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appeal

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TOSHI MORIHIRA AND HIS WIFE NOBUKO MOVED from Sydney to Mittagong 28 years ago for much the same reason many people still move to the Highlands today: they had had their first baby, Tomo, and they wanted to raise a family out of a big city. But while Toshi had trained and worked as a chef in both Japanese and European style restaurants, Mittagong in the early 80s wasn't quite ready for Japanese food. Instead, Toshi opened a cafe called Tulip Inn, where he served cakes, snacks and lunches for a decade.

"A friend's father advised me, 'Toshi, this is countryside. Don't mention the Japanese name because people still remember the Second World War'. So I took his advice and called it Tulip Inn," explains Toshi, adding after a pause: "Not now."

For the past 12 years, Toshi's Japanese Restaurant has fared excellently under his name, serving all things Japanese. Toshi initially opened in Bowral's former Port O' Call hotel, but four years ago when it was demolished he moved to a larger site in Mittagong.

The restaurant has a sushi counter, where sushi and sashimi are prepared while customers watch, and two rooms, the Western and Japanese rooms. The Japanese room has a raised timber floor with timber lined pits so patrons can remove their shoes and sit on cushions on the floor, Japanese style, but in the same posture as on a chair (happily eliminating the post kneel-meal hobble). The room is booked out most Friday and Saturday nights and is also used for kids' parties and school groups.

Toshi and his wife ran the restaurant in Bowral but the Mittagong venue is larger (it seats 70) and Toshi says he couldn't do it without his son Tomo as manager. It's now Tomo who goes to Sydney each week to purchase the seafood that's integral to so many dishes. "We used to go to the fish markets but now we have a supplier who supplies lots of the top Japanese restaurants in Sydney including Tetsuya's, Yoshii and Azuma," says Toshi. "The fish is slightly dearer than at the fish market but the quality is the best. He knows what Japanese people want."

Toshi's life took some unexpected turns before he settled on his career as a chef. He grew up in Nagoya and became a high school teacher. But he was also interested in cooking, so he did his chef's apprenticeship by going to night school and working as a cook at night.

Then he decided to study social work. "Social work in Australia was way ahead of Japan, and I wanted to brush up on my English," he says. At 26, he came to Australia to study at the University of NSW, expecting to stay just a few years.

He never finished the degree. He was staying with a family in Penrith and found commuting to uni difficult, so he moved to

the city and worked in restaurants, initially as a kitchenhand as his English wasn't strong. "I did two years of working and study, and it was just too hard. I couldn't do it any more!"

By this time he had married Nobuko and they decided to move to Mittagong. The Penrith couple Toshi had lived with had moved to Burradoo and invited them to visit. "We had a look and the Highlands seemed like a very nice place for children to grow up." As well as Tomo, 29, the couple have sons Hiro, 27, and Yoshi, 23.

Toshi ran Tulip Inn for a decade but business died after the Mittagong bypass opened in 1992. "Mittagong was like a ghost town; there were just no more tourists." In its last few years, Toshi introduced Japanese food on Friday and Saturday nights. "It was a day-time coffee shop, night-time Japanese restaurant. But people didn't want to touch raw fish in this area – in Sydney they were further ahead and it was OK – so we only did some raw fish. Mostly we cooked the food."

For the next few years he did casual work, teaching Japanese at Chevalier College and TAFE and working in other restaurants, including a Japanese one in Mittagong called Eco Cafe. In 1998 he opened Toshi's in Bowral and it worked straight away. "It was it's time. More people had moved from Sydney and they knew Japanese food."

Toshi changes the menu four times a year with the seasons, and makes bigger changes twice a year, but dishes like sushi, sashimi and tempura always remain. A popular summer salad is shredded confit of duck marinated in seasonal soy with salad leaves and served with a honey soy lime dressing (\$19). A more recent addition is grilled Patagonian toothfish marinated in premium white miso (\$20).

Toshi says he and Nobuko never considered leaving the area and were never concerned about being one of just a handful of local Japanese families. "My wife came from Tokyo and I'm from Nagoya which are very big cities. Our dream was to have a vegetable garden and fruit trees. In Japan it would have nearly been impossible. Here (in Willow Vale) we have three-quarters of an acre, which is more than enough for me.

"My parents were disappointed (that I didn't return). I was the only son with two sisters. But they come to Australia quite often and we go back to them when we can."

Over the years, at Toshi's in Bowral and Tulip Inn, Toshi has taught more than 500 students in five-week Japanese cooking classes. "People have asked me to run them again but there's no time at the moment. It's just too busy here." 

Toshi's Japanese Restaurant opens for dinner Tuesday to Saturday 6-9pm and for lunch Friday and Saturday noon-2pm.



Toshi's favourite

These recipes are old favourites and very common in Japan. My mother made them when I was young and I still make them for my family. They're great for lunch or dinner and also good cold. I would have taken them to school in my lunch box. When my sons were young they called the chicken dish "yummy chicken".

Deep Fried Marinated Chicken

A delightful dish with aromatic soy sauce and crispy fried chicken. Serves 4

- 2 chicken thighs or breasts**
- 2 curly lettuce**
- 2 tsp fresh ginger juice**
(grate ginger and squeeze out juice)
- 2 tbsp soy sauce**
- 2 tsp mirin (sweet rice wine)**
- Potato starch or corn starch**
- Oil for deep frying**

Remove excess skin and fat from the chicken, pierce the remaining skin with fork to make several holes, cut diagonally into bite-sized pieces and place in a bowl. Add the ginger juices, soy sauce and mirin, and rub the chicken to make it absorb the seasonings. Let stand for 10-15 mins. Wipe excess moisture from chicken. Coat every part of chicken with potato starch and deep fry in oil at 160-180C. Arrange chicken on plates and garnish with curly lettuce.



Teriyaki Fish

All you need is one frying pan. Salmon or Kingfish are very easy to cook and go well with boiled rice. Serves 4

- 4 fillets Salmon, Kingfish or Swordfish**

Sauce A

- 2 tbsp sake**
- 4 tsp soy sauce**
- 2 tbsp vegetable oil**

Sauce B

- 1 tbsp sake**
- 2 tsp sugar**
- 3 tbsp soy sauce**
- 4 tbsp mirin**

Soak fish fillets in sauce A for about 10 mins. Wipe off moisture. Heat oil in frying pan and fry fillets. Always cook first the side of fish that will face up when served. When browned, turn over, cover the pan and fry the other side over a low heat. Mix ingredients of sauce B to make teriyaki sauce. Remove excess oil from the frying pan with a paper kitchen towel. Put sauce B into the pan and simmer while coating the fish thoroughly. Arrange fillets on plate and garnish. Serve with boiled rice.



FROM TOP: SASHIMI AND SUSHI; TEMPURA PRAWNS AND VEGETABLES; THE JAPANESE ROOM; DESSERT PLATTER WITH GREEN TEA AND COINTREAU ICE-CREAM WITH RED BEAN AND KINAKO, BELGIAN CHOCOLATE MOUSSE, AND LEMON, LIME AND BITTERS AND SPARKLING WINE SORBET.