



PHOTOS BY SHARIL AMIN

Signature Pairing

A delicious slice of Japan has found its way to Damansara Heights

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An enclave in Damansara Heights that once housed such quaint institutions as Hock Lee's Supermarket and Seng Lee Coffee Shop has been transformed into a hip neighbourhood haunt known as Plaza Batai. One of the new tenants is Torii Yakitori & Whisky Bar, the offspring of the original establishment in Taman Tun Dr Ismail (TTDI), only a few miles away.

"I started the original Torii with several friends, all of them fans of Japanese grilled chicken," begins Torii chairman and CEO Terry Lim. "I had made a trip to Tokyo in 2010, which was when I personally discovered yakitori, and promptly fell in love with it. We brought that back here, and supplemented it with things like sashimi, oysters and foie gras."

The restaurant's name itself has a fascinating etymology, with the primary connotation alluding to its skewered speciality dishes. Reference is also made to Shinjiro Torii, a well-known figure in the Japanese whisky industry and the founder of the Suntory brand, as well as to a traditional Japanese gate associated with shrines.

The intention is for patrons to set aside their worldly concerns when entering Torii's wood-accented interior, a secluded world for the shared appreciation of quality food, fine ambers and convivial company. It is a sentiment that works thanks largely to Lim's aesthetic control and understanding of his clientele.

"I worked very closely with our interior designer because it was important to us to convey an atmosphere of class without the intimidation factor that it sometimes implies. We want a place where you wouldn't walk in with sandals and shorts, but at the same time, you won't feel as if you need to come in a suit or a dress," he says.

Lim's venture into the food and beverage sector follows more than 15 years in professional services, including stints with the Boston Consulting Group and McKinsey & Company as a management consultant as well as an international bank. Given the corporate expense accounts available in his line of work, the affable bon vivant was privileged to dine at some of the world's finest eateries, tutoring him in the hallmarks of excellent hospitality and cuisine as well as the genial ambience prevalent in such establishments.

"It was my job to entertain, and the good thing was that you dined at so many places that you eventually learnt to distinguish from the pack the standout eateries. It may look simple on the outside to achieve that distinction, but now that I'm in the same business, I understand that a great deal of effort goes into that appearance of simplicity," notes the 37-year-old.

Always on the lookout for a fresh experience, Lim examined the local scene and asked himself what was missing. Starting with the things he himself desired in an eatery, he recalled his yakitori experience in Japan and paired it with a discerning eye for premium whiskies. His ideas finally came together with Torii, which opened in TTDI in 2014.

The fledgling food haven drew consistent praise from the Klang Valley's de-

manding epicureans, with Lim and his partners parlaying its success into sister eateries Shinjiro, offering mid-tier Japanese dining at Tropicana City Mall, and Pizzolo, a trattoria-style Italian café at Atria Shopping Gallery.

Torii's second outlet spans two storeys, each with a clearly defined focus, allowing for a more flexible experience than Torii's TTDI single floor space.

"What happened in TTDI was that we had everyone — from yakitori fans and whisky connoisseurs to couples on a date night — packed into a small space. So what we did when we finally had more room was to delineate our spaces, with the downstairs being more dining-oriented and the upstairs being a lively area for drinks."

He adds, "We're famous for our whiskies, both Scotch and Japanese. In Scotland, the region the bottle comes from often tells you how peaty it tastes, due to brewing traditions and so on. It's not so clear cut in Japan's case. For example, Hakushu is traditionally quite peaty while Hibiki is generally more floral. Then you have those that are in between such as Togouchi, which is known as the Japanese Scotch."

To make it more approachable for newcomers, Torii has devised a programme called Whisky We Desire where the bar selects a bottle and offers a glass at an introductory price. The bartenders are also ready to guide first-timers through its selection of whiskies.

In addition, Torii offers whisky tastings once a month where participants get to sample four or five variations over the course of the half-hour session.

"Whisky highballs are popular in Japan especially during a meal. In Japan, you will hardly see anyone taking it by itself because it's too heavy. But if you're sitting down and enjoying the expression, it should be taken neat and served in a snifter glass to concentrate the bouquet," observes Lim.

The dining fare at Torii is decidedly premium with yakitori as the main attraction. In fact, it takes on a fancy stance with such decadent choices for the skewers as wagyu beef, rock lobsters as well as foie gras and beef gyoza. We also recommend the Avocado De La Mer (baked avocado, prawns, scallops and mushrooms) and the blue fin tuna salad. Lim assures that only the freshest ingredients are used, with fresh catch imported directly from Tsukiji Market in Tokyo every Tuesday and Friday. For a sweet finish, try its exclusive range of ice creams like White Chocolate Lavender and Whisky-N-Raisin.

"We take a scientific process to our food. Every two weeks or so, our executive chef brings out several new creations, which I will go over. After tasting a dozen or so a month, one or two will make it to our specials board. If the customers like a special, then it goes into our permanent menu. Every quarter, we try to include at least 15 new items to keep things fresh. As for our signature wings, we serve them crispy as Malaysians prefer that texture, while the Japanese tend to like them moist."

Great whiskies paired with indulgent yakitori — for once, here is a combination that is as good as it sounds. ■

Blue fin tuna salad (top) and pan-seared Bonded Unagi & Foie Gras