



"I want to prove that it's O.K. to be different in omakase."



Eugeniu Zubco

On the 37th floor of a Fifth Avenue tower, the 31-year-old Moldovan sushi chef and Masa alum is leading Manhattan's most exclusive new omakase counter



BY JENNIFER NOYES

Thirty-seven floors above Fifth Avenue, a Moldovan chef is serving some of the rarest Wagyu in America to 12 people at a time. The setting is Yūgin, an omakase counter tucked inside Coco's at Colette, a private members' club in Manhattan's General Motors Building. The beef is Omi Wagyu from Shiga Prefecture—the oldest Wagyu lineage in Japan, dating back more than 400 years—access to which Eugeniu Zubco spent years cultivating. In New York, he's encountered it only once before: during his decade at Masa.

Zubco isn't Japanese. In the omakase world, that still matters. He doesn't pretend otherwise. "At the beginning, I was insecure," he admits about opening Yūgin this past fall. "Many people would give me 'the look' when they came into the restaurant. Some would even ask if they could sit with another chef." Over time, he came to see the doubt as an advantage. "If I could create amazing food, it made the experience even more special."

Zubco's path to haute sushi began in Moldova, which is decidedly not a breeding ground for omakase masters. A lifelong love of cooking led him to train in a slew of kitchens around Europe, before discovering Asian cuisine, his true love, while spending a year working in Vietnam. The country taught him a lesson he never forgot: that freshness and ingredients trump everything else.



The Meiji-period Japanese screen that greets guests at the entrance to Yūgin, on the Upper East Side.

When he arrived in the United States, aged 20, Zubco knew Masa was the obvious destination. “I didn’t go there expecting to become a sushi chef,” he says about the Japanese restaurant, which has held Michelin stars since 2009. “I remember during my interview I made fried rice—it wasn’t perfect, but the chef allowed me to work after seeing my effort.”

What he learned from Masayoshi Takayama extended far beyond technique. “He taught me that it’s not only the food that matters—every aspect of a guest’s dinner needs intention: how you greet them, how you cook, how you present the food, your posture, the stability of the chair, the smoothness of the counter ...” Leaving after 10 years was less a break than it was a natural next chapter. “I’ve always dreamed of having my own sushi restaurant,” says Zubco. “After working under a legendary master, I felt it was time.”

At Yūgin, he’s applying Takayama’s obsessive attention to detail to his own vision. Twelve seats at the counter. No more because, as he explains it, “no matter how good I am, the maximum I can cook for at my highest level is six people at a time.” The other six seats are at an adjoining sushi counter helmed by Taka Chen. “He’s the person I trust with sushi more than anyone else in the world,” says Zubco, who considers Chen a peer rather than a sous-chef.



Left, grilled lobster served in a reduced bisque and layered with caviar, finger lime, uni, and tarragon; right (clockwise from top left of plate), a mushroom tart, Wagyu topped with caviar, lean tuna with grapefruit, and toro with tomato.

The sourcing is almost absurdly privileged. Beyond the Omi Wagyu—historically reserved for elites and sold as medicine to bypass religious consumption laws during Japan’s Edo period—Zubco receives fish directly from Tokyo’s Toyosu Market, sometimes picking it up at the airport himself. “They are my eyes and judgment in Japan,” he says about the Japanese vendors he works with. “I always want them to try my food so they understand my approach.” Zubco’s decade at Masa gave him direct experience negotiating with them. But the deeper currency, he believes, is care. “You can’t rush trust,” he explains. “In many cases, the respect you show toward the product matters even more than the financial aspect.”

Zubco is particularly proud of the pieces no one else can replicate: his soy sauce and shari-zu (the vinegar used for seasoning sushi rice), both homemade using recipes he’s developed over many years, are exclusive to Yūgin. “Many restaurants have access to great seafood,” he notes, “but I’m the only one who knows how to make these two components the way I do.”

Then there are the ceramics. Zubco works with artisans in [Brooklyn](#), South Korea, Pennsylvania, and Japan, but he also throws pieces himself when he can’t find exactly what a dish requires. “Plates are not just vessels,” he says. “They are ingredients themselves.” It only sounds theoretical until you see how inseparable the food is from what holds it.



One of the two six-person counters at Yūgin.

What separates Yūgin from strict traditionalism is not a rejection of form but a willingness to host. Zubco entertains. He explains, reads the room, and adjusts. Sushi may be sushi, but the experience is unmistakably personal.

The space itself—designed by creative director Juan Santa Cruz—matches the beauty Zubco strives for. A Meiji-period Japanese screen greets guests at the entrance. The bar is anchored by two hinoki-wood countertops cut from the same tree and imported from Japan. Cherry blossoms frame the windows, which overlook Central Park.

The menu changes constantly, dictated by both season and guest. If a fish is fatty, he'll grill it. If it's leaner, it becomes sashimi or nigiri. "No fish is ever the same," he says, "but the goal is always outstanding food." He also gauges his audience: guests with later reservations receive adjusted portions and richness levels, assuming they've eaten lightly beforehand. The progression itself is carefully orchestrated. "It's not a steady climb—there are highs and lows. Contrast creates emotion, and without it things can become boring."

This approach reflects Yūgin's guiding principle: *ichigo ichie*, the Japanese philosophy that no moment repeats itself. The same food, served again, cannot re-create the first connection or hinder the feeling of discovery. Zubco encourages guests to stay present, wary of how quickly a screen can flatten an experience meant to be fleeting.



Left, Zubco's scallop Wellington; right, lean tuna topped with uni, caviar, and fresh wasabi.

The chef spent nearly two years searching for the restaurant. "Walking along Fifth Avenue, entering a historic skyscraper, riding a marble elevator to the 37th floor into a sophisticated room—it felt natural." At \$475 per person with just two seatings Tuesday through Saturday, Yūgin is already nearly impossible to book, especially given its limited availability to non-members.

But what Zubco is building extends beyond exclusivity. "I want to prove that it's O.K. to be different in omakase," he says. "Tradition matters, but every tradition started because someone once thought differently." @

Yūgin is located inside Coco's at Colette, on the 37th floor of 767 Fifth Avenue, in New York; pre-paid reservations, at \$475 per person, are available up to four weeks in advance; the restaurant is open Tuesday through Saturday, with two seatings per day taking place between 5:30 and 11 P.M.

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Photos: Adam Slama (Zubco; interiors, both); Blaine Pennington (dishes, all)