

Nigiri (shaped by hand) sushi (*chutoro*, medium fatty tuna)
Photo: Nicolas Lobbستاël



Chef Okazaki prepares a dish
Photo: Nicolas Lobbستاël



A TASTE OF FINE SUSHI IN PARIS

A Paris sushi restaurant created as a collaboration between two chefs—one Japanese and one French—has earned high acclaim.

SAWAJI OSAMU



Caviar *gunkanmaki* (seaweed-wrapped) sushi
Photo: Nicolas Lobbستاël



Temaki (rolled by hand) sushi (*otoro*, fattiest tuna)
Photo: Nicolas Lobbستاël

THE number of overseas restaurants serving Japanese cuisine has increased in recent years. According to estimates by the Japanese government's Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF)ⁱ, such restaurants numbered around 24,000 in 2006, increasing to around 89,000 in 2015 and around 159,000 in 2021. Some of these overseas Japanese restaurants have even gained international acclaim. One such restaurant is L'Abyse in Paris, which in 2022 was awarded two stars by the world-renowned restaurant guidebook, the Michelin Guide.

L'Abyse is a sushi restaurant that opened in 2018 in the Pavillon Ledoyen, a historic building from 1842 located in the gardens of the Champs-Élysées. It is owned by Yannick Alléno, one of France's most famous chefs. Aside from L'Abyse, Alléno owns two other restaurants in the Pavillon Ledoyen, which in 2022 were awarded three and one Michelin Guide stars, respectively.

Alléno first encountered traditional Japanese cuisine some 30 years ago, when he visited Japan at the age of 20. Over the course of his three-week stay, Alléno was captivated by ingredients such as fish and shellfish, and cuisine such as sushi.



From L'Abyse's 12-seat counter, guests can observe Chef Okazaki making sushi at close quarters
Photo: Nicolas Lobbestaël

After that, he began to visit Japan frequently, savoring the dishes served at many famous restaurants, interacting with Japanese chefs, and acquiring knowledge and skills.

The name "L'Abyse" ("deep sea") incorporates Alléno's homage to Japan, an island country that is surrounded on all four sides by the sea, and which is deeply connected to oceans and fish.

The 2022 Michelin Guide website praises L'Abyse as follows. "A great Japanese sushi master, ingredients of stunning quality (*ikejime*ⁱⁱ fish from the Atlantic) and the creative touch of Yannick Alléno: L'Abyse takes us to the heady summits of Japanese gastronomy."

The "great Japanese sushi master" mentioned here is Okazaki Yasunari. The son of a sushi chef himself, Okazaki embarked on his own journey as a chef at the age of 18. Since then, he has refined his skills for over 20 years, working at top-class restaurants. Okazaki met Alléno for the first time in 2016, when he was working at a sushi restaurant in Ginza, Tokyo.

"I was able to break the ice with Chef Alléno right away through our conversations about cuisine," Okazaki recalls. "From the way he talked, I could feel his strong passion for sushi."

With his particular love of sushi, it was Alléno's dream to open a sushi restaurant in Paris. After recognizing Okazaki's skills and talent, he invited him to open a sushi restaurant together in Paris.

"Going to France was actually a dream of mine. I very much wanted to open a sushi restaurant in Paris," says Okazaki. And so, in 2018, Okazaki left Japan behind and became the sushi master at L'Abyse. Within just half a year of opening, the restaurant gained one Michelin star, and has earned two stars for three successive years since 2020.

The course dinners at L'Abyse consist of three parts. The first course features such dishes as seasonal *tsukemono* (pickled vegetables), white asparagus cooked in a *kombu* (kelp) broth, and *sashimi* (raw fish). Next comes the main course, which



Chirashizushi (scattered sushi)
Photo: Nicolas Lobbestaël

is *nigiri* (shaped by hand) sushi. Last is the dessert course, featuring dishes such as mushroom ice cream with *sobacha* (buckwheat tea) nougatine. (Current menu as of June 2022.)

Chef Okazaki creates the restaurant's menu together with the other chefs, and the menu is finalized after the addition of ideas from Chef Alléno. The dishes served often include Extractions® of various ingredients obtained using a special method developed by Chef Alléno. For this reason, guests at L'Abyse can enjoy Japanese cuisine imbued with the essence of French cuisine, and which can only be savored at this Paris restaurant.

"I have two objectives," says Okazaki. "One is to gain three Michelin Stars. The other is to have people around the world feel that they want to eat the sushi made by Chef Alléno and myself. I want us to reach a level where, when people think of sushi, our names come to mind."

This collaboration between Japanese and French chefs is opening up a new world for sushi and, by extension, Japanese cuisine. 

i https://www.maff.go.jp/j/shokusan/eat/attach/pdf/160328_shokub-13.pdf

ii *Ikejime* is a specialized method of killing fish, used to maintain the freshness of their meat.