

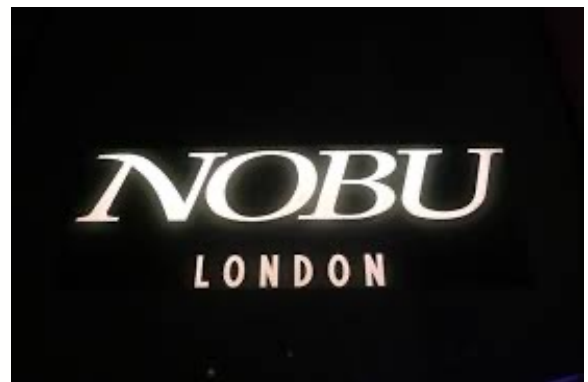
NOBU  
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**NOBU**  
LONDON





## Know who? Nobu

Madonna and Bill Clinton eat at his restaurant and Robert de Niro does his PR. Nobuyuki Matsuhisa runs the world's most fashionable restaurant, renowned in New York, London and Milan as a magnet for A-list diners. But it is his simple genius with rice and fish that has made his global reputation.

**Sheryl Garratt**

Saturday 21 April 2001  
16.32 BST

Chef Nobuyuki Matsuhisa says that his restaurant in Los Angeles is lucky. If Oscar nominees come to eat there just before the ceremony, they tend to win. Robin Williams had been up for an award three times without success, but when he brought his family to Matsuhisa on the eve of the 1998 Oscars, Nobuyuki - more commonly known as Nobu - offered his congratulations in advance. 'He doesn't drink, but I sent a bottle of Cristal Roederer champagne over anyway, because I knew he'd win.' Sure enough, Williams walked off with an Oscar for *Good Will Hunting*. The following year Roberto Benigni was so pleased that the place had brought him luck that, after picking up his statuette for *Life is Beautiful*, he skipped the big parties to eat at Matsuhisa again. The whole restaurant, Nobu recalls proudly, stood up to applaud him.

Meanwhile, the Nobu restaurant on the first floor of Park Lane's ultra-fashionable Metropolitan Hotel was recently dubbed 'knickers-off Nobu' by the Evening Standard, who used the last few months' tabloid gossip to back up their claim that it is 'the randiest, sexiest, most lascivious restaurant in London'. At the end of last year, Bush singer Gavin Rossdale met Andrea Corr there; Gwyneth Paltrow was photographed kissing an unidentified man by the entrance; Rod Stewart's ex-wife Rachel Hunter stepped out with actor Mark Wahlberg; and Liam Gallagher and Nicole Appleton chose the restaurant for their first public outing as a couple. In January, England manager Sven Goran-Eriksson was seen dining there with his girlfriend Nancy Dell'Olio, while Harrison Ford - also recently separated from his wife - was there with a 'mystery blonde'. Dani Behr chowed down with J from *5ive*, former escort of sporty Spice Girl Mel C, while David Coulthard effectively ended his engagement by dining with a girl who was not his fiancée, then going upstairs to share a bath with her. And of course, there was Boris Becker. He enjoyed a dinner at Nobu with Russian model Angela Ermakowa after Wimbledon in 1999 which led, in March 2000, to the birth of his daughter Anna. Prior to a court case in February, there were some nonsensical accusations involving stolen sperm, a turkey baster and a Russian mafia blackmail plot, but eventually the tennis star came clean: his baby was conceived in a post-sushi tryst in one of the Metropolitan hotel's linen cupboards.

As well as the luckiest restaurant in Los Angeles and the sexiest restaurant in London, Nobu's empire has expanded to Miami, Las Vegas, Malibu, Tokyo and Milan, with a thirteenth restaurant opening this month in Paris. If you want a weekend reservation at any



of them, be sure to call several weeks in advance (unless you're a celebrity of course, in which case you'll have the number for the special VIP reservations line). Robin Leigh, the manager of the Park Lane branch, says he's been offered up to £1,000 by people desperate to get a table at short notice. Once inside, you'll be dining with pop stars, politicians, actors, supermodels and royalty, and although each restaurant is different, they all share similar attitudes. The design is always sleek and chic without being too formal. The food is light and healthy, but it's also elegant and reassuringly expensive. As for the service, Nobu is the kind of place where everyone knows who you are, but no one makes a great deal of fuss about it.

Celebrity party organiser Fran Cutler often eats at the Park Lane Nobu with her business partner Meg Matthews or other famous friends such as Kate Moss. 'It's very central, and it's not as uptight as a lot of good restaurants. You can dress up, but you don't necessarily have to. Celebrities like it because the service is great, but everyone gets treated the same. And the food is a whole experience: your tastebuds are pushed from pillar to post. They do a wicked mushroom salad, then you get the rock shrimps, the black cod, the saké with gold leaf in it ... There's always something different to try. You could eat there every night and not get tired of it.' It's a formula that has served its owner well. Listed in Forbes as one of the top five money earners in his profession, Nobu is on first-name terms with many of Hollywood's élite. He plays celebrity golf tournaments partnering Celine Dion. He has appeared in a Gap ad photographed by Herb Ritts. He has prepared private dinners for Bill and Hillary Clinton. He's even had a role in a big movie, playing a high-rolling Japanese gambler alongside Robert De Niro in the Las Vegas mob movie Casino. Thanks to his innovative cuisine and a chance meeting with an actor one night at the tiny eight-seat sushi bar in Matsuhisa, Nobu is the most famous sushi chef in the world.

Nobuyuki Matsuhisa was eight when his older brother took him to a sushi restaurant for the first time. It was about a year after their father, an architect, had been killed in a car accident. When Nobu passed through the sliding door into the restaurant, he says it felt like entering different world. 'The smells, the beautiful selection of fish The first time I went into a sushi restaurant, I knew my future - I wanted to be a sushi chef.' He started his rigorous seven-year training at the age of 18, getting up at dawn to go to Tokyo's vast Tsujiki fish market, then working in his mentor's restaurant until the last customers left at night, after which he cleaned up and slept on the floor. He got just two days a month off and earned a pittance. And he did this for three years before he was allowed to even start learning to make sushi. 'I had a lot of patience,' he says, 'because I loved this job. But I was enjoying it too. I like to see fish, and I went to the fish market every morning. I got to open the restaurant and see the customers. My mentor was making sushi, so I could watch him all the time. As he worked I'd be copying him under the table, just practising with my fingers.' When I ask what all this practice was for, what makes good sushi, he finds it hard to answer in words. The fish has to be fresh, he says. The rice has to be cooked perfectly. The combination of the two has to be harmonious, with the shaped rice matched exactly to the size of the fish slice. The entire bundle has to be packed together in a way that is not too hard, not too soft. But most of all, it has to have heart. 'I know the best way because I've been doing it for a long time, but to younger people, sushi means sushi rice, sliced fish. They make something that looks like sushi, but it doesn't have heart like mine.'

Nobu married after finishing his training, and soon after, in 1972, a Japanese-Peruvian businessman who came to the restaurant whenever he was in Tokyo invited him to come to Lima and open a traditional Japanese restaurant catering to executives at the big Japanese

corporations with offices there. Nobu had always wanted to travel. There was a photograph he treasured of his father with some colourfully dressed local people in the Philippines. 'Whenever I missed my father, I looked at that picture and thought that one day, I'd like to go out of the country. It was a dream.'

For Nobu, happiness is directly linked to the quality of the local seafood. The fish was good in Peru, straight out of the Pacific Ocean. But after his rigorous training in Japanese cooking traditions that have scarcely changed for generations, he was excited too by the local cuisine, full of unfamiliar flavours such as garlic and chillies. The South Americans even had their own way of eating raw fish - ceviche, where the flesh is marinated in citrus juice. After three years in Peru, his partners asked him to economise on his ingredients and rather than compromise his art, he moved to Argentina. The fish was good there too, but the people weren't quite ready for sushi. A year later he went back to Japan, but after the big house, maid and gardeners they'd enjoyed in South America, life in a cramped Tokyo apartment was difficult.

So he took out a loan and moved with his young family to Anchorage, Alaska, where the fish was excellent. Money was tight so he did much of the building work for his new restaurant himself, as well as all the cooking. At the end of 1980, he took his first day off for months to celebrate Thanksgiving Day. He was at a friend's house enjoying a turkey dinner when the call came to say the restaurant was on fire. He got there in time to watch it burn to the ground. It's one of his worst memories, he says. There was no insurance, and nearly all the money he'd used to set up the place was borrowed. Thinking about Alaska can still reduce him to tears.

Heavily in debt, he took his wife and children home to Japan, then flew to Los Angeles alone to find work. Finally a friend lent him \$70,000 to open Matsuhisa in 1987, a small, homely place with room for less than 40 people where he began to experiment with the rigid conventions of classic Japanese cooking, incorporating some of the ideas he'd seen in Peru. He began using garlic, chilli and coriander alongside traditional Japanese flavours like ginger and soy, and introduced new ingredients such as olive oil, truffles and foie gras. When a customer sent back a plate of sashimi, unwilling to eat raw fish, Nobu made a quick marinade for the slices and then poured hot oil over them, searing the outside so they looked more palatable to Western eyes: the 'new style sashimi' that remains on his menus to this day. Ruth Reichl, editor of the glossy US food magazine *Gourmet*, was then at the Los Angeles Times in charge of restaurant reviews. 'We had a critic who was married to a Japanese woman, they ate there in its first week and said it was extraordinary. It wasn't like sushi he'd ever tried before. She talked to Nobu in Japanese and got the whole Peruvian background. So he pretty much started out with getting amazing reviews.'

'Americans have a huge appetite for sushi, but we also have an appetite for innovation. And for a very long time, he was the only one really playing with the form, taking a very traditional cuisine and doing innovative things with it. And then he quickly got a big celebrity clientele, which really fuelled it.'

Soon a place at the eight-seat sushi bar wasn't much easier to get than an Oscar nomination - and seemed to go to pretty much the same people. One night the director Roland Joffe came in with Robert De Niro, who he'd worked with on *The Mission*. In a voice that is still heavily accented despite his years in America, Nobu says he didn't recognise the actor: 'I didn't even

know the name.' But De Niro liked the food, especially the black cod marinated in miso, and that night the two men ended up drinking together. After that, the actor would eat there whenever he was in LA. De Niro had taken over an old coffee warehouse in the run-down TriBeCa area of Manhattan with the aim of creating offices for film and media companies and a ground-floor restaurant. A year or so after they first met, he invited Nobu to look at the space. The chef went to hang out for a few days, but the memory of Alaska was too fresh for him to take the risk. Instead, De Niro eventually opened the successful TriBeCa Grill there with acclaimed New York restaurateur Drew Nieporent and a team of 24 celebrity backers that included Francis Ford Coppola and Mikhail Barishnikov.

Read the second part of the Nobu feature [here](#)

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**Food & drink** **The Observer**



## Know who? Nobu (part two)

Nobuyuki Matsuhisa is owner of Nobu, the world's most fashionable restaurant. From a humble start in Los Angeles, he has spread the Nobu brand to New York, London and Milan. His restaurants are a magnet for A-list diners but it is his simple genius with rice and fish that has made his global reputation.

**Sheryl Garratt**

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For the next four years, De Niro continued to dine at Matsuhisa, although New York was never mentioned by the two men. But then he called again. He'd found another property just down the block in now-fashionable TriBeCa, and wanted to know if Nobu felt ready yet. The chef still gets emotional when talking about how his friend waited for him. This time he said yes, and went into partnership with De Niro and Nieporent to open Nobu.

By then, Ruth Reichl was editing the restaurant reviews at the New York Times. 'He was really lucky - or smart - to partner with Drew Nieporent, who has a very big reputation here,' she says. 'Matsuhisa had wonderful food, but it had never been very well run in the front of the house. They combined his reputation as an innovative chef with a great interior design, and people who really knew how to run the place. It was - it is - an extremely well-run restaurant. And again, he's always had a very good-looking clientele there. It's always been filled with models and movie stars - and having Robert De Niro as one of the owners doesn't hurt.'

Ritchie Notar, now Nobu's head of operations and a partner in the Malibu Nobu, was taken on to help with the New York launch in 1994. He'd worked at the ultra-cool Studio 54 disco at its peak, so he knew how to work a room, to manage celebrity egos. More importantly, they knew him. But he says he still made mistakes at first. With celebrities, he says, 'You want to seat them strategically so that they can see each other, but they're not sitting next to each other.'

He learned this in the opening week. Francis Ford Coppola was in, and when Harvey Keitel arrived from his home across the street, he sat them close together. 'You could just feel the bad vibes. Then I found out that Harvey Keitel was the original actor in Apocalypse Now, before Martin Sheen. He had a big row with Coppola, left the set and they haven't spoken since. So what do I do? Sit them next to each other. Stupid. That's why I now read the gossip magazines.'

'In a way Studio 54 prepped me for Nobu, because it's almost like the velvet rope again. It's very difficult to get in, and our wait list is phenomenal. You get a lot of big egos and famous people, and they have to be handled sometimes with kid gloves, but also you have to be somewhat firm. Once you're full up, what can you do?'



All the Nobu staff have their favourite celebrity stories. After the riding accident which left him paralysed, Christopher Reeves's wheelchair was too big to manoeuvre into the compact LA and New York restaurants. But one night Nobu arranged a private room for the actor at the TriBeCa Grill, cooked in his own kitchen and then ran down the block with each course. Al Gore also came to the New York restaurant, preceded by bomb-sniffing dogs and security men who shut off the entire street. 'All that,' says Notar, 'just for sashimi salad.' There was also the time golfer Nick Faldo booked the New York Nobu for a private party, and Prince Andrew was among the guests. Someone asked if the prince would have his photograph taken with Nobu, who was working that night. Andrew apparently looked Nobu up and down, took in his kitchen uniform, and haughtily said no. Afterwards, when a bodyguard had explained that this was not just a chef, but the head of the whole Nobu empire, he changed his mind.

'You know what I said?' laughs Nobu. 'I said no.' The Prince doesn't seem to have minded: he's a regular at the restaurant in Park Lane.

Nobu cooks for Oscar parties every year, and for the big US music awards, the Grammys. Probably the biggest event, though, was an Armani party for 1,200 people in Milan two years ago. Nobu's executive chef Mark Edwards assigned his team at the London restaurant to gather all the food together, packed two-and-a-half tons of it into polystyrene containers at 4am, then flew to Italy with it on a specially chartered cargo plane. 'We had it all in Milan and we were preparing it by eight o'clock in the morning,' he recalls. 'I had nine chefs there to finish it off and do the party. I didn't sleep in three days. I don't know how much it cost, but it must have been phenomenal.'

After New York, the expansion was rapid. When Singaporean entrepreneurs B.S. and Christina Ong opened the sleek, modern Metropolitan Hotel on London's Park Lane four years ago, Nobu got the stylish setting it needed for its first European venture; the Ongs persuaded everyone from Madonna to Princess Di to eat in the first-floor restaurant. Mark Edwards was recruited from Vong to run the kitchen, and it gained a coveted Michelin star within a year - something Edwards still finds flattering, but funny. 'I didn't think they gave them to restaurants without tablecloths.'

Nobu has successfully taken his experimental cuisine back home with a Tokyo Nobu, and when Giorgio Armani opened his new flagship store in Milan last month, Nobu again found a chic fashion setting; Armani, meanwhile, got the A-list celebrity Robert De Niro at his opening. Notoriously media-shy, De Niro will nonetheless use his status to promote Nobu when it matters. This is no Planet Hollywood operation, but his presence at a launch party or press conference always guarantees coverage. And when the restaurant applied for its liquor licence in Las Vegas, it was the actor who went to the hearing. An active partner, he often travels with Nobu to check out new locations - they recently visited Moscow together.

They have had offers from all over the globe, says Ritchie Notar. They were in Brazil last year, and in Africa before that. A sushi-loving sheik has made an interesting offer in Dubai. 'The first thing we'll do is check the chefs, and go to the fish markets,' he says, before adding wearily, 'I've seen more fish markets than I care to, but Nobu always spends extra time there.'

But still, Notar feels that a proposed Sydney Nobu may well be the last. Nobuyuki Matsuhisa is 51 now, and there is only so much travelling one chef can do. His base is in Los Angeles,

but he also has homes in New York and Tokyo and shuttles between his other restaurants, spending as much time in the kitchen as he can. One daughter works in Nobu Tokyo, the other is studying fashion in London at Central St Martins. In the week we met, Nobu had flown to London from Tokyo, calling in at Milan then travelling back to London to have dinner with his daughter at The Ivy, before going home to LA.

In New York they've opened Nobu Next Door: a noisier, more relaxed restaurant actually a few doors down from the original Nobu with a no-reservations policy (and huge queues at peak times as a result). In Park Lane, they've coped with the demand at weekends by opening the White Room: a candlelit area with music where diners can eat on big communal tables without reservations. This, Notar feels, may be the future for Nobu if it wishes to expand further: less formal, complicated restaurants with simpler menus and no sushi bar or omakase (chef's choice) requiring highly specialised chefs. Two pared-down restaurants have already been opened using the name Ubon (Nobu backwards) in Beverly Hills and London's Docklands. In the meantime, Nobu is working on his first cookery book, putting down his life's work for posterity.

To Mark Edwards, the appeal of Nobu's cooking is its flexibility. 'There's so much room in a Nobu kitchen to experiment, there are no restrictions. And the ingredients you have are always the best.' Anything can be used, as long as the cooking techniques are Japanese, relying on freshness, quality and, above all, simplicity. 'Nothing too complicated, there's never more than three flavours in a dish.' For the Milan opening, Edwards created dishes made with local ingredients such as porcini and truffles. Each new restaurant, he says, contributes new ideas to the others. 'It's like a recipe book that is always growing.'

The logistics of running such an empire are extraordinary. Fish is flown in to the restaurants from all over the world. Soft-shell crabs and rock shrimps from the Pacific coast of the US; snow crab and king crab from Alaska; tiger prawns from Australia and Thailand; sea urchin from Japan. The chefs also use as much local seafood as possible: in the London restaurants, that means Scottish salmon and scallops, Dover sole, clams, sea bass and eels as well as more esoteric seafood such as buttery halibut cheeks or monkfish livers.

In a scene straight out of *Silence of the Lambs*, Edwards takes me into the bowels of the Metropolitan hotel to see the lock-up garage where he keeps his tuna. It's kept at temperatures below -60°C in a freezer he had specially made by a company whose main clients are hospital morgues. 'They were quite surprised when I said I was going to put fish in it.' Premium tuna costs £18-25 per kilo. The Park Lane Nobu gets through 12,500 kilos a year.

As for the black cod in miso that has become one of Nobu's signature dishes, it's made from a species of cod that lives in very cold water. Nobu discovered it in Alaska, but his current supply comes from around Chile. Edwards was once offered £50,000 by a competitor to reveal the exact source. He refused. I ask Nobu if this worries him, but he laughs and says his secret is safe. 'The company who supply me the black cod do business with us by the container, not by the piece,' he points out. 'They have to keep it just for me, because it's a million-dollar business.'

## **Inaniwa pasta salad with lobster**

**1/2 kg cooked lobster removed from shell and chilled**

**160g inaniwa noodles**

**1/2 head curly endive lettuce**

**1/2 bunch finely chopped chives**

**100ml grapeseed oil**

**20ml soy sauce**

**40ml yuzu juice (can substitute lemon or lime)**

**1 clove garlic, puréed**

**Fresh milled black pepper**

Combine the garlic, black pepper, yuzu juice and soy sauce together, and slowly whisk in the grapeseed oil, a little at a time. Cook the inaniwa pasta in plenty of boiling salted water until cooked (4-5 minutes), then refresh in cold water and drain. Toss the inaniwa in the dressing, and add chopped chives. Roll up with a fork or chopsticks, and place on the frissé salad. Slice the lobster tail and claw, and arrange on top of the inaniwa. Spoon a little dressing over the top of the lobster and the salad leaves, sprinkle with chopped chives, and serve cold with chopsticks.

## **Know your Nobus**

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and in Aspen, LasVegas and Tokyo.

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