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Tastemaker

By Steve Trautlein

A fresh start

Chef and cooking instructor Ema Koeda celebrates California cuisine in Ebisu



Photos Courtesy of Office K2M

palate.”

It’s no surprise that Ema Koeda calls one of her cooking classes a “melting pot.” After all, the chef is something of a melting pot herself. Born in Tehran and raised in Scarsdale, New York, Koeda attended Tokyo’s Sophia University and the Culinary Institute of America. She’s worked as both a waitress and a restaurant producer, and now spends half her time on culinary research trips and consulting work overseas. Yet for all her varied experiences, the 28-year-old planning director at Ebisu’s Elegante Vita Nacora has a simple goal. “I don’t want my students to memorize a recipe,” she says. “I want them to build a

Koeda is well on her way to getting her wish. Elegante Vita Nacora, which includes C’Zon restaurant and Nacora International Cooking School, has been introducing the pleasures of Napa cuisine since its inception late last year. Though still largely unknown to Japanese diners, Northern California fare is making inroads thanks to its emphasis on seasonal ingredients, intense flavors and straightforward recipes—in other words, the qualities that Japanese appreciate in their own food.

Koeda herself took a roundabout path to Napa. After majoring in business and

economics at Sophia, she got her start in the food industry as a restaurant planner in Tokyo in 2000. That job involved location scouting, menu design and staff training, and by the time her company, Myu Planning, branched out overseas two years later, Koeda was managing the entire process. "It was really fun," she says of setting up new restaurants in Hong Kong, China and other far-flung locales. "Sixty percent of my time was overseas dealing with clients."

Still, Koeda longed to be on the other side of the stoves, so she enrolled at CIA's California branch in 2004. The West Coast campus of the renowned New York cooking school caters to hospitality-industry professionals, giving them hands-on kitchen experience in the form of an intensive 30-week course—perfect for Koeda, who had business skills but little formal training as a cook. Thanks to its location in Napa, the school also places an emphasis on the region's most celebrated product: wine. "One thing I didn't anticipate was how pairing wine will change the food completely," she says.

In fact, the entire experience was a revelation. "Living in Napa changed me a lot because I hadn't planned on doing California cuisine before I went," she says. "I had lived in the east, so I didn't think American food could be that healthy." Now, Koeda champions a cooking style that makes abundant use of vegetables, fruits and lean meats, and which largely eschews oil and fats. Flavor instead comes from marinades, citrus-infused sauces, and intense mixes like bagna cauda and tapenade. (See restaurant review)

Relying as it does on natural flavors, Napa cuisine can only succeed when attention is paid to the nuance of each ingredient. Koeda has learned this lesson well. "I usually go with my chef to the farmer to talk and see what's in season," she says. "Every month we change the menu a little bit because farmers run out." Quality is further ensured by C'Zon's distributor—the same man who supplies Alain Ducasse's flagship restaurant Beige and who, according to the Koeda, "refuses to sell to restaurants that don't prepare his food with respect."

Standards are high inside the classroom as well. The cooking courses, which are taught in English or Japanese, consist of five sessions that last almost

three hours each and are spread over 10 weeks. The beginners class introduces basic vegetable preparation and marinating techniques, while the intermediate “melting pot” course might see students practicing Italian, Japanese or other cuisines. Koeda also runs seasonal classes, for which she’ll decide the menu two weeks in advance after making market trips to see what’s fresh.

Students, she says, include everyone from housewives to industry professionals, and 80 percent are repeat attendees. Besides teaching them to prepare salads, pastas, rice and main dishes and desserts, Koeda gives tips on pairing food with wine. As a final touch, everyone leaves with a small gift—and the satisfaction that they’ve learned from a rising star of the Tokyo dining scene.

Cooking courses: ¥55,000 (¥5,000 discount for registering one month in advance). Call for schedule and information on classes in English. Tel: 03-5728-4556. 2-10-10 Ebisu Nishi, Shibuya-ku. Nearest stn: Ebisu or Daikanyama. www.elegantevita.co.jp