A trio of restaurants in New York pairs eastern food and western wine

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BRUSHSTROKE

"I'm making it up," says sommelier Sejo Yang about the 160 bottle cellar he built in his one-year-old Brushstroke, or haute Asian cuisine restaurant based on the concept of kaiseki, a series of beautifully presented dishes forming a blank and you'll fill it sense of occasion.

He doesn't mean "making it up" in the sense that his wines fit aren't sold. He's worked as the sommelier at top-notch New York Japanese restaurants Sakeya, Kyo, and Kazu, originally picking up wine knowledge as a way to talk to customers about sake, but to come up with a serious wine list that works with Brushstroke's cuisine. Yang had to change his taste, "I have this mindset that we should have more wines, but we are trying to do kaiseki,"

Brushstroke is itself a little unconventional. A collaboration between New York chef David Bondley and a culinary school in Osaka, Japan, the restaurant was conceived as a way to expose Japanese chefs to new influences and ingredients while building on traditional cooking techniques. Japan-born chef has worked in the kitchen, though Bondley himself has been known to drop in on an occasion, working shoulder to shoulder with the cooks.

"On a Tokyo street corner, Brushstroke's airy, light-filled dining room (Osaka Daily Standard) shows off windows that overlook the street. Natural materials dominate: a polished concrete backsplash in the entryway, blond wood with leaves and imperfections intact in the dining room. Tables have the same look, creating the open kitchen where several cooks work together, using bowls. Their uniformed chefs communicate with their chef's ears to communications.

In the dining room, you can choose between eight- or 16-course set menus (the prices are available to choose). Though the dishes change frequently, there is a general progression to the order, beginning with seasonal vegetables and moving from steamed to cooked fish, then pork or duck, finally a rice mirepoix before dessert.

"Seasonally is a concept, open breaded just winces, eating, summer, fall and fall here. Food such as bitter and sweet are for only 6 weeks and then are gone. A severe menu that the curry blossom stands in full bloom on the plate of a vegetable dish had just begun to open the week before.

The chef's note: the sauce extends to the wine as well. Yang chooses new by the glass wines every month, often with seasonality in mind. What is delicious in the winter might change to be more reflective in spring or Chablis in the summer, lighter, greener crispier at the days get warmer.

Yang's wine-pairing ideas originate from a thought process that comes come "I was thinking about the color yellow," he says of the first course, a delicate plate of buttery baby vegetable enroled in a light yellow miso-marinated sauce, "and my vision of Asian was always yellow." On the side of Vietnamese, he pairs out herediated blends with dominating flavors of oyster and vanilla. His choice, the 2010 Primo, a Russian River bottle fermented in stainless-steel, in crisp and spicy, developing a sturdy core alongside the food.

It's not enough, however, to think about just the dish in relation to the wine, says Yang. Because the courses in the set menu exist as parts of a whole, he must consider the progression of wines during the meal as well. A trained composer of classical and jazz music, he compares a 10-course meal with something to a long-form piece of music. There must be slow parts that build to crescendos, adagio, and allegro. Within a meal, he likes to build to these highpoints, what he calls "bom-beau pairings."

As an example of one of these pairings, Yang serves an Ennio Antonio Falco Caravaggio with grilled pork belly marinated in 3-year Kosho (a fermented seasoning of citrus peel, chili pepper, and salt) and topped with a black garlic sauce. "People don't think about Shinsei at all," says Yang, noting that a lighter preparation might ruin his meal, an off-dry Pinot Gris. But the aromatic in the dark sauce and the Shinsei are a lock, both cut into with hints of sweetness. The Blushed Almond and smoke notes in the Shinsei also fall in line with the grilled, fatty meat.

Most customers order bottles of the list rather than pairings for the menu, according to Yang. And he's ready to guide them, whatever their preference. "There's always something that works with the wine," he says. Although maybe more telling in his choice for a catch-all pairing, "Champagne. Always Champagne." — J.F.