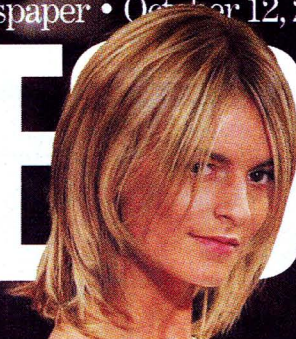


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# En Garde



Reika Yo in Zia Ziprin.



**NEW YORK** — Reika Yo likes to say that En, the Japanese brasserie she's just opened in the West Village, started out as a joke.

Yo, 30, a musician by training, was studying jazz piano in London and didn't want to leave the city. But, because her visa was running out, she returned home to Japan, where her family owns a chain of 25 restaurants.

Once there, her brother, Buneki, who is in the family business, told her she needed to settle on a career. "You've got to get some kind of job," he said. "You can speak English. Why don't you open a restaurant in New York?" Buneki thought he was playing around, but it got Yo thinking. Two weeks later, she bought a ticket to Manhattan.

Yo spent a month in the city in early 2000 eating out every night. She tried Nobu, Bond Street and Balthazar. (At the same time, Buneki was talking to Danny Meyer about opening a Gramercy Tavern in Tokyo; it didn't work out.)

"If you say 'Japanese restaurant' in New York, people think it's a sushi restaurant. The real Tokyo food is not here," she says, citing the lack of rice and noodle dishes, steamed and fried fish and handcrafted tofu.

In September of that year, Yo moved to New York for good. Looking at more than 100 spaces, it took two years to find the spot. "We changed our minds so many times," she says, though she knew she wanted to be somewhere downtown. "Most spaces there have narrow entrances," she explains. Her brother would take a look and be disappointed. "It's too narrow," he'd say. "This is a place for the eel to sleep." Finally, they settled on the corner of Hudson and Leroy, the former location of Room, an interior shop. It took a year to sign the lease, and then another year to design the 5,500-square-foot dining room.

Her brother has been involved mostly financially. "He sent four chefs from Japan," Yo says. (En's menu is quite similar to the family's restaurants in Japan, though selections of sushi and sashimi have been widened.) One of the chefs needed a couch, so she passed along hers, which is why her Chelsea apartment these days is looking especially bare, with a piano to plunk and her French bulldog, Bebe, to play with. Besides, she has to spend most of her time in the restaurant.

"I'm nervous every day," she says. "I had no idea what kind of clientele I was going to get. I wanted to introduce it to people here. Not just Japanese people, but the local people of New York."

It shouldn't be difficult, with all of her fabulous friends — such as Sean McPherson, Daryl Hannah and Björk — who all dined at one of En's initial private tastings. As Four makes many of Yo's outfits and she relies on a fashion designer friend named Zia Ziprin to take care of much of the rest. (Ziprin also designed En's uniforms.) Yo also wears a lot of especially challenging Comme des Garçons pieces and likes Ann Demeulemeester. "I love mixing stuff," she says. "I go to Portabello Market in London a lot."

One wouldn't expect anything less from a hipster who played in a P-Funk cover band as a teenager in Japan. But her New York friends all came from her first apartment when she moved to New York on 19th Street.

"There were so many interesting people there," she says. "My New York world started from that building."

— Marshall Heyman