

OFF THE MENU

Hachibei, Specializing in Eel, Opens in Midtown East

Adam Leonti's latest in the former Dovetail space, a rooftop bar atop an RH store, and more restaurant news.



A large, left, and medium eel bento-style box at Hachibei. Alfredo Chiarappa for The New York Times



By Florence Fabricant

Oct. 30, 2018



Headliner

Hachibei

Freshwater eel is basically all that's served in an intimate townhouse dining room, up a flight of stairs from the street. Here, grilled eel is seared on both sides as it is brushed with a sauce developed in Kyushu, the island in southwestern Japan where it is a specialty. It comes on a bed of rice with soup, salad, seasoned tofu and pickles, \$55 for the regular size and \$75 for the large (\$25 and \$45 without tofu or salad at lunch, with only 100 orders available). The name refers to several unagi places, both stands and restaurants, on Kyushu. Okuno Hachibei, related to the family, is the consultant for the New York restaurant, which is owned by a group of eel-loving investors who prefer to be in the background. As to the décor, the restaurant has black walls, red curtains and a light wood counter and tables; it seats only 40. (Opens Friday)

238 East 53rd Street, second floor, 212-888-8003, hachibei.nyc.



OPENINGS | OCT. 30, 2015

Hachibei Is the New Midtown Restaurant Specializing in Grilled Eel

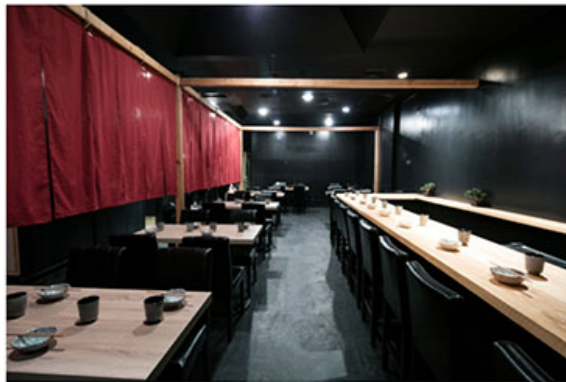
By Chris Crowley



Eel. It's what's for dinner. Photo: Melissa Hom

Eel is big business in Japan, where over 100,000 tons of unagi, or freshwater eel, are consumed every year. Unagi no kabayaki, or grilled eel with a sweet and savory glaze, even gets a holiday to itself (the Day of the Ox), while there are entire restaurants devoted to the speciality. Chef Okuno Hachibei's relatives have run unagi stands in Japan for the last eight decades, so it makes sense that he's lending his name (and expertise) to a new all-eel restaurant that will open this week in Manhattan.

Opening this Friday, the eponymous *Unagi-Ya Hachibei* is tucked away like a secret on the second floor of a midtown building. Its stark black walls, slate-gray floor, and red curtains draped along one wall help give it the feel of a canteen run for First Order soldiers, but the owners aren't so sinister: They're the same people behind restaurants like the East Village's late-night spot *Ichibantei* and have brought Hachibei on as a consulting chef.



No windows to distract you from the eel. Photo: Melissa Hom

Here, the menu consists of one option only: a set meal, available in both regular and large portions (\$25 or \$45 during lunch, \$55 or \$75 during dinner), built around unagi no kabayaki. The freshwater eel is butterflied and skewered, dipped in sauce made from Hachibei's own recipe, and grilled while brushed with more of that same sauce. It's served on top of rice, and the rest of the meal is rounded out by a salad, clear soup, chilled tofu with scallion and ginger, and daikon pickles. Down the line, they also plan to introduce beer, wine, sake, and cocktails.

During lunch, only 100 orders of the dish will be served, a move designed to help conserve some of the eel. The European Commission has considered a ban on fishing in the Atlantic, and in 2014, the International Union for Conservation of Nature announced that the American eel was at risk of extinction in the wild. (Eel-smuggling has become a lucrative business.) In Japan, the government found in 2013 that wild eel populations had declined by roughly 90 percent in only three decades and declared the species endangered. Last year, the country's Fisheries Agency said that the cultivation of glass eels (baby eels) had dropped from 15.4 tons to 8.9 tons. All of which is to say that eating eel is as fraught as eating bluefin tuna.

When asked about this situation, a rep for the restaurant responded with a statement attributed to Hachibei acknowledging the issue and saying the restaurant works as "environmentally consciously as possible" with eel farms. "Eating eel is a centuries old tradition and an important part of our culinary heritage that we want to share with New Yorkers," it reads. Grilled unagi is delicious — and hopefully we can manage our tastes for it.

Hachibei, 238 E. 53rd St. 2nd Floor, nr. Second Ave.; 212-888-8003

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THE NEW YORKER



TABLES FOR TWO

Unagi Aburi Ittetsu
60 Kenmare St.

Unagi-Ya Hachibei
238 E. 53rd St.

In Japan, freshwater eel, or unagi, is such a beloved and age-old delicacy—prized for its nutritional value (it's high in vitamins and protein), its tender, ever so slightly gelatinous texture, and its rich yet delicate flavor, enjoyed especially in the summertime—that there is a category of restaurants that serve basically nothing else. In New York, where once there were no such establishments, suddenly there are two.

Though the restaurants have no direct connection, they share much in common. Both import eel, live, from Japan every week. Both charge around fifty dollars per eel—a price based not only on shipping costs but also on the fact that Japanese freshwater eel has been overharvested to the point that it's a limited-supply luxury item. And both prepare the eel in a traditional manner—filleted, basted in a sweet soy-based sauce called tare, and grilled—and serve it with ground sansho pepper over sushi rice in a lacquered box, for a dish known as unaju.

On a recent evening, I went to the newer of the two, Unagi Aburi Ittetsu, which opened in December in Nolita, on Kenmare, a street that has become so dense with Japanese restaurants that you could call it Little Japan. The wealth of options—a ramen joint, a shabu-shabu omakase counter, a yakitori grill, a sushi spot, one shop for soba and another for Japanese curry—might help explain why Unagi Aburi Ittetsu, a brightly lit little box that seats only seventeen people, was nearly empty around eight o'clock.

At least one of my fellow-patrons was delighted to be there. Shortly after I sat down, a besuited banker type answered a video chat. “Diablo, man!” he said. “How ya doing?” Then he gave Diablo a tour of the place, making sure to zoom in on a large contraption that was circulating water through two tall plastic buckets; within them were slithering masses of eels. “Yeah, it’s sick,” he declared. “I gotta take you here next time you’re in New York.”

Should Diablo eat at Unagi Aburi Ittetsu the next time he’s in New York? The unaju here makes for a decent meal. Each eel is cooked over charcoal until its gray skin gets charred and silvery, its flesh soft and flaky; the tare is sweet but balanced, the chewy grains of rice candied in drippings. Each box comes with a cup of average miso soup and a few slices of pickled radish, and can be supplemented with blanched vegetables and overcooked edamame.

Diablo, and anyone else seeking unagi, would be much better off at Unagi-Ya

Hachibei, which opened in November. Up an anonymous set of stairs in midtown, the place has a bit of a speakeasy vibe, romantically dim and atmospheric. At lunch, a whole-eel unaju is ten dollars more than at Aburi Ittetsu. (At dinner, it goes up another ten.) The difference is worth it for what’s included: a tangle of mixed greens; a bowl of clear, fragrant, floral-tasting dashi; smoky daikon pickles; and thick, almost stretchy yuzu sorbet or matcha ice cream for dessert.

But the eel itself, sourced, the menu specifies, from Aichi, in central Japan, is a cut above, too. You can order it Western style (grilled, for a firm texture, then sliced into slivers) or Eastern style (steamed first, for silkiness, then grilled and left in fillets); either way, the cleaner, more buttery flavor of the fish shines through. The recipe for the complex, caramelized tare was honed for decades on Kyushu, the southernmost of Japan’s main islands.

And there are a host of interesting appetizers, which are available à la carte or as part of a ninety-five-dollar kaiseki, or multicourse meal: spiny little eel bones, deep-fried until they’re as crunchy as potato chips and served in what looks like a miniature hot-air-balloon basket; a skewer of surprisingly mild and chewy grilled eel liver; a “Caesar” salad, topped with croutons made from crispy eel skin. Opt for them all, and you’ve got unagi nose-to-tail, nary a bit of luxury wasted. (*Unagi Aburi Ittetsu, one eel \$45; Unagi-Ya Hachibei, one eel \$65.*)

—Hannah Goldfield

TIME OUT'S HOT SPOTS

Where to eat and drink right now



↑ Hachibei

It's time that eels got their day in the sun. This Japanese speakeasy-style dining room is dedicated solely to unagi (freshwater eel) that's grilled, coated in a secret sauce, and served with rice, salad, soup and chilled tofu. The name comes from chef Okuno Hachibei, the restaurant's chief consultant who is known in Japan for his eel expertise.

→ Midtown East (hachibei.nyc)

→ Peaches Hothouse

If you don't want to schlep to Bed-Stuy for some of the best Southern food in the city, you can now go to the team's second Brooklyn eatery, in Fort Greene. Celebrities (Chrissy Teigen, Whoopi Goldberg) praise the fried chicken, which goes great with the restaurant's signature Brownstone Punch, a tropical swig.

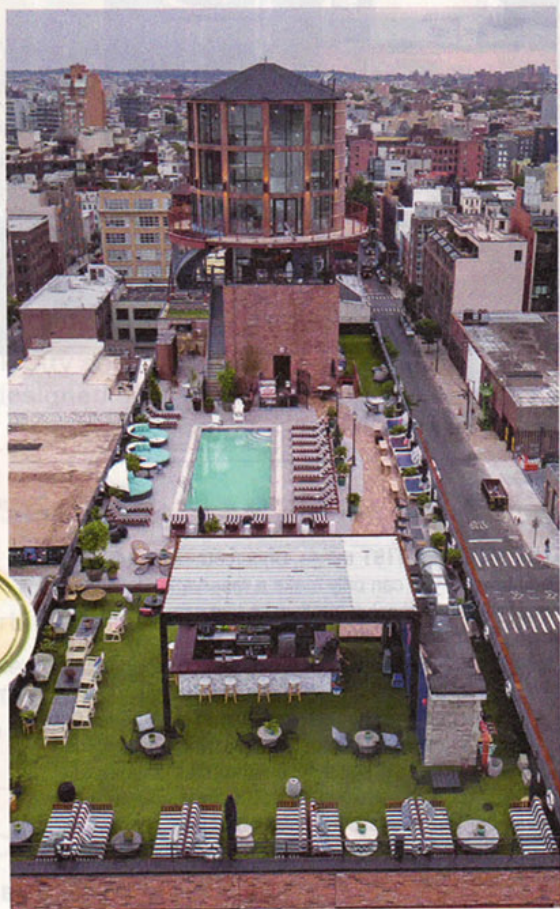
→ Fort Greene (peacheshothouse.com)



↓ The Water Tower

Yes, this is exactly what you think it is: Party in a renovated water tower lined with floor-to-ceiling windows that provide 360-degree views of Manhattan and Brooklyn. Late night, listen to rotating DJ sets while drinking inventive cocktails crafted by Rael Petit (Roxy Hotel, Mulberry Project).

→ The Williamsburg Hotel (thewilliamsburghotel.com)



→ 10 Corso Como

Take in a little bit of Milan at the southernmost tip of Manhattan. The all-in-one European shop and café might be best known for its dazzling displays and funky designs, but the back restaurant will help fuel your shopping trip with carby northern Italian dishes.

→ Fulton Market Building, Seaport District (10corsocomo.nyc)



The Best of 2018

Top destinations, drinks and home-cooked dishes: Our critics and readers have their say

RESTAURANTS | RECIPES | WINE | SPIRITS

Food
The New York Times

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 12, 2018

Fond Pleasures For the Palate

With apologies to the listicle gods, not to mention the headline gods, I don't mean this to be a definitive list of the best things I ate this year. Such a list would overlap considerably with my ranking of the best new restaurants. It seems more fair to spread the love around. So the list that follows, in alphabetical order, is drawn exclusively from places that didn't make my top 10 but still do at least one thing very, very well. *PETE WELLS*



JEENAH MOON FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Unagi don

UNAGI-YA HACHIBEI

Sure, the city got along fine before it had a destination eel restaurant. But it's better off with one, especially one that imports Japanese eel twice a week and grills it until the lightly charred skin is just as appealing as the rich, flaky meat (available as part of a prix-fixe meal costing \$55 to \$95).

238 East 53rd Street, Midtown East;
212-888-8003; hachibei.nyc.

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THE REAL DEAL ON EEL For some, unagi is just a punch line from *Friends*. But in Japan, this freshwater eel is a delicacy (100,000 tons are eaten every year). And in New York City, it's a bona fide trend with two all-eel restaurants that opened last winter, **Unagi** (unaginyc.com) and **Hachibei** (hachibei.nyc). Though unagi is tasty, its boom is concerning, as freshwater eel is considered endangered due to a population decline. If you decide to try the trend, always ask whether the eel is sustainably farmed. If not, stick with the salmon! -ci



Hover your phone's camera here for more adventurous seafood.

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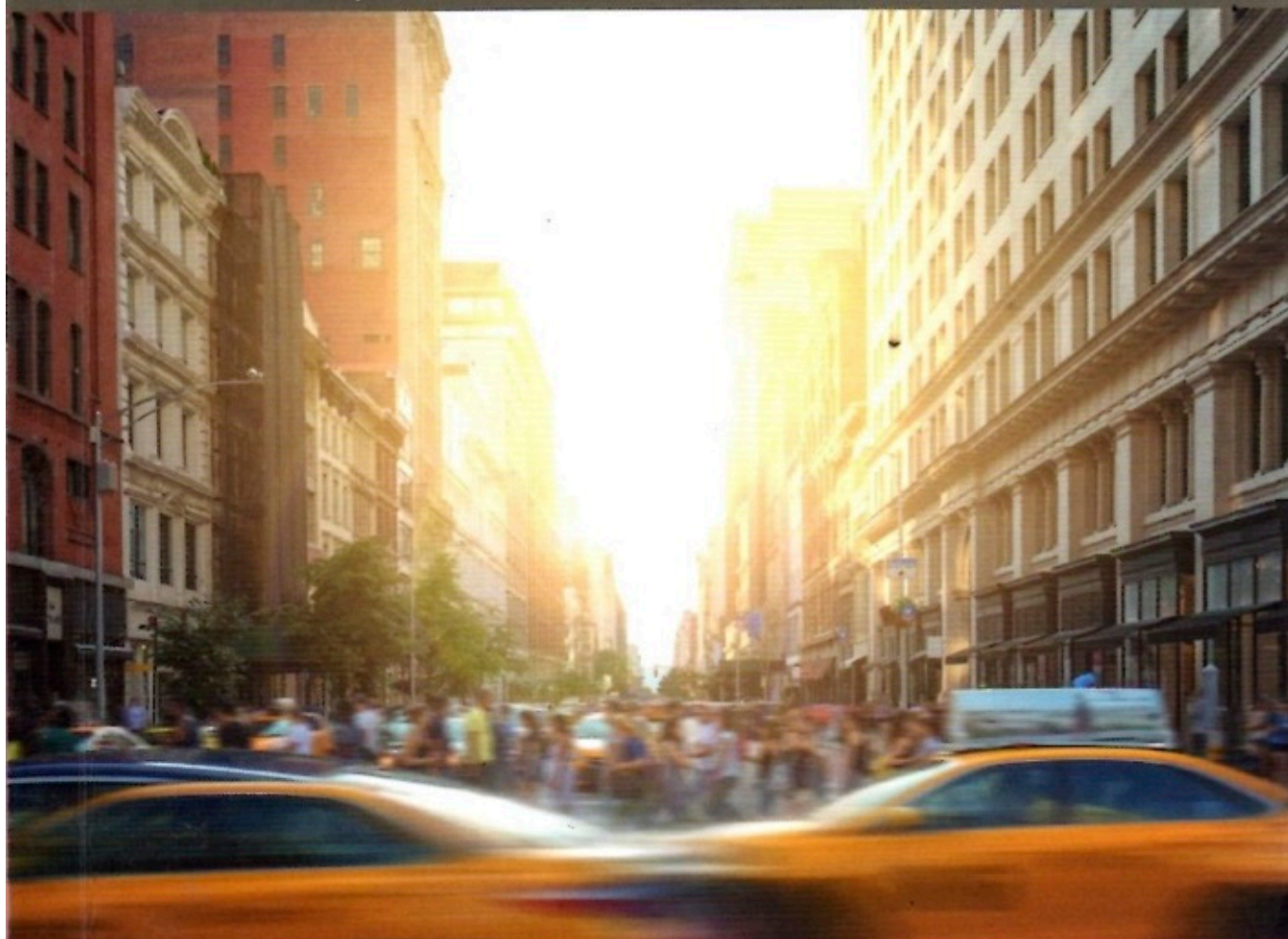
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