

Sweet seduction

The Japanese outdo themselves in their epicurean zeal for chocolate and pastries, a fact embraced by French chocolate company Valrhona in its Tokyo training school

Story **Christine Manfield**

Tokyo is, in my opinion, the best city in the world for the sensual pleasure of eating, dining out and pure indulgence. The Japanese have a steadfast obsession with an epicurean lifestyle. Their attention to detail, their supreme philosophy and practice of less is more, their craft — all emanate in their food. Whether it's sashimi, sushi, nabemono, kaiseki, kushiage, tempura, teppanyaki, yakitori, tofu or soba, ramen or udon noodles, the exquisite offerings in Tokyo are guaranteed to set your heart and belly on fire. The city is sensory overload and all it requires are submission and a natural curiosity. It's the ultimate pleasure dome and on this visit it's all about chocolate.

I travelled to Tokyo with the express purpose of learning from the masters of chocolate and to attend the Ecole Valrhona Tokyo with a select group of Australian chefs. We spent a week honing our skills and broadening our knowledge and appreciation of chocolate and sugar.

Valrhona is a premium chocolate manufacturer from the Rhone Valley region of France. The company focuses on producing high-grade chocolate for professional chefs, although it does produce consumer products as well. In 1988 Valrhona established the Ecole du Grand Chocolat in France to train chefs to use its products in chocolate-based dishes and pastries. Recognising the Japanese obsession with chocolate, the company went on to open a professional school in Tokyo in 2007.

Our kitchen classroom at Ecole Valrhona Tokyo is state of the art and our two French teachers, Gael Etrillard, executive pastry chef at the Raffles Hotel, Singapore, and Nicolas Botomosy, are master patissiers at the top of their game. Our days are packed with absorbing as much new knowledge about chocolate as possible as well as fine-tuning our skills to elevate our appreciation and understanding of the unique character of chocolate. The school is about learning new and clever techniques, but it is also about sharing our collective experiences and, ultimately, spending a couple of days doing nothing but eating chocolate. Understandably, we had to taste all the creations we had made but we also hit the streets sampling some of the best chocolate and pastries on offer in the city.

It doesn't take long to realise that the locals have a particular penchant for anything sweet and the city is

packed with pastry, dessert and chocolate shops. We all know the staple food of Japan is rice and fish, but I reckon chocolate and pastry come in close behind — the locals can't seem to get enough of it. What's on offer represents the most noted masters of France as well as their own heroes of the sugar world. Where to start?

We start in Ginza, the epicentre of extravagance where the boulevards are grand, the department stores beckon and the wagashi (confectionery) shops show off their wares like prized jewellery. Some are housed in department stores such as Matsuya (La Maison du Chocolat), Mitsukoshi (the food hall in the basement is a food lovers' wonderland; make sure you try the choux vanille from Frederic Cassel) and Wako. Others are stand-alone stores, such as Hidemi Sugino with his artful creations, Ginza Tricolore, a classic cafe where you can taste one of the best chocolate eclairs in town, or Henri Charpentier, an exclusive boutique that specialises in the art of the macaron.

At the intimate Ginza Kazuya, you will find its fastidious owner making fine Japanese pastries — try the creamy sesame ones. The renowned French tea producer Mariage Freres has a shop packed with exotic teas in Shibuya — head upstairs for its pastries and seasonal cakes made in-house and choose your favourite tea to accompany your choice. Such a civilised respite.

The search for sweet seduction continues and I reckon you could head to any district in the city and find something original and delicious — it's that kind of place. From the subway at Roppongi station we exit straight into Tokyo Midtown. This expansive shopping precinct has Hinokicho Park as a serene and peaceful backdrop. We check out Frederic Cassel Chocolates, the all-white minimalist Sadaharu Aoki for patisserie and chocolate (try Bamboo, the Tokyo version of the opera cake), Henri Le Roux, Dean & DeLuca and Kayanoya for all things savoury.

While at Tokyo Midtown, it's essential to head up to the third floor to some great Japanese design shops such as Style Meets People, Wise-Wise and Idee Shop Variete. I find it impossible to leave empty handed.

Across the road at Roppongi Hills, we head straight to L'Atelier de Joel Robuchon for a late breakfast of buttery pastries out on the terrace and leave with a box of beautiful macarons to snack on later. Over on the Keyakizaka-dori side, we head to Le Chocolat de H, where chef Hironobu



Master patissier Gael Etrillard shows a group of professional chefs how to enlarge their vision of the possibilities of chocolate at the Ecole Valrhona Tokyo; some of the exquisite desserts that show the versatility of chocolate, left and below





The food hall at Mitsukoshi department store, left, is a wonderland for food lovers — don't miss the choux vanille, bottom right. Henri Le Roux, below, is one of many chocolate emporiums at Tokyo Midtown shopping precinct



CHOUX VANILLE

Tsujiguchi, one of Japan's rising stars, showcases his exquisite handcrafted chocolates — every taste a revelation.

Across to Shinjuku, we visit Isetan department store with its massive food hall (depachika), in the basement that houses edible fantasies of many of the world's leading pastry and chocolate artists such as Jean-Paul Hevin, Pierre Herme (who also has a shop in Aoyama), Hediard, Henri Le Roux, Alain Ducasse, Kihachi and Pierre Marcolini. The exquisite food displays are mind-boggling and just about every conceivable food item is available. Keiko Ishii Vincent, a Japanese pastry chef who learnt her craft in Paris, has opened Patisserie K. Vincent. She is an expert hand with all things pastry and chocolate (she uses Valrhona) and her flavours are sublime. Many regard her as one of Tokyo's most talented pastry chefs, so it's worth beating a path to her door.

While you are in the Shinjuku district, spend a few hours wandering south through the Yoyogi district, en route to Harajuku and Omotesando to discover some of Tokyo's more recent arrivals. Jumping off the subway at Omotesando, we head towards Aoyama to Yoku Moku to stock up on feather-light cigar tuile wafers, each individually wrapped, packaged in beautiful tins; they make the perfect present. In the adjoining tearoom, try the traditional Mochi (rice cakes) flavoured with matcha (green tea powder) or Dorayaki, crepes filled with red bean paste.

“The staple food of Japan is rice and fish, but I reckon chocolate and pastry come in close behind”

The food hall at Tokyu Food Show is like a theatre of food. The honey section is extraordinary, with an amazing array from all over Japan. Sadly I could not bring any home because of our tight Customs regulations. The chocolates at Bel Amer are flavoured with local ingredients such as wasabi, ume (plum) and ginger.

From Shibuya or Ebisu, it's a short hop to Daikanyama, one of Tokyo's funkier districts. Belgian chocolatier Leonidas is at the top of the hill up from the subway station; and you can get pastries, chocolates and cheese among other treats at Le Cordon Bleu boutique.

At nearby Nakameguro, musicians, artists, designers,

and creative types give this post-industrial neighbourhood an edgy ambience with some terrific street art, a laid-back feel and local designer shops.

Tokyo is overload, but I adore it for that very reason. While my days are spent tasting all things sweet, the nights are spent exploring the savoury side of life — a necessary respite for the system. After my quest is complete, I return home with a bag full of artisan-crafted chocolates, some fabulous new equipment for the kitchen, a head full of ideas about the unlimited potential of chocolate and a belly full of sugar. After a week of total and utter indulgence, it's time to detox.

Pastry and chocolate shops

Hidemi Sugino

3-6-17 Kyobashi, Chuo-ku
+81 3 3538 6780

Henri Charpentier

2-8-20 Ginza, Chuo-ku
+81 3 3562 2721

Ginza Kazuya

1st floor, Matsui Building, 1-6-8
Yurakucho, Chiyoda-ku
+81 3 3503 0080

Ginza Tricolore

5-9-17 Chuo-ku, Ginza
+81 3 3571-1811

Mariage Freres Ginza

Suzuran Dori, 5-6-6 Ginza,
Chuo-ku
+81 3 3572 1854

Isetan department store

3-14-1 Shinjuku, Shinjuku-ku
+81 3 3225 2514

Galleria Tokyo Midtown

9-7-4 Akasaka, Minato-ku

Tokyu Food Show

Shibuya 2-24-1, Shibuya-ku
+81 3 3477-3111

Patisserie Sadaharu Aoki Paris

1st floor, Shinkokusai building,
3-4-1 Marunouchi, Chiyoda-ku
+81 3 5293 28000

Yoku Moku

5-3-3 Minami-Aoyama, Minato-ku
+81 3 5485 3330

L'Atelier de Joel Robuchon

6-10-1 Roppongi, Minato-ku
+81 3 5772 7500

Le Chocolat de H

6-12-4 Roppongi, Minato-ku
+81 3 5772 0075

Le Maison du Chocolat

Matsuya department store
3-6-1 Ginza, Chuo-ku
+81 3 3562 77077

Patisserie K. Vincent

1-2 Tsukudohachimancho,
Shinjuku-ku
+81 3 5228 3931.

Restaurants

Narisawa

2-6-15 Minami-Aoyama,
Minato-ku
+81 3 5785 0799
Supreme talent and sublime

“You could head to any district in the city and find something original and delicious”

flavours — my favourite in Tokyo.

Birdland

Basement, Tsukamoto Sozan
building, 4-2-15 Ginza, Chuo-ku
+81 3 5250 1081
All things chicken. Don't miss
the grilled sansei-yaki: chicken
breast with sansho pepper.

Tama

5-9-8 Minami-Aoyama, Minato-ku
+81 3 3406 8088
A terrific, modern izakaya bar;
small and busy, it stays open late.

Teyandei Izakaya

2-20-1 Nishi-Azabu, Shibuya-ku
+81 3 3407 8127
Another great bar with food at
Omotesando.

Charcoal Grill Anko

1st floor Kato Building, 25-4
Maruyama-cho, Shibuya-ku
+81 3 5459 4083
A buzzy izakaya with delicious
house-made vinegars to flavour
the grilled meats and fish.

Ippudo

1-3-13 Hiroo, Shibuya-ku
+81 3 5420 2225
One of my favourite noodle
shops in Tokyo — the red pork
broth is my pick.

Issa An

1st Floor, Kudan-Abitation
3-6-6 Kanda Jinbocho,
Chiyoda-ku
+81 3 3239 0889
Here it's all about soba

noodles.

Sushi Takumi Saito

2nd floor, Akasaka Fugetsudo
Building
4-2-2 Akasaka, Minato-ku
+81 3 3505 6380
The sushi here is too fabulous
for words; the menu is fixed
price, expensive but
exceptional.

Midorizushi Ginza

7-2 Ginza, Chuo
+81 3 5568 1212
Standouts at this well-known
sushi restaurant are grilled eel
toro (tuna belly) and mackerel
sashimi.

Ten-Ichi

6-6-5 Ginza (Namaki-dori),