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IT IS BEST TIME FOR WOMEN IN BOLLYWOOD: MADHURI 13 VIVACITY

JAPANESE EVE ONE HOUR

Expat chef York Sese is an instant hit with the young and the old diners at the eight-seater Teppanyaki table at Benihana, the newly opened Japanese restaurant at Epicuria, the food mall at Nehru Place. This is one of the eight other such shared tables in this section. He is the master of food arts for the night. He twists the children's menu and turns it into a chef's hat before turning around to perform an acrobatic "ritual" with his kitchen tools. The guests are hooked and definitely want more.

And just when you think he's going to start cooking at the Teppanyaki grill for you, he draws a big smiley with what he calls "Johnson's baby oil". A little kid at my table has no idea that it is soya oil and is happy to relate. Next, he stacks up onion rings and makes a smoking volcano out of it with a flame here to create drama.

This is Benihana experience for you — one that's been a hit with its diners for the 50 years that it has been in existence as a chain spread across the world. The first Benihana came up in the US in 1964, when wrestler Rocky Aoki opened the very first outlet named after a Japanese red flower in Manhattan. Ever since, the chain grew to a 100 Benihanas all over the world and now it's come to India as part of its half century celebrations. There are five more in the pipeline. We'd rather concentrate on the experience. So, here I find myself poring over the Hibachi set menu which has great choices for seafood lovers. Needless to say, I am a happy person in no time.

The set menu comes to you in the form of a course meal. To begin with is the clear miso soup with mushrooms, followed by Teppanyaki appetiser with zucchini, mushrooms, onions and perfectly cooked prawns in peanut butter. As the dish made its way to our plate, York performed another act of making the tail end of the prawns land in his hat. "That's my trash can," he mocks.

As I get comfortable with my chopsticks, I notice Karan, my table attendant, fish out a child friendly version (it's tied up at the ends with rubber band and held apart with paper roll to allow the free movement without it slipping) to help a little one by my side ape the grown ups. That's how they teach

Play with your meal

The Benihana experience is all about the show that accompanies the Teppanyaki style of Japanese cooking. As part of their 50th year celebrations, they've opened their 101st restaurant in the world and the first in Delhi is at Epicuria mall. By NAVNEET MENDIRATTA



children to use their chopsticks back home.

Incidentally, back home for York is Philippines where his Japanese origin parents chose to settle down. His grandmother still lives in Japan, he tells me. "There are over a lakh Japanese settlers in Philippines. And the local food is a mix of Spanish, Japanese, southeast Asian... well, all influenced by the early settlers," he says. I look around to see. Each of the Teppanyaki tables is attended to by expat chefs, all trained to entertain. Cooking is taken for granted.

A deviation from the set menu is a choice of Sushi, Benihana tempura roll. A lovely crispy roll made up of lightly fried prawn, tuna and salmon in the tempura mix that quells the notion of sushi being only a raw offering. Next, comes the Benihana salad, a small bowlful of greens (and red, the tomatoes that is) tossed in vinegar dressing with garlic sauce at the top. At the grill, York cooks my garlic sticky rice with egg thrown in. The smoky flavours enhancing my appetite every bit more.

Each Hibachi meal is served with two sauces: garlic for the seafood and creamy mustard to go with chicken and lamb preparations. Then there is soy, which you are encouraged to use liberally as and when you

seek more flavour. Soy sauce is a great flavour enhancer when mixed into plain steamed sticky rice. The menu offers vegetarian mains to keep the vegans happy, but I gave it a skip for this one night, choosing Benihana special with tenderloin lamb and lobster tail; Benihana delight with tiger prawns and chicken cooked in a thick teppanyaki sauce and seafood diablo with prawns and calamari tossed in udon noodles and spicy cream sauce. To close the meal, the chef serves a perfectly "cooked" tempura green tea ice cream, signature of this restaurant.

Over all, the food is great, especially when you can get the chef to alter the tastes and flavours as he gets along, and works well if you visit the restaurant in a group. The interactive style of cooking and serving is a welcome change to regular sit-ins.