

food & wine

Say hello to Azuma Den, the new restaurant calling East Hotel home

Amy Martin

WHEN Bisa Hospitality was testing the menu for its upcoming restaurant, brand director Dion Bisa had one instruction for her chefs.

"Make me what you make at home."

Sure, the tofu dish that was sitting in front of her was fine, but she wanted it to sing.

After all, this was a dish that wasn't just new to the menu, it was going to help set the scene at a brand new restaurant at East Hotel.

Azuma Den will open its doors next month as the latest offering from Bisa Hospitality, which also owns East Hotel, as well as Agostinis, Joe's Bar and Cafe Sosta.

It marks a new direction for the Canberra-based business, which until now has had Italian food at the heart of its culinary offerings.

This latest venture focuses on Korean and Japanese foods, with Bisa Hospitality executive chef Junho "Luffy" Koh and sous chef Jun Kim at the helm, with some encouragement from Bisa.

"I remember our executive chef [Junho Koh] cooked this tofu dish for tasting, and it was deep fried and crispy, and ... a little bit bland, a little bit boring," she says.

"And I was like 'Is this what you do at home?' And he goes, 'Oh, no, we don't cook it like that at home ... but it's not fried'. And I said, 'Bring [your family version] next time we do a tasting, it's going to be one of my favourite dishes'.

"And it was. It was this warm, silken tofu with this incredibly complex chilli sauce around it, which just warms you up, and it's like eating a savoury custard.

"But I had to draw out [the chefs'] confidence in believing that their cuisine was worthy of a beautiful restaurant, and it's just because they're humble."

Taking over the space left by Muse, the Korean-Japanese menu is a new direction for Bisa Hospitality, with Azuma being the Japanese word for east.



Bisa Hospitality executive chef Junho "Luffy" Koh will lead Azuma Den, at East Hotel. Pictures supplied

But the restaurant wasn't the original plan for the space.

When Muse first closed in August last year, the plan was to open a breakfast space, with Agostinis taking over the breakfast offering in the interim period.

But then Bisa was struck with inspiration. What if Agostinis continued doing breakfast full-time, and they used the space for something else?

"Why don't we create something fun and new and different?" Bisa mused.

"I just had this crazy idea ... [of] using fire and a grill, because we'd been looking at that anyway for future projects.

"It's different to Agostinis and everyone's into healthy eating so it means that we can do a lot of grilled food with great flavour. And who doesn't love Asian food and Italian food? It's the best of both worlds."

This is the first time Koh has cooked Korean or Japanese food in his professional career. He has trained in Italian cooking techniques since he started cheffing, most recently at Agostinis.

But Azuma Den is still like a full circle moment. It's the cuisine that Koh grew up eating, and even while he was plating up other cuisines for paying customers, it's Korean food that he makes day to day.

Meanwhile, Kim started his career as a chef in the Korean army, cooking three meals a day for 150 soldiers. After coming to Australia, he then worked in a Japanese restaurant and learnt the art of Japanese knife skills and its respect for simple ingredients.

"I think it's an interesting balance between the two cuisines," Bisa says.

"Japanese is so clean and kind of refined. And then you get smacked with the Korean kimchi or chilli.

"The combination is so good in that way. It's a bit of playfulness as well. You can bring things out that you like in both cuisines."

And the cornerstone combining both cuisines is the hibachi, which will be on show at the centre of the restaurant for all to see.

It's a sight to behold, but it's also a whole new way of cooking. Cooking with fire doesn't have the same control as a stove or oven.

"Fire is different, you know, because you have to respond to it. You can't really control it as much as gas or induction, but it's got theatre as well, which is nice," Bisa says.

"But the restaurant space itself is incredible. We loved Muse, but we're not Muse, and we don't want people to go, 'Oh, it looks just like Muse'. So the majority of the bookshelves are gone, which is sad for book lovers. [Interior designer] Kelly Ross is doing this installation over one of the massive bookshelves, which is like a Japanese loom, and she's made it like a tapestry."

AZUMA DEN

by BISA · HOSPITALITY



East Hotel, Kingston

Opening August