

Lords of the Riingo



NEW YORK — Riingo, the name of chef Marcus Samuelsson's new sushi restaurant in Midtown's Alex Hotel was inspired by the Japanese word for "apple" — and Samuelsson is adamant about the fact that he's opening it in New York, the biggest apple of all. "We're not trying to be Tokyo," Samuelsson says as he walks through his rather multicultural new boite. "We're New York."

When Samuelsson says that, he means that Riingo is not your typical sushi-conveyor belt kind of joint. It's more of a melting pot, which translates into options on the menu. "If you want four slices of sushi and a steak, I want to be able to do that for you," he says. "It's food from an immigrant's eye." There's miso soup, yes, and top-of-the-line sashimi, but also braised pork belly with honey glazed garlic, poached bass with octopus and wild mushrooms and beer-braised beef short ribs with an apple puree.

It's all in the name of entertainment, says Samuelsson, who came from Sweden in 1995 and slept on a massage table in his first New York apartment. "It's a one-stop unit. You can have a meeting here, but you can also bring your friends. You don't have to choose between fun and good at Riingo, and there are maybe only five restaurants in the city like that."

It's a departure for Samuelsson, who is also the chef at one "great" — as he calls it — restaurant in the city, Aquavit, which he insists is a "completely different experience." "It drives a completely different clientele and it's often a place for special occasions," he says, before glancing down to his sweatshirt and jeans. "I can't be seated there wearing what I'm wearing right now."

And the down-to-earth attitude comes through in Glen Coben's design. Although it features a Carrera marble staircase leading up to a large mezzanine, there also is a "democratic" chef's table, a.k.a. the sushi bar, which is made of several slabs of Corian, peering into an open kitchen, and a large banquette covered in kimono fabrics — what Coben and Samuelsson call the Bento Box.

"There's a challenge with hotel restaurants to establish the restaurant as a restaurant," says Coben, who worked for many years with David Rockwell and went out on his own four years ago. Since then he's designed Moda, an Italian restaurant in Midtown; Washington Park, Jonathan Waxman's short-lived but critically heralded lower Fifth Avenue spot, and an in-progress project called The Neptune Room, a restaurant he can't discuss yet, except to say it will open on the Upper West Side.

At Riingo, Coben specifically stayed away from Scandinavian materials and lighter wood because of Samuelsson's background with Aquavit. "But Japanese modern design has Scandinavian influence, so it's inevitable that we came back to it."

The whole place became a cultural smorgasbord after all: small pieces of artwork on the wall featuring international maps, Scandinavian chairs, Finnish sushi boats, Swedish sushi bar chairs.

"We also have a lot of American cooks cooking for us," Samuelsson throws in, with a laugh.

— Marshall Heyman



The bar at Riingo.



Marcus Samuelsson and Glen Coben at Riingo's sushi bar.