

PHOTOGRAPHY / SAMANTHA SIN

Bird on a Fire

If you're in the know, you've already been to yakitori nirvana, Yardbird. If you aren't...get in line behind **CHRISTINA KO**

Yardbird



PATRON AND EXECUTIVE CHEF MATT ABERGEL



POSSIBLY THE COOLEST JOINT ON BRIDGES STREET

ALL YOU NEED to know about Yardbird can be encapsulated in 10 words: they don't take reservations, and the food is frickin' good.

But in the interest of filling these pages, I'll elaborate. Yardbird is the brainchild of Matt Abergel, the former head chef at Zuma who trained at Masa in New York, an omakase sushi restaurant launched by Masa Takayama that once reigned as the most expensive restaurant in the US. The executive chef and owner took a different approach to his own project: "Masa and Zuma are like night and day. There's nothing similar about them. But they taught me important things: I always knew I didn't want to open a restaurant like Masa, and I always knew I didn't want to open a restaurant like Zuma."

In fact, Yardbird is like no other restaurant in Hong Kong. In New York, perhaps, it would be one of those dime-a-dozen, breezily hip joints enjoyed by yuppies and scenesters, though not coddled by them. On Hong Kong's Bridges Street, it's a full-on phenomenon, packed to the brim nightly.

Some chalk it down to a clever manipulation of restaurant policies - no reservations and no service charge, effecting a sort of democratic dining movement that's bizarrely appealing in our market (nobody loves a queue like a true Hongkonger). Others suggest it's the vibe it emits: a window-fronted neighbourhood joint lit



YARDBIRD IS A FULL-ON PHENOMENON

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mainly by the glow of the refrigerators, with bar-style seating and high tables packed closely enough to create a vortex of chatter that ensures the atmosphere is always buzzing. Throw in a poppin' 1980s hip-hop soundtrack featuring the likes of vintage Wu-Tang and De La Soul for the kind of cacophony created only by the cool. And don't think no one's mentioned the calibre of the waiters - knowledgeable enough that you're comfortable leaving the ordering up to them and, if you're one who appreciates a little boy-shaped eye candy, not too hard to look at, either. Abergel insists this isn't a hiring policy: "That was not intentional. I think a lot of it is their attitude - they're happy, and that's attractive. I guess good-looking kids, they just hang out together," he jokes. "Don't quote me on that."

Sure, these things matter. But I think it boils down to the food: myriad interpretations of chicken parts from beak to tail. "It comes from a traditional yakitori-style restaurant, a

place where it's really relaxed. My favourite restaurants in the world have always been in that style - a restaurant that focuses on one thing and does that really well," says Abergel. To say that Yardbird only serves one thing is cheating a little bit, because it's really one animal, dissected into at least a dozen really awesome ways to eat it. Chicken is often relegated to the bastard-child position in the culinary world, but Abergel has picked up on its chief merit: its ability to be a canvas for other flavours.

So if you came looking for stiff white breasts, then you might as well go straight to Wanchai's red-light establishments, because you won't find any of that here. The food is seasoned boldly, so much so that each bite almost demands an accompanying shot of cooling sake, and to that end, Yardbird has a drinks list that exceeds its food menu, including its own brand of *junmai* sake.

The appetiser that has everyone talking, funnily enough, doesn't actually feature



chicken, though its sauce is derived from a chicken-wing recipe. Salty, spicy, sweet and crunchy, the “KFC” or Korean Fried Cauliflower hits you with a jambalaya of flavours that seems inspired by the boldness of Cajun seasoning, but is actually – obviously – derived from Korean cuisine. A squeeze of lime adds the final dimension, sour, while a sprinkling of sesame seeds confirms the tastes in Asian territory. The spice lingers on your tongue like a good French kiss, so you’ll be licking your lips suggestively and begging for second base before you know it.

Liver mousse arrives with endearingly miniature “onion rings” – generously salted, battered shallots that would make a great bar snack. Alone, they verge on the thirst-inducing, but together with the whipped chicken liver, an airy and lightly pungent concoction cut with chopped spring onions, it’s heaven on a slice of bread. That’s not to discount the quality of the



“KFC” – KOREAN FRIED CAULIFLOWER

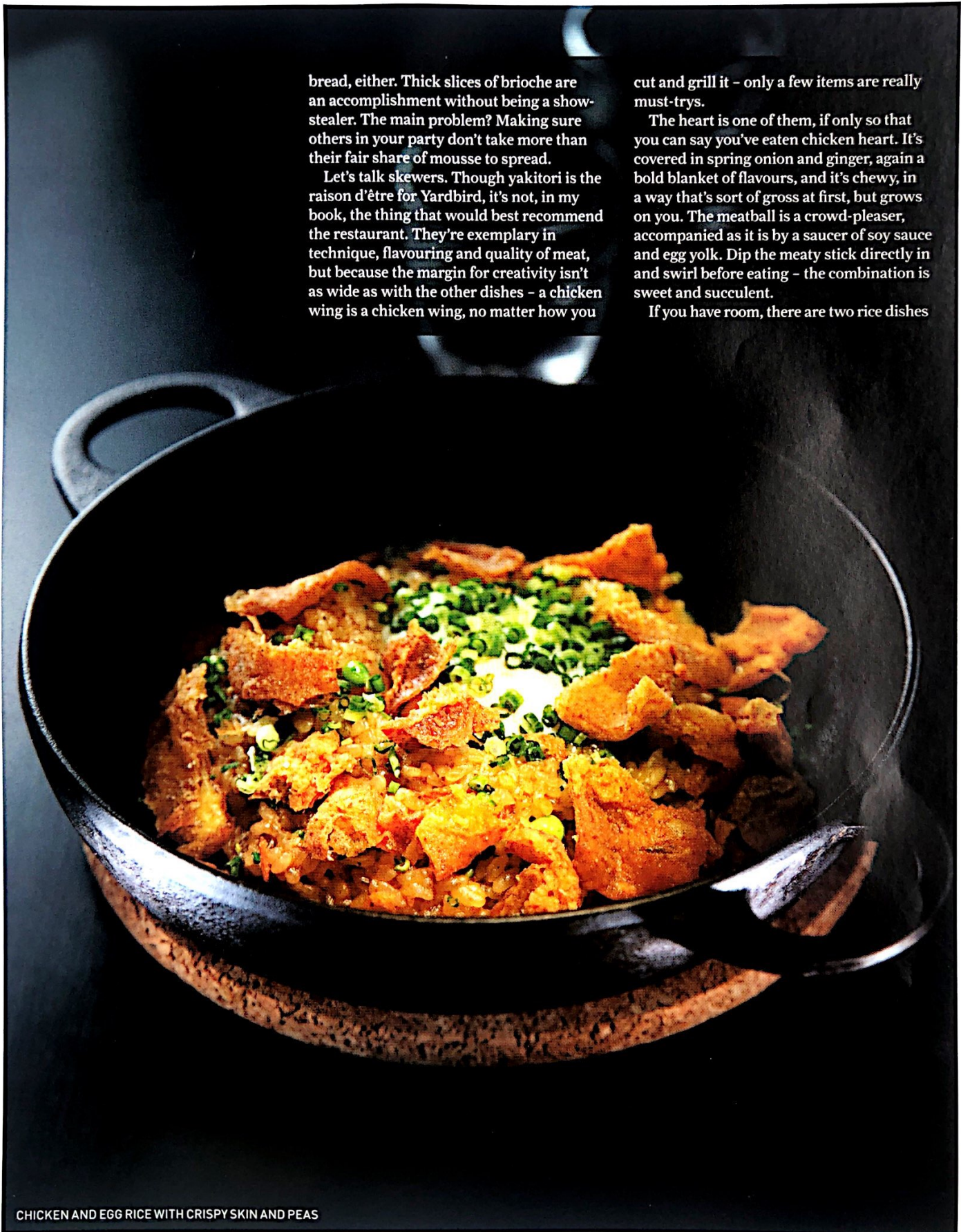
bread, either. Thick slices of brioche are an accomplishment without being a show-stealer. The main problem? Making sure others in your party don't take more than their fair share of mousse to spread.

Let's talk skewers. Though yakitori is the *raison d'être* for Yardbird, it's not, in my book, the thing that would best recommend the restaurant. They're exemplary in technique, flavouring and quality of meat, but because the margin for creativity isn't as wide as with the other dishes - a chicken wing is a chicken wing, no matter how you

cut and grill it - only a few items are really must-trys.

The heart is one of them, if only so that you can say you've eaten chicken heart. It's covered in spring onion and ginger, again a bold blanket of flavours, and it's chewy, in a way that's sort of gross at first, but grows on you. The meatball is a crowd-pleaser, accompanied as it is by a saucer of soy sauce and egg yolk. Dip the meaty stick directly in and swirl before eating - the combination is sweet and succulent.

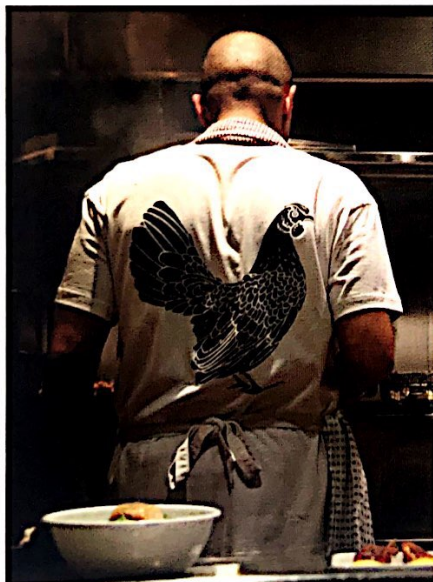
If you have room, there are two rice dishes



CHICKEN AND EGG RICE WITH CRISPY SKIN AND PEAS



LIVER MOUSSE WITH MILK BREAD AND CRISPY SHALLOTS



CHICKEN MEATBALL AND HEART YAKITORI

It doesn't get heartier than egg-lubricated fried rice, piping hot in an iron casserole dish

to choose from, as well as rice cakes seasoned with *furikake* (Japanese rice seasoning), a simple but inspired creation that could be replicated at home – I know because I've tried, with happy results. Hungrier patrons whose stomachs refuse to be placated by beer will need an earnest rice dish, and it doesn't get heartier than egg-lubricated fried rice, piping hot in an iron casserole dish and liberally invaded by peas and crispy chicken skin.

The downside is the dish it arrives in, too hot to be handled by bare hands, which means that it can't be consumed while standing. It's common to grab a cocktail in the waiting area or just outside the venue while waiting for a table, but some have even taken to ordering plates as well – not just

smaller dishes, but entrées, too. It would behoove them to see, perhaps, a second branch open to accommodate the crowd.

"Because of all the press, people are coming out of the woodwork, offering us things," Abergel admits. "I'm having fun doing what I'm doing now. I'm not going to say no, there's no plans to do anything. But there's no immediate plans. It's only been [five] months, I don't want to get ahead of myself and lose control. I'm not that hungry."

He may not be – but there are certainly diners who are, I'm sure. "The fact that I got this off the ground and turned it into what I wanted, I'm happy with that," he insists. Nice to see a man who isn't looking his gift horse in the mouth – or in his case, gift chicken. ■