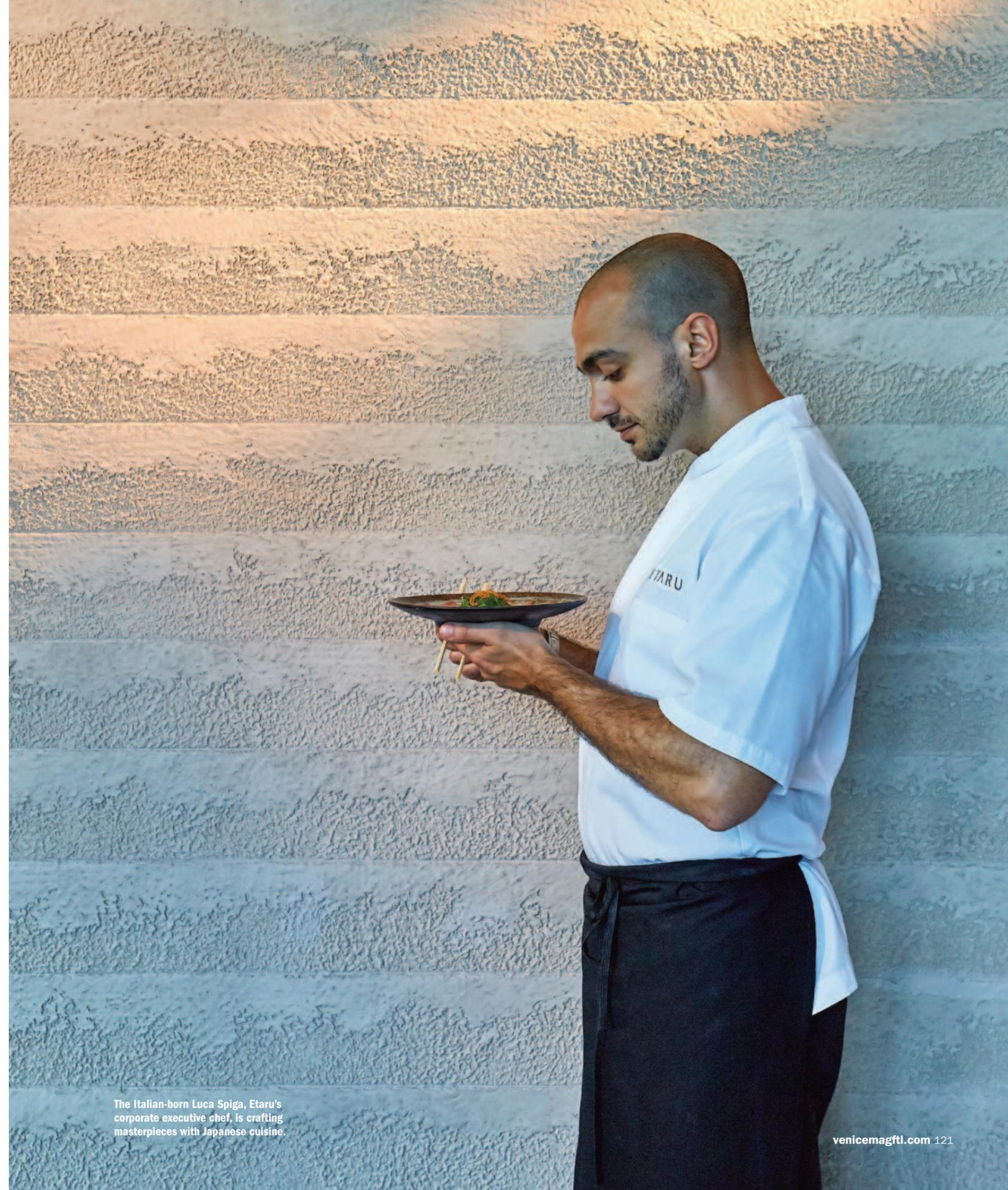


THE ART IS IN THE DETAILS

At Etaru Las Olas, it's all about applying precision with an artful touch.

BY JOHN TANASYCHUK PHOTOGRAPHY BY KELLY STERLING



The Italian-born Luca Spiga, Etaru's corporate executive chef, is crafting masterpieces with Japanese cuisine.

It's 8 o'clock on a Saturday and the kitchen at Etaru Las Olas, the 4-month-old modern Japanese restaurant in Fort Lauderdale, is in full rush.

Luca Spiga, Etaru's corporate executive chef, is chatting up guests who've scored a spot at the popular 20-seat counter that looks into the open kitchen. No dish leaves Spiga's kitchen without him first giving it a glance. Chargrilled scallops are lined up like soldiers and dusted with crushed wasabi. Wagyu gunkan, a kind of Japanese beef tartare, are capped with osetra caviar and scallions. Sushi rolls are meticulously filled and tightened. Everything is Instagram-ready.

Tour the menu with Spiga, and you begin to understand that his artful presentation is key to the restaurant's philosophy. The precisely composed dishes, Spiga says, challenge the 30 members of his kitchen to maintain and improve their skills with the discipline he learned at two Michelin-starred London restaurants.

"At Etaru, we're all about the details," says Spiga, who first joined Etaru's sister restaurant Roka in London in 2011.

Spiga discovered Japanese cuisine while working his way through some of the world's finest cooking traditions. He's gone from the perfect tomato in Sardinia to the best pastry in London to the picture-perfect Etaru. Along the way, he became obsessed with how professional chefs work, how they treat ingredients and how quality is in the particulars.

An example of his experience comes together in the black cod that's marinated in yuzu miso and served with pickled radish. It's one of Etaru's signature dishes and appears on plates like a clever art installation ready for viewers to ponder. Do take the time to look before consuming.

It took 72 hours for that cod to get from the hand of a chef to the chopsticks of a diner. The cod is first cut into uniform 200-gram fillets and placed in a 24-hour brine that not only enhances the flavors of the sea but also provides a firmer, almost crisp exterior and a creamy interior. That's because the salt cooks the fish—just a little—from the outside in. The fillets are then marinated in a yuzu miso mixture for two days, leaving them with a subtle citrus umami flavor when grilled over charcoal on the Japanese robata grill.

That robata grill, fueled with two kinds of charcoal—wood for smokiness and compressed charcoal for high heat—is the centerpiece of Etaru's open kitchen, both in Fort Lauderdale and in the Hallandale Beach location that launched in 2017.

When ready to serve, the cod fillet is nestled inside a dried hoba leaf, a species of magnolia. It's plated with radish pickled in a sugar, salt, seaweed and vinegar mixture that provides a bright contrast to the sweet and fishy cod. Like all dishes at Etaru, the cod is served on a unique piece of dinnerware made in Japan. Don't bother asking for the manufacturer. No one will tell you.

But ask the Italian-born Spiga how he came to appreciate the ingredients, flavors and cooking techniques of Japanese food and the conversation goes to Quartu Sant'Elena, the city on the island of Sardinia where he grew up.



The sashimi platter with semi-fatty tuna, yellowtail, salmon-yellowtail tartare and chile dressing, plus oysters with ponzu and tapioca-wagyu sushi.

“Italian cuisine is a simple cuisine,” Spiga says. “I always use the example of a perfectly ripe tomato that perhaps came from the garden of my grandmother. All it really needs is olive oil, salt and pepper.” Just four ingredients can create a perfect combination of sweet, sour and creamy oiliness.

Likewise, in Japanese cooking, the freshest piece of fish becomes perfection with just wasabi and soy sauce. “It doesn’t need 20 ingredients or 20 sauces or 20 garnishes,” he says. “Japanese cuisine is very simple, but the quality of the product has to be perfect.”

He points to Etaru’s kampachi sashimi, another signature showstopper always ready for its close-up. It gets its visual oomph first from the thin overlapping slices of Panamanian cobia, arranged in a circular pattern on the edge of the plate. It’s splashed with a pungent yuzu, soy and truffle oil dressing, plated with a tiny pile of a leafy green cousin of arugula called mizuna and topped with a dollop of razor-thin shreds of pickled sweet potato.

Unlike in some restaurant kitchens, Spiga insists his chefs use knives instead of slicing machines to achieve both those perfect cobia slices and the fine shreds of potato.

“We want the chef to be a skilled chef,” he says. “The more work we do with our hands, the better it is for the chef.”

Because every dish on Etaru’s menu is consumed with chopsticks—or, in the case of lamb chops, by hand—chefs must have outstanding knife skills. The restaurant’s success depends on their competence. Each Etaru chef is required to switch cooking stations every three months to learn everything about the menu, and there’s no such thing as an Etaru prep cook.

“I believe a chef needs to know how to prepare the foods and how to cook them,” Spiga says. “Every chef is running a station and is responsible for that station.”

Etaru’s sushi chefs go through even more rigorous training. “In Japan, sushi chefs can spend five years just washing rice and getting to understand how to clean and cut fish,” he says. “Of course, that’s not true at Etaru, but minimum training to become a sushi chef here is one year. You can’t learn sushi in three months.”

Additionally, chefs have an informal continuing education program in the Etaru kitchen, where Spiga takes time to show them how to properly sharpen a knife or to explain why he only buys the fermented soybean paste known as miso from Japan. It starts with higher-quality soybeans and is held in higher-quality barrels than in other countries.

While Spiga has no formal culinary education, he witnessed his grandparents earn their living by growing and selling fruits and vegetables. He says his father is also a fine home cook who prefers to use a wood fire to grill the sea bream and branzino so abundant off the coast of Sardinia.

During his teen years, Spiga worked in tourist restaurants as a waiter or kitchen helper and took off to England after high school to broaden not only his culinary skills but also his worldview. He landed at Locanda Locatelli, one of the first Italian restaurants in London to receive a Michelin star. As is the case in most European kitchens, he started at the bottom of the ladder—but he quickly became a pastry chef, ultimately managing a staff of four by age 23.

“I believe every chef needs to start from pastry,” he says. “Pastry gives you discipline because you need to respect the method, the procedure, the recipe. If you put 10 grams less or 10 grams more or use a different method, it doesn’t come out the same. The mousse is going to split, the parfait isn’t going to be soft or the ice cream is not going to be creamy. If you already

The Finer Things

Chef Luca Spiga’s attention to detail reaches far and wide, as seen in these three signature strokes.

■ Each large ice cube on the sushi platters is crystal clear instead of cloudy.

■ Raw oysters are topped with ponzu tapioca, finely chopped kimchi and shredded scallions.

■ Korean-spiced lamb chops are carved to identical size. They’re grilled and plated with a dollop of spicy gochujang and four identical batons of cucumber kissed with sesame dressing. The finished product is an abstract expressionist masterpiece.



coconut with passion
fruit and raspberry.



Kampachi sashimi with yuzu truffle dressing, mizuna and pickled vegetables.

have the discipline for pastry when you go into the kitchen, you will be more precise. If a short rib has to cook for eight hours, you need to cook it for eight hours, not seven or nine.”

After two years of making pastries at Locanda Locatelli, Spiga worked alongside Michelin-starred chef Marcus Wareing at his French restaurant. Spiga says the experience taught him that the hierarchy of a classic European kitchen is a great lesson in discipline.

And then Japanese cuisine came calling. Spiga started at Roka London, again at the bottom rung in a position known as commis chef, or a junior jack-of-all-trades.

“I didn’t know ingredients,” Spiga says. “I didn’t know the culture. I didn’t know the cooking methods. I told myself, ‘I’m going to do this for one year and then do something else.’ But after seven years, I’m still here.”

Spiga has watched his company grow into multiple locations and multiple concepts—including Miami’s Zuma—but quality has remained the focus. While many growing restaurant companies look to increase revenue,

Spiga says that’s not so at Etaru.

“Yes, our company is getting bigger, but our priority is to make sure the guests are getting what they pay for,” he says, adding that nothing kills a chef’s motivation quicker than being told he has to cut corners.

Spiga even gets to show off his pastry background at Etaru by overseeing the creation of a don’t-miss piece de resistance: the smoked coconut with passion fruit frozen parfait and raspberry. It starts with a European-style passion fruit frozen parfait with a golden mango sauce at the center. The parfait gets its smoky flavor after the chef immerses a hot piece of charcoal into hot milk before it’s poured into a spherical mold. The delicate frozen ball is then rolled in smoked coconut flakes. A piece of nori seaweed gets a powdered sugar coating before being placed on top. It’s served perched atop a pile of chopped house-made mochi, frozen raspberries and lychee.

It’s a magnificent fruit still life. “The details we implement in every single ingredient and in every single component on the plate make it look like a painting,” Spiga says. ■



Scallops with yuzu mayo and seasoning.