



SMALL, chef-owned businesses are still popping up around Melbourne, a hard slog but often the wish of many a chef to drive their own dream. And, there are the chefs who keep going from strength-to-strength, opening new dining rooms and building their own restaurant empires.

Chef **Kenji Ito** has opened his first Melbourne restaurant, **Wa Kenbo**, in Fitzroy. Ito, who for the last 11 years ran the award-winning Adelaide restaurant, Kenji Modern Japanese, opened the doors to Wa Kenbo in September. Ito chose to come to Melbourne to challenge himself. "I've often visited Melbourne and loved the food here," he says. "I moved here because I'm looking for the challenge of a big city; I want Wa Kenbo to be one of many great restaurants - not the number one restaurant."

Humble words from a chef of 23 years who first sharpened his knives at the renowned Tsuji Culinary Institute in Tokyo, and then went on to refine his skills in Akasaka and Ginza.

The menu is a wonderful synergy of Ito's two worlds, using refined Japanese technique on both Australian and Japanese ingredients, including vegetables and herbs that he grows at home. Alongside the homegrown ingredients, the innovative and progressive menu is made up of dishes that he shops for daily. The white fish sashimi changes regularly, always with two kinds of fish and always using two preparation methods such as cured, seared or raw fish depending on the fish's condition and season. Other dishes may include Hoji tea-smoked duck breast, duck neck Chorizo, soy-soaked grilled Shishito, pickled quandong and Sansho peppercorn jus, Sumiyaki chargrilled Ichiyaboshi whole fish, Myoga & Mitsuba soy vinegar sauce with Goma-ae broad beans, and the slow-cooked Kuro-buta pork belly with steamed Hakusai pork roll, shiitake, crackling, Shichimi pepper-pickled Nashi pear, which was Ito's signature dish in his Adelaide restaurant.

The drinks list, crafted by his wife Noriko, is a selection of wine, saké and cocktails designed to delicately complement the food. The room is a blend of stonework, wood and textured fabrics in natural tones referencing water and earth. The 25-seat dining room is intentionally cosseted, to bring focus to the food. Its location is on a side-street in Fitzroy - in between Brunswick and Nicholson streets - with no signage is a homage to many great restaurants in Japanese cities often found off-the-beaten-track. This is a place where every detail is thoughtfully arranged. Ito's precision and attention to detail is evident throughout, he is a man who truly dedicates himself to the craft of looking after people and creating great dining experiences for them. 69 Victoria St, Fitzroy; phone (03) 9041 9495.

Restaurant Shik, the 65-seat, laneway-located, dimly lit CBD restaurant opened quietly a few months ago and is slowly making waves for all the right reasons.

The Korean-influenced succinct menu is split into entrees, grilled and braised dishes and banchan (sides). There's a lot of meat, actually vegetarians do get overlooked somewhat, but the seasonal kimchis include fennel and coriander, beetroot and watercress, brussel sprouts and persimmon.

The meats are mostly secondary cuts that are cooked on the grill, perhaps a wagyu intercostal or Rangers Valley beef short plate (the part of the belly right under the gut) and kimchi-marinated pork neck, each served with a banchan or two, leaves and ssamjang (a sweet and spicy paste).

The 60-bottle wine list is almost entirely natural and Shik also stocks three types of the spirit soju distilled the traditional way, using rice. 30 Niagara Lane, Melbourne; phone (03) 9670 5195.

Flowering displays that change with the seasons highlight the changeable menu at **Scott Pickett's** new restaurant **Matilda**. The dining tables, by furniture-maker Hugh Makin, also add to the rich aesthetic. Constructed from two felled trees in the

melbournegrapevine

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Otways, the tabletops are tactile and textured.

Then there's the menu, a whole john dory highlights Pickett and his chefs' classical training while keeping its feet firmly in Australia. The fish is topped with Matilda's take on the classic French sauce, grenobloise (typically capers, beurre noisette and lemon), and given a native edge with the addition of salt bush, desert lime and lemon myrtle. The use of wood fire, charcoal and smoke are also strong elements on the menu. The 28-day, dry-aged Cape Grim scotch fillet at 450g or the 21-day, dry-aged grass-fed Hopkins River rib eye are both made for the wood-fired grill. The crisp-skinned, dry-aged duck breast that's cooked in the second chamber of a woodfire oven has become a dish with a cult following. The drinks list is comprehensive and they offer wine, beer and cocktail matches with each dish, depending on your preference. 159 Domain Rd, South Yarra; phone (03) 9089 6668.

Top left: Chef Kenji Ito of Wa Kenbo restaurant.

Below and bottom: Food from Wa Kenbo restaurant.

