



hakata nihon ryori

Mohamed Sultan's newest Japanese outlet serves up great ramen – and, er, pasta, too.

#01-03, 33 Mohamed Sultan Road. Tel: 6836-1039 **OPEN** Mon-Sat 11.30am-3pm; Mon-Thu 6pm-midnight, Fri & Sat 6pm-2am; Sun & PH (dinner only) 6pm-midnight

What: Very quietly, Mohamed Sultan Road is turning into a veritable foodie's haven. Happily, the spread is eclectic, including a rash of bars, patisseries, French, Italian and Iranian joints. But a clear Japanese note dominates, undoubtedly, a response to the fairly large concentration of Japanese expats living in the area. The recently opened Hakata Nihon Ryori is itself book-ended by two other Japanese restaurants. It may be still too early to rechristen Mohamed Sultan as Little Tokyo, but that day approaches.

The look: Startlingly spare and a little Nordic in its pale pine (vener) palette swathing the counter spaces. I rather like the wallpaper with the subtle bamboo motifs.

The food: The cherubic Chef Steven Liaw's outlet at Hong Leong Shopping Centre is apparently a magnet for Japanese families, and I assume he's trying to replicate the winning formula at Mohamed Sultan. Taking his cue from the name Hakata — a ward in Kyushu, Japan's southernmost island — Liaw focuses on Kyushu cuisine. Which is to say that, in addition to the usual suspects of yakitori,



KARUBI

shabu shabu and sukiyaki, there's plenty of delightfully springy ramen and fragrant pork-based soups. There isn't, however, any *fugu* (puffer fish), a Kyushu delicacy, on the menu.

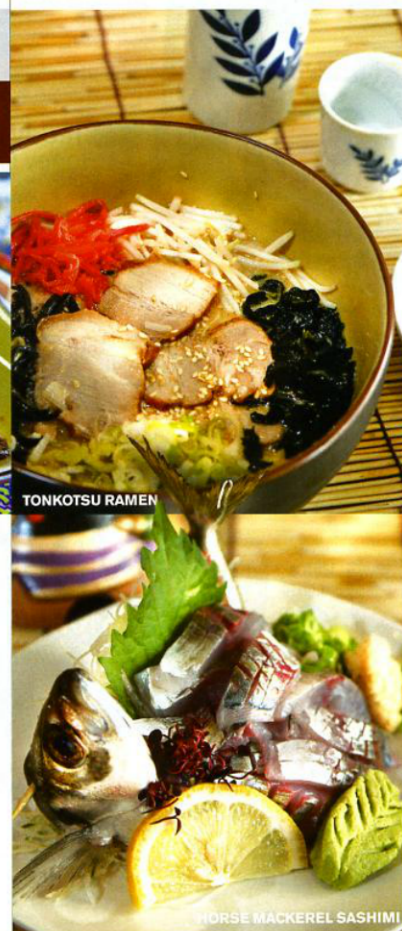
The sashimi selection... is varied enough. Horse mackerel sashimi (seasonal price) — all fresh and seaweedy and lovely with grated ginger — arrived at the table with the tiles of pale flesh snuggled up against the fish bones. If you ask nicely, the bones are whisked away and deep-fried to a lovely crunchy finish.

The house specials of ramen... are worth investigation, especially the lovely

tonkotsu (\$10). The Maggi-mee-like noodles are a perfect foil for the peppery, sweet pork slices; translucent scallions; and pork stock, milky from the 10-hour-long cooking process. What floored me, though, was how well done the spaghetti mentaiko (\$10) was. For starters, the pasta is perfectly al dente, putting to shame any number of Italian restaurants around town. And with nothing more than a little salt, pepper, and the almost colourless fine-grainy finish of cod roe for company, the dish is transformed. Through some strange alchemy with the heat and oil, the roe actually tastes like cheese.

Also yum: Perfect with a steaming bowl of rice is the karubi (\$20), thick slices of beef ribs that are satisfyingly oily, seared and sweet. And the dobinmushi (\$10) is a teapot of seafood and nori-infused stock, hiding within its clear depths toasted, woody top notes.

Rating: ★★★★★ A very pleasant pit-stop for some old-fashioned Japanese sustenance. ■



TONKOTSU RAMEN

HORSE MACKEREL SASHIMI