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# WESTERNISING JAPANESE FOOD AT KUROBUTA

By Caroline Phillips



'You're going to hate Kurobuta,' my teen children announce cheerily. 'It's uncomfortable and noisy.' Well, naturally, I wanted to prove them wrong – what self-righteous mother wouldn't? But given the fact that I'm now sitting on something like a park bench, only less comfortable – a wooden, plank-like seat – in a restaurant that is chronically loud, cavernous and unpleasantly dark, it's going to be difficult to disagree with my teen lifestyle advisors.

A 'wall' of hanging strings separates us from the next table and pendant halogen bulbs in cages dangle disconsolately. There are no soft furnishings, just stone and paint and bouncing sound. 'But the food is great,' they add. So listen up: after all, my kids have both been committed gastronomes since they were in utero. Plus, Kurobuta has garnered almost universally glowing reviews in the national press.



The staff is like a bunch of antipodean nannies or surfer boys and girls: good-looking and megawatt enthusiastic. We could be Down Under if we weren't in the ground floor of a gloomy modern block looking over that no man's land-ish part of Marble Arch plaintively called 'Connaught Village.'

The chef and co-founder, Scott Hallsworth, is the restaurant's Aussie hero. His website boasts that he has created dishes for many A-listers. 'During his years as top man at the Nobu London and Melbourne restaurants, he cooked for Michael Jackson,' it reads '...and served up his signature dishes for Bill Clinton and Robert de Niro. While he was at Real Madrid, David Beckham

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signature dishes for Brit Clinton and Robert de Niro. While he was at Real Madrid, David Beckham flew Scott to Madrid to cater the birthday party of his wife Victoria.'



He also has a pop-up that stayed up in Chelsea. And an outpost in Bodrum. And now, here he is in person, in the can-almost-touch-him flesh: working the pass from the dining-room side of the bar dressed in a T-shirt and stripy apron. I am almost dying with anticipation.

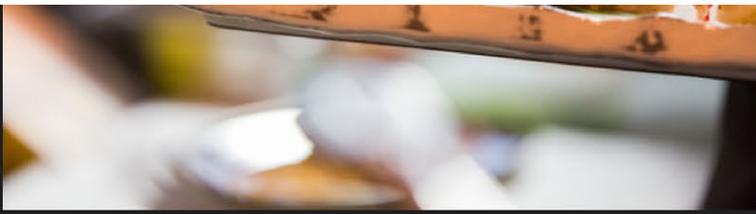
Kurobuta (Japanese for a species of black pig) is based on an izakaya – a Japanese drinking den. There's room for 80 and they also serve dishes to go. Scott's aim is to popularise and westernise Japanese food.



The menu is a compendium of yumminess, an easy-eating compilation, with silly subsections entitled things like, 'Something Crunchy,' 'Significant Others,' 'On The Side' and 'Junk Food Japan' – the junk food being, for example, Wagyu beef sliders. Under 'Sushi,' there's fresh salmon with béarnaise salsa and fries.

We devour the crispest tempura-ed black pepper soft-shell crab, each light-batter bite releasing another divine taste of fish and spice; the tuna pizza has a super-crischy, thin wheaten cracker base, topped with the best, freshest tuna sashimi, truffle ponzu and a sauce with red onions and green chillies; and the beef fillet tataki with onion ponzu and garlic crisps is a delightfully textural dish. A different runner brings each plate. The service is 5 star, but relaxed, upbeat and jokey.





Somehow, we eat our way through the menu. The beer grilled beef fillet with wasabi salsa must be from a happy Buddhist cow fed on love, so tip-top is the meat. BBQ pork belly in steamed buns with spicy peanut soy is so inventive and original (even if it's not Scott's invention, but more David Chang's at Momofuko): it's like upmarket fairground food, and the fatty, chewy belly of pork against the soft bun with the red onion and green chillies send me to heaven. The Nasu Dengaku, sticky miso grilled aubergine with candied walnuts is sublime. 'Insane, it's so amazing,' according to Child One.

Less successful is the flamed edamame with sake which are boiled then grilled and overcooked. And the spicy tuna maki may look like flowers – like pretty petals of sushi – but the seaweed is too chewy and the rice too heavy.



The food comes quickly, and disappears rapidly. The waiters take it away too fast, almost before my chopsticks are out of the dishes. It's too swift for me; junk food speed, rather than the lingering that prices for little fusion dishes like these deserve (crispy skin duck confit is £14; Kombu roasted Chilean sea bass is £18; sushi is £4 a piece).

Before we can blink, the puddings appear. Pistachio parfait, limoncello jelly, matcha meringue, hazelnut and chocolate mini doughnuts in green tea sugar – and that's just one desert. It's too complicated, too elaborate, a collision of ingredients. But it looks enchantingly like a geometrical 3D diagram. As for the lavender crème brûlée, cinnamon ice-cream, apple pie foam and shortbread pud – too busy for me. But 'it's like riding a unicorn through a rainbow,' enthuses a waiter with a tattoo. I don't have body art. But I can say that overall Scott's food is as magical as dancing with goblins and fairies on the moon.



Kurobata is fashionable. It's full of young professionals, local ladies, families, couples – yes, lots of people on dates and yards of blonde hair. Plus this area is also an outpost of Kuwait.

I don't embarrass my children too much – after all, I fail to ask for the music to be turned down. But I do – oh, watch their faces turn red – request a cushion. There isn't one. In fact, there's only one chair with a soft seat in the entire restaurant. This notwithstanding, I might return. With my own bottom-absorbing paraphernalia. Kurobata is definitely a great place in which to own a healthy mouth, and not just because you need to shout.

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Open at 12 pm; last food orders at 10:30 pm

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*Caroline Phillips is an award-winning freelance journalist who contributes to publications from Sunday and daily newspapers to glossy magazines and various luxury websites. To see more of her work, go to [www.carolinephillips.net](http://www.carolinephillips.net).*

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