



Bringing the unexpected (and the odd dad joke) to Japanese haute cuisine.

Hasegawa's Playhouse

Among the trendy boutiques and natural wine bars in Tokyo's Jingumae neighbourhood, the entrance to Den—a Michelin two-star restaurant—is marked by a row of warmly glowing windows in lieu of a sign. Beyond the *noren* curtain that hangs in the doorway, squat clay figurines and impish creatures populate the countertops and corners. From their seats around a massive wooden table in the spacious main room, diners watch the team of young chefs prepare their food under the guidance of Zaiyu Hasegawa.

At 47, Hasegawa exudes a youthful energy, greeting each guest as he glides around the room, doling out a stack of red-and-white striped boxes. Every container displays the letters “DFC” above a white toque-capped portrait of Hasegawa, and inside, diners discover his seasonal take on “Kentucky Fried Chicken.” On one winter evening, that meant a succulent fried chicken wing stuffed with rice and delicately bitter ginkgo nuts, nestled amid frosted pinecones and festive holly leaves.

Hasegawa's playful approach to modern *kaiseki*—Japan's seasonally influenced, multicourse haute cuisine—goes against the stiff formality that characterizes many traditional establishments. At Den, potatoes are

served buried in roasted green tea leaves alongside a hoe and gardening gloves; whole smelt, deep-fried and balanced on their fins, appear to tiptoe across the plate. The signature salad, a medley of raw and cooked vegetables from his sister's garden, sparks joy with emoji-like smiley faces stamped into carrot rounds, winking beneath a tangle of leaves and edible flowers tossed in a salted kelp vinaigrette.

“A lot of people, especially young Japanese and travellers from overseas, tell me that they're afraid to go to *kaiseki* restaurants because the atmosphere is intimidating,” Hasegawa says. “I want to make Japanese cuisine accessible to everyone. You can respect tradition and have fun at the same time.”

His mother, a former geisha, was a gifted home cook who worked as the manager of Uotoku, an exclusive *ryotei* (traditional Japanese restaurant) in Tokyo's Kagurazaka neighbourhood. She often received bento boxes from the restaurant, and Hasegawa remembers feasting on an array of beautifully presented delicacies: fruit confections encased in clear, jelly-like agar; black soybeans, dark as onyx, sweetened with a mixture of sugar and soy sauce; and dashi-simmered gluten cut to resemble

autumn leaves with flame-hued tips. By high school, Hasegawa knew he wanted to become a chef. When he was 18, he began a live-in apprenticeship at Uotoku, though he and his mother initially kept their family ties a secret. After a stint under the three-star *kaiseki* specialist Hideki Ishikawa, Hasegawa struck out on his own at the age of 29 and launched Den in the city's Jimbocho book district in 2008.

In the world of *kaiseki*, where chefs usually spend their careers perfecting age-old recipes passed down through the generations, Hasegawa's experimental style feels like a radical departure. His love of the form, however, is what drives him to innovate. "It is precisely because we understand and respect the tradition of Japanese cuisine that we must push forward," he says. In 2016, the restaurant relocated to Jingumae, taking over the former space of French restaurant Le Gaulois, where Hasegawa and his wife, Emi, were regulars. Puchi, Jr., the Hasegawas' chihuahua, often dozes on a chair behind the front desk. After dinner service, Puchi bids farewell to guests, placing his two front paws together in a gesture of thanks.

An irrepressible teller of dad jokes, Hasegawa incorporates visual twists

into his creations. His take on *monaka*, a traditional dessert typically made with sweet bean paste sandwiched between crisp rice wafers, features a savoury filling of foie gras and smoked daikon pickles instead. What looks like the beloved classic *age dashi tofu* is made with creamy cod milt, thickened with arrow root, shaped into cubes, and then deep-fried. Likewise, DFC originated as a playful jab at the Japanese tradition of eating fried chicken at Christmas—the result of a hugely successful marketing campaign by Kentucky Fried Chicken in 1974.

The aim, Hasegawa says, is to add an element of the unexpected. "First and foremost, the food has to be delicious. But if the meal makes you smile, it's all the more memorable." —*Melinda Joe*

Of the nearly 4,000 emoji available, there are some curious exceptions: no ketchup, no white wine, no artichoke, and a bunch of bread omissions (good luck finding toast or challah). But the window is now open to propose new emoji, and the Unicode Consortium's blog has a roundup of successful submission packages. How did the olive get through? Judges might've been swayed by the Marcus Aurelius quote, or by the melon emoji shade (people are far likelier to google *olive*), or they might just have had a weakness for Mediterranean food.



Liquid nitrogen, foams, assorted meat glues: a molecular gastronomist looks back.

Weird Science

Ivan Brehm spent four years as development chef at The Fat Duck in the UK. He considers the movement that changed the way we cook and eat.

Molecular gastronomy—most of us who worked in it abhor the term. It's like talking about water being wet. Everything is molecular! It's not that it wasn't accurate, it was just redundant.

For me, molecular gastronomy is something that happened. Past tense is critical. But it changed the way that we cook and its impact is undeniable. Most restaurants on the planet now have soy lecithin¹ in their pantry, regardless of the type of food they cook.

Back when I was starting out, molecular gastronomy was literally the coolest thing that had ever happened.² Cooking had always been seen as a creative, romantic act. Suddenly, we started talking about the science. That was important to me because my entire family were lawyers, and absolutely no one was excited about me wanting to be a chef. But there was Ferran Adrià of el Bulli on the cover of *The New York Times Magazine* in 2003,³ holding up colourful orange foam, heralding the new era. It just lit a fire in my gut.

The sheer avant garde nature of the movement meant you could subvert the rules that cooks generally adhered to. Why do we do it this way? Does it have to be that way? And should we explore a different way?

At The Fat Duck, I worked on a new version of Heston Blumenthal's famous mock turtle soup, part of The

Mad Hatter's Tea Party course, using techniques that were incredibly cutting edge for the time. They required a \$30,000 piece of equipment that we called The Rocket—it was a centrifuge, a super spinning device that allowed us to reduce and concentrate flavours, deconstruct ingredients, and create visually striking but also incredibly delicious food.

We used The Rocket to concentrate a stock into a jelly that was molded into a pocket-watch shape and coated in gold leaf. It could be dropped in a cup and then rehydrated with hot water and transformed into a delicious bouillon. And that was just one component. That full dish required a lot of recipe writing, a lot of research, process, and development—understanding the story of the Mad Hatter, the purpose of the Tea Party. We thought carefully about the font we'd use on the tea bag tag, and spent time designing the plates with UK ceramicist Reiko Kaneco. We employed the process of inquiry in the act of cooking.

I remember we investigated whether the temperature of the restaurant's door handle could provide either a positive or negative experience as the customer's first point of contact. We asked, did it make sense to chill the handle of the door on hot summer days? And to warm the handle of the door on very cold winter nights? I don't think people understand the degree of granularity that Heston was bringing to the entire dining experience.

But we all had to keep moving, to keep selling. Foam wasn't enough; spheres

1
A food additive used to create airy foams and mousses or to emulsify dressings and sauces.

2
At Madrid Fusión 2004, Blumenthal demonstrated the possibilities of liquid nitrogen to chefs for the first time by making his signature bacon-and-egg ice cream (pictured next page). The crowd went nuts, and that very same week, Blumenthal was awarded his third Michelin star.

3
Ferran Adrià's 2003 cover moment.

