

TASTE  
BUDS

Tapeo's Michael Van Warmelo uses Spanish bomba rice for the seafood and meat paellas.



## RICE AND SHINE

There's more to the grain than just being a staple, writes **Mercy Lo**

**RICE IS** life in many parts of the world. There is a common saying in Asian dining culture: a meal is never complete without a bowl of rice. Even the way we say "time for a meal" in Chinese, is literally translated as "eat rice."

Japan is a country that takes pride in its rice culture. Rice is used extensively in the national cuisine, for instance, sushi, kamameshi (kettle rice) and gyudon (beef bowl).

Hong Kong has imported many rice dishes from Japan over the years, but Muneo Nishida feels that not many here know how to cook perfect Japanese rice. Eager to better educate local diners, he founded Hana-musubi (Tel: 2877-7372), at 28 Harbour Road in Wan Chai, which serves mainly omusubi, the Japanese rice ball.

"Simply getting the best quality rice is not enough. You have to pay attention to the moisture, the rice maker, the temperature and even the way you wash the rice," says Nishida, who spent the past five years traveling all over Japan to find out how to make the tastiest rice dishes.

Hana-musubi offers 30 choices of omusubi (starting from HK\$8 each) a day along with an array of delectable bento box, healthy soups and delicate desserts. Lunch sets are also available from HK\$53.

Each rice ball is freshly handmade every day in the factory before being delivered to the store. Umeboshi (pickled plum), konbu (seaweed), wasabi octopus and teriyaki chicken are among traditional flavors while new ones include kimchi, shrimp tempura and curry.

Japan's Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare has come up with the 30 Different Items Per Day to be Healthy scheme, in which 30 food items are suggested so people get the nutrients the body needs.

Nishida says: "Our menu is planned by Japanese nutritionists, who included more than 10 ingredients

in each food item sold, therefore providing a healthy, balanced diet for Hongkongers."

Rice is not only a staple for Asians, but for some Western populations as well. One popular rice dish from the West is paella, which many would consider as the national dish of Spain.

"Paella, which means pan in Spanish, comes from Valencia in Spain. It used to be considered more of a peasant dish by the locals, as rice is very easy to grow and obtain. Farmers and fishermen can just cook up a large pan of paella with some rice and fresh seafood," says executive chef Michael Van Warmelo of Tapeo (Tel: 3171-1989) in the Aus Building at 15-19 Hollywood Road.

Spanish bomba rice is used to make the paella. "The short-grained rice absorbs three times its volume in broth, but it still holds its shape and texture as a grain of rice, which is the perfect rice for cooking paella," Van Warmelo says.

Apart from a variety of tapas, the cozy restaurant also serves up several paella dishes, featuring seafood paella (HK\$178), meat paella (HK\$168) and also one mixing both seafood and meat together (HK\$198), all served in a pan. "It's like a big feast in a small pan," Van Warmelo says.

For those who still have not had enough of rice, try the Spanish rice pudding (HK\$58) at Tapeo. The authentic dessert is made with milk, cinnamon, orange peel and orange caramel. The fresh orange zest perks up the creamy texture of the pudding.

As a leading rice producer in Europe, Italy often serves rice as

a main dish, instead of making

it a side dish like in most Chinese cuisines. "In Italian cuisine, we don't think about rice the way Asians think about rice," says Andrea Spagoni, executive chef of Domani (Tel: 2111-1197) in Pacific Place.

Risotto is one example. The restaurant serves an array of modern risottos (all at HK\$210).

Surprise your palate with the surprising combination of Italian figs and French foie gras in a risotto, or go for the more subtle but equally amazing thyme risotto topped with cocoa powder, inspired by chocolate pralines.

Or experience how tea complements seafood in the Earl Grey tea risotto with calamari and lime.

"Using carnaroli rice for the risottos, we always cook the rice to *al dente*, so it doesn't lose its body and structure. When cooked, each grain should remain separate from each other – difficult to be eaten with chopsticks, unlike the relatively sticky Asian rice," Spagoni says.

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Wasabi octopus omusubi from Hana-musubi.



Hana-musubi's 30 choices of omusubi include, clockwise from far left, kimchi, trabeculae in vinegar and mushroom.



domani



Andrea Spagoni provides a modern twist with his fig and French foie gras risotto at Domani, while at Hana-musubi, each rice ball is handmade on the day.