

PICTURE IAIN GILLESPIE

# OPEN *heart*

Nobu Matsuhisa hasn't had success handed to him on a plate. That's why, as the chef tells **Julie Hosking**, he's deeply grateful for everything.



**H**is name is synonymous with success. A pioneering chef whose signature style is lauded around the world. A businessman with 38 restaurants and seven hotels – and counting – bearing his name.

But Nobu Matsuhisa remembers a very different time more than 30 years ago. A time when his situation was so precarious he contemplated ending it all. It was late November, snow was falling, and he was standing outside his restaurant in Anchorage, Alaska, watching red flames consume his livelihood. It had only been open 50 days.

Having spent the past six months building the restaurant, his young family only joining him from Japan the month before, the chef was in debt and distraught. Still reeling from perceived failures in Peru and Argentina, he saw Alaska as his last chance. “For a while, all I could think about was death and how to go about dying,” he writes in *Nobu: A Memoir*. “Should I get lost in the mountains and just disappear? Should I throw myself into the sea?”

It was his friends and family, in particular wife Yoko, who saved him. “She never left my side. Later she told me ‘I knew that you could rise above it. I was sure that you would carve a path to our future; that

you would make me happy.’ It was her belief that carried me through.”

But as Nobu tells me today he looks back at his myriad challenges as a series of turning points. “I started at 17/18 and I’m 69 last week,” he says in his charmingly broken English. “Like I left Japan, that is a turning point; left the Peru, another turning point; went to Alaska, another turning point. But I never give up. Especially, you know, Alaska the most hard time. But if I not take this experience, maybe I’m not here. This is why I always recommend – not recommend, advise – to the younger generation chef, you should try but don’t forget about the mistake. If you make a mistake, you know smart people learn from the mistake. That’s why the mistake is not bad sign for me. But I don’t want a mistake any more!” And he laughs loudly.

We’re sitting in a quiet corner of his Perth restaurant, the 24th Nobu that was officially opened in March 2012. He spends 10 months of the year travelling – “I have a million miles” – checking in on the restaurants and hotels, to ensure everything is up to scratch. He hasn’t been to Perth for more than a year, his last visit to Australia taking him to his Melbourne restaurant instead, so tonight he will be hosting a special dinner and signing copies of his

memoir. Staff are clearly excited, and undoubtedly a bit nervous, to have him here. Nobu has very exacting standards, especially when it comes to signature dishes such as black cod in miso and new-style sashimi.

“I have to check with the quality still. If it’s going another way, I bring back my way,” he says with a smile. “Maybe only I can control this, I know because I create how much dressing, the slice, the presentation, the sauce ...”

Nobu has good reason to be so particular. These are the dishes that made his name, that marrying of the Peruvian flavours he discovered while working in South America with the clean, simple traditional style he had learned as a young sushi chef in Japan. “Before Peru I was just cooking Japanese food ... no garlic, no olive oil, no spices, just wasabi, very clean food. In Peru, they cook food with the lemon juice, like ceviche, and I got so much experience there. Finally my style of Japanese cooking combined to the Peruvian influence ... then came the Nobu food. The spice, the chilli, the heat, and also I like to use the cilantro. The first time I could not eat any cilantro, very strong flavour – now I love it!”

Before the world fell for his flavour combinations, a rather smitten actor was trying to woo him to New



York from Los Angeles, where he had moved with his family after a brief return to Japan with his tail between his legs. Robert De Niro was a regular visitor to his LA restaurant Matsuhisa, which he had opened with the help of a generous benefactor and was winning over critics and celebrities. Madonna was a regular guest, happy to queue because she didn't have a reservation, and Nobu famously turned away Tom Cruise because he was booked out. He also joked to Roberto Benigni that if he came every day with his wife before the Oscars he would win for *Life is Beautiful*. So the Italian actor did. And he won.

But it was De Niro who marked another turning point in Nobu's life. He had no idea who the Academy Award-winning actor was when he first came by the restaurant, where he was partial to the black cod and miso and Hokusetsu sake. But he soon became a regular whenever he was in town and it wasn't long before he was talking to Nobu about opening a restaurant in his home city. He even flew out to New York at De Niro's insistence, where the actor showed him a property he'd bought in Manhattan's Tribeca neighbourhood. It was here, he told Nobu, he wanted to open a restaurant.

"My English, however, was too poor for us to carry on any kind of discussion," he recalls in his memoir. "I listened to his ideas and then, in broken English, tried to explain that I couldn't start another restaurant now because the one in Los Angeles was not quite on its feet."

De Niro opened the Tribeca Grill instead, but he had not given up on his Japanese friend. "He was waiting for me for four years, and then I feel 'Oh gosh, he's not asking to play at opening a restaurant, he's serious'," Nobu tells me. "Many people come to open restaurant and they have money, blah blah blah, but I can't just trust people who are just talking. He has heart, passion, he wants to work with me, that's why finally I can trust him. And then we opened the first restaurant in New York. I appreciate him because he was waiting."

He said they had a connection almost immediately, a feeling that you can't see, almost like a marriage. "We are good partners, and good friends. And he is a big supporter to me. Every new restaurant that's opening, he comes ... always we see each other, looking for the next step."

Heart, or kokoro, is at the core of Nobu's philosophy, not just for cooking but life. It's something the elder statesman tries to instil in the next generation of chefs. "Always put the heart on this plate, cook each process with heart, just like the mum makes the food for the kids. How much can I put my heart on my dish," he says. "Of course we need good product. My way is very simple. And it has to be tasty.



Rare talent Nobu starting out in Japan. PICTURE COURTESY NOBU RESTAURANTS



Only one Nobu with his ever-supportive wife, Yoko. PICTURE STEVEN FREEMAN

Cheers, mate Nobu with business partner Robert De Niro. PICTURE ERIK KABIK



But each process, slicing, cooking, plating, it's more details, more heart, more kokoro."


Nobu wanted to be a sushi chef from the moment his elder brother took him to a sushi bar – a special treat in an era long before the ubiquitous sushi train – though he found himself working in one much earlier than expected after being expelled from school for crashing a car and missing his exams.

Asked to choose five ingredients he couldn't live without, Nobu returns to his roots. "I grew up in Japan, so rice, soy sauce, miso, fish and one more ... It's very difficult. I don't know, salt or olive oil? Oh, dashi!" And he grins, relieved to have remembered how important the Japanese stock is to his cooking, though as befitting a chef who has so successfully married cuisines, he is always experimenting.

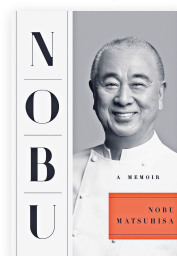
"Cooking is kind of like fashions for me, always I'm looking for what's next, find out the new ingredients, and find a way to cook it. When I find new ingredients I create a new dish," he says, acknowledging it's all his time on the road that helps inform changes to his menus. He likes to visit local markets and find something different and see what he can come up with in consultation with his resident chefs.

"We have to use local product as much as possible," he says, paying tribute to Nobu Perth chef Leif Huru's way with kangaroo. "It's like the new style sashimi, the olive oil, the chives, the garlic, they say people like it here. Because also it match the cultures. I respect each country's culture."

Aside from the endless inspiration, the grandfather – who loves doing sushi demonstrations with his eldest grand-daughter on an annual cruise – says he is motivated by the need to give back, to teach and nurture his broader family. "Used to be like a small family, now it's a big family," he says with a laugh. "Cooking is all my life. I like to try my best every moment ... to give a chance to the next-generation chef."

As long as Nobu is sustained by twice-a-year sabbaticals, where he likes to retreat somewhere quiet and read with only the sounds of nature to disturb him, the restaurateur has no plans to retire. "I know people have a lot of 'I want the more money, a bigger house, a nice car'. But I'm not greedy, I don't want more, more, more. I have enough. That's why I like in my life to go one by one, and then one day that's it. I don't want to say I need more. I like to say 'thank you so much, I was born, I worked in the restaurant business, and thank you for all my family: I just want to say thank you for my life.'" 

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*Nobu: A Memoir*  
Nobu Matsuhisa  
(Atria, \$40)