

Small & Mighty

One room, eight seats, 17 dishes and a little bit of magic: enter the world of Ngan Ping Chow, the culinary ringmaster of Tokyo's **Tapas Molecular Bar**

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It makes sense that the world's largest city, and the capital of the world's oldest country, is also the epicentre of probably the most expansive food culture, history and scene on the planet. If we're simply talking numbers, Tokyo has the most restaurants of any city on Earth – and the most Michelin stars (a blinding 305 at last count). But one of those shines all the brighter when you consider its space-to-star ratio: Tapas Molecular Bar, a full-service sushi bar-cum-kitchen flanked by just eight barstools, which, if you're lucky enough to bag one, will transport you on a unique culinary adventure that departs but twice a night.

“Diners experience a two-hour journey of being together with the chefs in a very relaxed atmosphere. Each chef is not just cooking or plating up in front of the diners, but also interactively letting them know how and why every dish has been made, composed and created,” explains Ngan Ping Chow, head chef and the grand master of proceedings at Tapas Molecular Bar since 2014. Hong Kong-born Ping left his Chinese home, and the acclaimed one-thirtyone restaurant, for what he describes as a “once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to take the Tapas Molecular Bar to the next level”. And that he did, winning his (and its) first Michelin star in his first year there, and retaining it every year since.

Before setting foot behind the bar, Ping spent months soaking up the intricacies of Japanese cooking, learning its secrets and developing his own molecular style in tandem with that discovery – something he's never stopped doing. “The local produce and the cooking tradition in Japan is a marriage of culture and art,” he says. “As a foreigner, I must make an effort to study and experience it, to understand more in order to best use the resources from this land. The produce and culture influence the cooking; they also enrich

Opening page: Chef Ngan Ping Chow in action **This page,** clockwise from right: Ping's signature ‘cigar’ comes to life; inside the Tapas Molecular Bar; more creative offerings from the menu



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my knowledge of the culinary world.” As a result, his menu is an intriguing mix of Japanese delicacies and Western favourites – all with a considerable twist. The traditional onsen tamago (hot-spring eggs), for example, get a Mediterranean kick from orzo and Parmesan; the Waldorf salad, on the other hand, comes with a yuzu flourish.

The 17-course molecular tasting menu, made up entirely of small, tapas-style plates, changes every four months – but there's one dish that endures. Ping's signature ‘cigar’, which looks exactly like its namesake, even down to the sesame ash sprinkled at one (artfully blackened) end. It is, in fact, a potato-tuile meat cylinder flavoured with apple, cucumber and hoi sin, a personal tribute to the Chinese classic Peking duck. “It delivers my most memorable childhood experiences of Peking duck,” says Ping. “It is a dish composed with flavour, technique, a fun factor and my memories.” A philosophy that courses through every tantalising aspect of Ping's menu, and indeed the whole restaurant, some 38 floors up at the Mandarin Oriental, Tokyo.

On taking your seat at the Tapas Molecular Bar, you're invited to unlock your own personal toolbox (and I mean that literally) – an array of unlikely-looking implements designed to aid your navigation of the edible odyssey that lies ahead. There's even a tape measure, which you pull to reveal your menu for the evening. It's the first of many clever tricks devised by the showman chef, who says, “It helps to bring out the imagination of the diner, when they see the menu. Because once we start, it will become more like a performance of presenting flavours, textures and techniques. For me I would say that it is like a concert, composed of many elements that are all linked together.” Such elements include liquid nitrogen (so far, so

molecular gastronomy), edible beaches (which really must be seen to be believed) and so-called miracle fruit, all prepared right in front of you.

Theatre, then, is clearly a huge part of the meal, but it's not merely an attention-grabbing aside. Says Ping, “To have a perfect dining experience, no doubt the ingredients, taste and technique of the dish itself are the basics, but I also believe that the way we present and showcase every dish helps diners understand the story and spirit behind it. The element of theatre leaves an impression with the diners and creates memories that will stay with them.” It's a mutually rewarding process, admits the chef, who sums up his own experience in one word: “Satisfaction.”

“As a chef,” he adds, “to present your dishes in such close proximity to diners that have their eyes on your every action and movement is very different to just directing in a kitchen. Not only is the taste and the presentation of the dish judged and discussed, but also your overall performance. Therefore I need to be a multi-role player in this environment. I play the role of a chef to make sure the taste and presentation of all the dishes are accurate. I also play the role of a director for every show, to control the pace of the night and performances of the team, according to a group of diners who have different and varied reactions. Lastly, I play the role of entertainer, maintaining a friendly and relaxed atmosphere in order to make sure that every diner feels comfortable to communicate and interact... because their mood also determines the atmosphere of the night.”

The production, its cast and its platform may be small, but the premise, the impact, and the buzz that surrounds each and every performance – sorry, service? Quite the opposite.