

Balancing Act

With Japanese cuisine, everything has a purpose and relationship. And our resident culinary expert was reduced to a humble student when he stepped into the kitchen.

by **Donald Downes**

Photography by
Bassett Photographic

No doubt you've had Japanese food. Besides tasting pretty terrific, it's always beautifully displayed. Colors are vivid and thought out, textures and shapes contrast, and plate space is fully utilized, not cluttered. Yet the cuisine and its preparation is mysterious to many, probably because it is a cuisine that's steeped in an ancient heritage — everything has a purpose, a reason, a place, a relationship. Whew! No wonder it's a mystery.

Given my curiosity for cuisines, and the fact that America Japan Week '93 is here in town this month, I investigated further. I learned that Japanese food is big on opposites. Dark colors against light hues (and light colors against dark hues) arouse the eyes. Smooth or soft-textured foods are often weaved with crunchy counterparts. Roundish foods are served on dishes having straight lines, and, of course, straight-line foods are served on round dishes. Even the food on a plate (the positive space) balances where there is no food (the negative space), and the two are usually connected by a single line, such as a green onion, a vegetable stick, or a piece of pickled ginger. It's all a matter of balance.

Fascinating stuff.

Yet, none of this amounts to a hill of sticky rice if the ingredients are not fresh. Freshness is the basis of Japanese cooking. It is the food itself you taste, not what has been done to it. And, unlike the other above elements, there is no acceptable opposite.

Take tempura, for example. What could be simpler? I mean it's just some odd pieces of vegetables and things batter-coated and deep-fried. Right? Well, my first travels into tempura world produced objects that would have frightened children and small pets. The resulting experimental items looked like barnacle-encrusted creatures dragged up from a murky abyss — à la Jules Verne — instead of the light and lacy wrapped vegetables I had sampled at a Japanese restaurant.

What happened!?

According to Fred Yamada, owner/chef of Scottsdale's Yamakasa, any one of a number of things could have troubled my attempt. To make terrific tempura, these things are crucial: The batter should be thin (not pancake batter), sort of lumpy (don't stir in every last speck of flour), use *ice* water, prepare the batter just before frying,

and make several batches if frying a lot; also be sure the oil is heated to a temperature between 350 and 375 degrees.

Another try at tempura did yield recognizable (and edible) lightly coated pieces. However, I do need more practice before throwing a tempura bash.

Those who know me, know that I have professed a liking for cooked fish, as opposed to its raw state known simply to most as sushi. But, in order to better understand and truly appreciate Japanese cooking — especially that freshness part — I sacrificed my proclamation and surrendered my palate to the sushi masters at Yamakasa.

Guess what? This sushi stuff is swell! What? A guy can't change his mind? The adventure — doing sushi, as in "Do you do sushi?" — now has me hooked. If you knew sushi, like I now know sushi, you'd do sushi too. And, talk about freshness. Needless to say it's paramount with sushi. If it's not, well... you know what happens.

At most sushi bars, the varieties of cold, pristine fish are displayed in glass cases atop cubed ice. Mr. Yamada (or just Fred as he's known to his customers), a master sushi chef, too, says the fish, et al., are displayed in this manner so the customers can see the freshness, and (perhaps more