japan, to a lumber merchant father – who died in a traffic accident while Nobu was still young – and a housewife mother who passed away 10 years ago. He had experienced a fair share of hardships and setbacks before finding success with restaurants Matsuhisa, in Beverly Hills, and Nobu, in New York City.

Nobu started as a dishwasher at age 18 and after three years, his "master" started teaching him how to make sushi. He accompanied his master, carrying his basket, to Tokyo's Tsukiji Market, where he watched his mentor select fish. After the auction at 6.30am, Nobu returned to the restaurant and cleaned the fish they purchased. He went home at midnight every day, earning a very low salary.

"In my generation, we were taught to watch our masters prepare sushi," says Nobu. "I asked questions and he answered, but at the end of the day, it's all about practice, technique and experience. It all depends on what you do and how much time you practice."

By the time he was 24, Nobu was looking for opportunities abroad and he jumped at the chance offered by one of his customers to open a restaurant in Lima, Peru. At the time, a lot of Japanese immigrants were already there and Japan's cultural influences contributed to the richness of Japanese-Peruvian cuisine known as Nikkei. Nobu saw "a different food culture" and became "more flexible", incorporating Peruvian ingredients like fresh coriander, chilli and garlic to his dishes. This marked the beginning of his signature "Nobu-style Japanese" cuisine.

LOSING EVERYTHING

Differences over food costs led Nobu to split from his associates after three years. "My former business partner said it was unnecessary to use quality ingredients because Peruvians didn't know anything about Japanese cuisine," he says. "But I liked using quality ingredients, which made our costs higher. He screamed and argued with me, and I already knew that was game over for me."

Nobu moved to Buenos Aires and worked at a small Japanese restaurant for a year. He says he didn't learn much and didn't get any inspiration while living there because there were only a few customers. He returned to Japan and then moved to Alaska at age 28 to open his own restaurant with a partner. But after 50 days of operation, the restaurant burned to the ground due to electrical problems.

"I almost tried to kill myself because I lost everything – opportunities, money, dreams and energy," Nobu says. "I was weak and I didn't know how to keep myself going. But since my wife and two daughters [Junko and Yoshiko] were around me, I thought maybe I should give myself another chance."

Emotionally shattered and with debts to pay, Nobu went to Los Angeles and took a job at a sushi bar. He earned his way back to solvency – after nine years of hard work. As his confidence slowly returned and his finances normalised, Nobu opened his first namesake restaurant, Matsuhisa, in Beverly Hills.

JAPANESE CUISINE REDUX

When the flagship restaurant Matsuhisa opened in January 1987, it instantly became a hot spot

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frequented by Hollywood celebrities, including Robert De Niro, Al Pacino and Clint Eastwood. Nobu served imaginative dishes, including lobster sashimi tacos, yellowtail sashimi with jalapeño, octopus *tiradito* (Peruvian-style sashimi), and tuna tempura roll with yuzu miso sauce.

Nobu became so popular that Hollywood A-lister De Niro eventually persuaded him to open a restaurant, with the backing of the Oscar-winning actor and key global partners, such as restaurateur Drew Nieporent and film producer Meir Teper. The first Nobu in Tribeca, New York City, opened in August 1994. Just like Matsuhisa in Beverly Hills, Nobu New York became the place to see and be seen among the rich and famous. Well-loved dishes such as miso-marinated black cod and new style sashimi from Matsuhisa's menu were also served there.

Some dishes have evolved over the years and have been mainstays on the menu. The original deep-fried soft-shell crab was served with lemon, and Nobu reinvented the dish by making soft-shell crab spring rolls. "The idea actually came from the guests. I thought about their suggestions and added them to our menus," Nobu says.

NOBU-STYLE JAPANESE

While some don't like eating sea urchin raw, Nobu made a tempura out of it. In a video demonstration on Martha Stewart's website, Nobu wrapped the flavourful sea urchin, or uni, in shisho leaf then rolled it in seaweed before dipping into the batter. Tim Zagat, co-founder, co-chair and chief executive officer of *The Zagat Survey*, once ordered seven pieces of uni tempura and since then the dish has been labelled as "a Tim Zagat favourite".

Nobu's innovative food has been called "new-style Japanese", but he prefers to call it "Nobu-style Japanese". With an emphasis on using local ingredients, he combines them with other influences and incorporates Japanese techniques. For example, the Dover sole at Nobu London, at The Metropolitan Hotel in Park Lane, is prepared either pan-fried with red chilli shisho salsa or steamed with black bean sauce.

Bluefin tuna, an endangered fish, is also served as a sashimi, particularly at Nobu Berkeley Street, also in London. In 2009, bluefin tuna in Nobu's menus became a central issue among wildlife campaigners, including British celebrities such as Sienna Miller and Stephen Fry. "Every year, the government in different countries

01 Nobuyuki "Nobu" Matsuhisa

02 Miso-marinated black cod

03 Authentic Kobe beef tartar Nobu-style

04 The panoramic harbour view from Nobu InterContinental Hong Kong



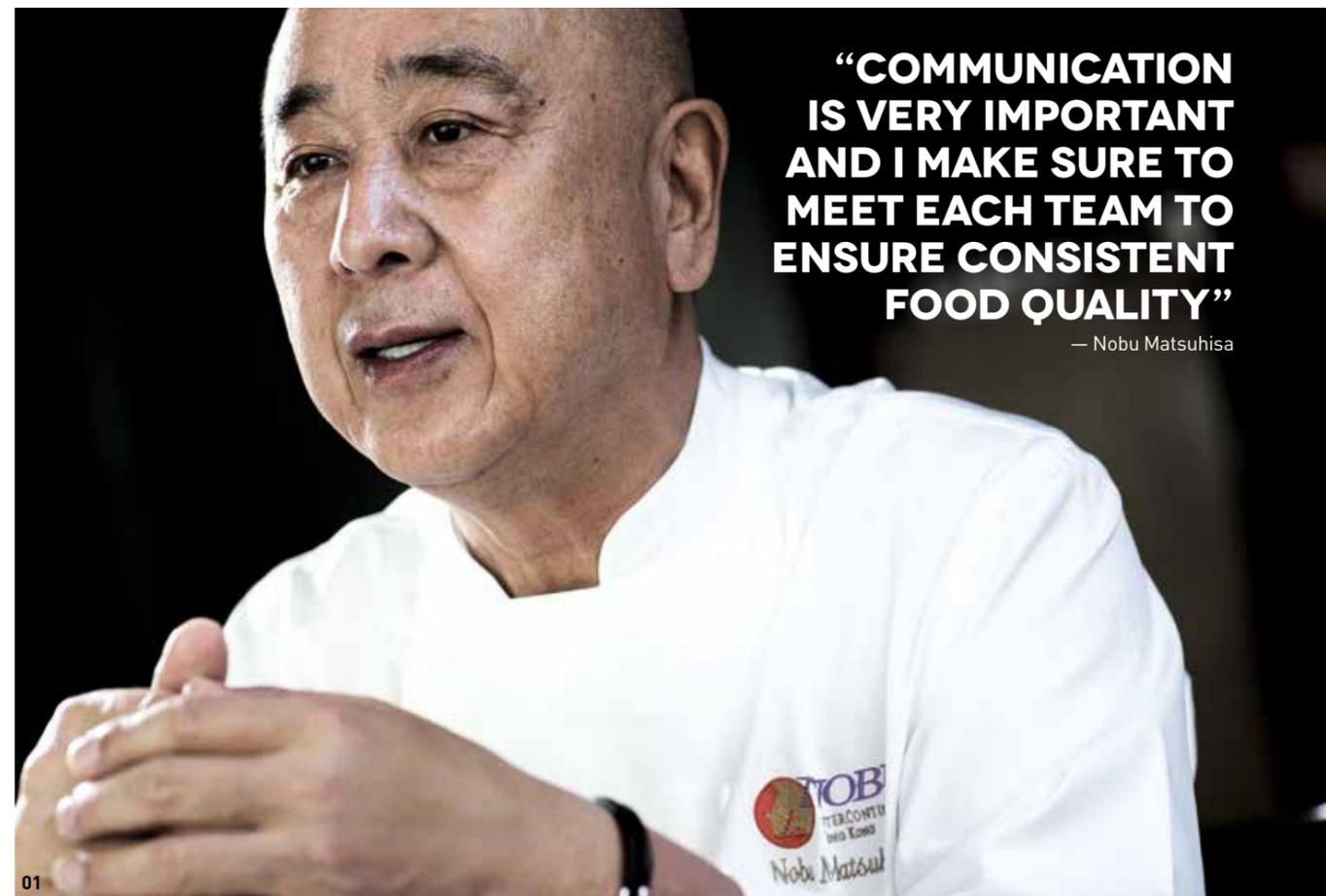
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01

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decide how many tonnes [of bluefin tuna] you can catch," says Nobu. "Our restaurants are in compliance with the law and we only used farmed bluefin tuna that comes from Spain, Italy, Australia, Mexico or Japan."

THE RIGHT DEAL

Despite the criticisms, Nobu – who is now a grandfather of two – continues to expand his culinary empire. Food critics are now full of praise for the eight-year-old Nobu InterContinental Hong Kong's use of fresh organic ingredients from New Life Farm in the New Territories. The local outlet is managed by executive chef Sean Mell, a California native who was relocated from Nobu Lana'i in Hawaii, and executive sushi chef Hideki Endo.

"There's now a lot of competition among Japanese restaurants in Hong Kong, but that is good because we offer the best products," say Nobu.

Asked about his future plans, Nobu keeps his cards close to his chest. "I don't know what will happen in the next five years, maybe I will become homeless," he says with a laugh. "I try my best to take it day by day. I don't care about opening businesses in different locations. What matters is waiting for the right offer and making sure the deal is good." ☺

MAN OF MANY HATS

Nobu cooks up a sprawling business empire.

Nobu Matsuhisa's current and upcoming projects include Nobu Hospitality, a television series, business consulting for Crystal Cruises, publishing cookbooks and a homeware collection.

Nobu Hospitality, co-owned by Nobu, Robert De Niro and Jimmy Sweis, have two Nobu Hotels – a 181-room property within the Caesars Palace resort in Las Vegas, and a 321-room version in Manila within the City of Dreams Casino, a 6.2-hectare integrated resort complex.

Nobu Hospitality will open eight other hotels in the next two years, according to chief executive Trevor Horwell. The Nobu Hotel at Eden Roc Miami Beach, with a Nobu Restaurant and Bar Lounge, will open in January 2016.

Nobu recently launched a TV series, *Nobu's Japan*, on Discovery's TLC channel. In the four-part series, Nobu guides some of the world's brightest culinary stars, such as Spanish native José Andrés, through Japanese cities, including Hokkaido, Nagasaki, and Sado in Niigata, Yamaguchi Prefecture.