Excruciatingly chic to the highest degree, the Nobu restaurants are among the hardest to get into on three continents. They are the personal inspiration of a Japanese sushi-trained chef, Nobuyuki Matsuhisa, who, with unusual experiences in Peru, Argentina, and Alaska behind him, was fortunate enough to open an establishment in Los Angeles into which part-time restaurant entrepreneur and actor Robert De Niro happened to wander. During those years on the Pacific coast, Nobu began to experiment, combining the pure, fresh, uncomplicated flavors of sushi with the Western flavors of garlic, chili, and coriander. As he attracted a more upscale clientele, he complemented those flavors with luxury ingredients such as truffles and caviar. Nobu: The Cookbook represents the current state of play. Exquisite, expensive, and breathtakingly stylish, this food is designed to impress with its artful simplicity. Perhaps the two most representative dishes are the most celebrated: the New-Style Sushi, in which raw fish is given a sizzling dressing of hot oil; and the beautiful Black Cod with Miso, marinated in sake, mirin, and miso for three days then grilled and baked and served with a single ikebana-like spear of pickled juvenile ginger. Altogether a beautiful production. There are aspects of this cooking, however, that for all its glamour may require the turning of a blind eye. How many home cooks will be prepared to disembowel a live octopus? And eyebrows may be raised among environmentalists at Nobus championing of Arctic sea bass, a fish known before its cosmetic rechristening a few years ago as Patagonian tooth fish and that is likely to become extinct within three years through illegal overfishing in the southern oceans. Food for thought.
Personal Review: Nobu: The Cookbook by Robert De Niro
Kodansha's corporate big wigs are Nobu fans so when he chose them to publish his first cook book, they decided to match the quality of the book to the quality of Nobu's ingredients. They used an eight colour separation process (absurdly expensive) for all the fish pictures, and try as you might you can't really see the dots that compose the image, at least not without a magnifying glass.

Nobu's aim is to proudly lay himself open to his public. He doesn't fear revealing his secrets because he's confident enough to know his style and character are unique to him. He wants to inspire amateur chefs.

Here are three of the simpler dishes that anyone could make.

1) Sea urchin in a shiitake mushroom cap, wrapped in steamed spinach, served on an egg sauce with a spoonful of salmon roe

2) Asparagus topped with salmon roe

3) Steamed monkfish liver with caviar

As the saying goes, the media is the message and the pictures actually help the amateur chef no end. With the superb pictures that accompany the recipes, you can execute these dishes almost from the name of the recipe alone. Without the pictures, you can't.

One caveat. Nobu is a name dropper. I've no doubt that Robert De Niro, Martha Stewart, Ken takakura, and Linda Evans really are his friends but he mentions famous names too often for my taste. On the other hand when I went to Nobu Tokyo during Nobu week, he was there and toured the dining room. He stopped by our table and signed a copy of his book for me. So he's not too proud to smile and have chat with us rabble; he really likes his customers.

Vincent Poirier, Tokyo

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