

HOTEL

Wasabi Redefined

Diego Gronda dresses one of Taj's most iconic restaurants in a new palette, laying the grounds for a startlingly innovative experience

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The staircase resembles an origami carpet, which unfolds from the top to the bottom. Diego's play on red lacquer is both in keeping with Japanese culture and the fact that it makes a signature statement, even when viewed from the outside

Photograph © Rockwell Group Europe



The arches are clad with high-gloss bronze, making the space seem brighter and more airy (above)



The sushi bar is backed by a wall crafted with Japan's traditional joinery-work, where the joints are anchored by bow-shaped metal pieces

There are some places that are great for a leisurely meal, a relaxed cup of coffee or an indulgent dessert. And then there are other places that root themselves deeply in the psyche, becoming a part of the city's very culture and one with your own consciousness. Wasabi by Morimoto, which has long been a signature restaurant of the Taj Mahal Palace & Towers, Mumbai, is one such place. Which is why it was always going to be interesting to see how a fresh set of creative minds redefined this most essential of Mumbai experiences

And thankfully, Diego Gronda, Managing and Creative Director of the Rockwell Group Europe, does not disappoint. Under his expert design sensibility, the "new" Wasabi unfolds like a "magic box" of red lacquer, approached from the Harbour Bar via an almost theatrical staircase that is meant to resemble a folded origami carpet. This is just one of the many subtle Japanese elements that Diego has brought into this space, highlighting the restaurant's precedents without stumbling into the trappings of oriental kitsch.

Another such facet comes from the wood paneling on the wall behind the sushi bar, which was created using traditional joinery techniques dating back to 18th century Japan. And to complete the fusion with Indian sensibilities, all the crafting of the various pieces has been done in this country: "We are very proud to have worked with Indian artisans on all the elements – for example, the joinery-work was done in Chennai, while the monolithic block of stone for the sushi bar came from Udaipur," explains Diego.

The designer's personal favourite, however, is clearly the private dining room, which now centers around a sculptural round table lit by an oversized custom fixture made from hammered metal. The inspiration came from Diego's various visits to Japan, where he was intrigued by the rituals associated with Miso soup, served in a round bowl. "In some places, it heralds the beginning of a meal; while in others, it marks the conclusion," he explains. At Wasabi, he abstracted this evocative ritual to create an element of discovery: The circular structure seems to open and close down with the arrival and departure of guests. "This creates a feeling of intimacy, as if the space was solely reserved for you," he elucidates. "The whole idea was to capture the essence of the spaces, without trying to recreate the Japanese idiom in a textbook form."

Which works perfectly, because after all, the true essence of any space is derived from the experience it offers. And like its fresh and energetic red palette, this vibrant new Wasabi is indeed an unforgettable experience – one of those places, where dining is not just about the food, and the memories won't start fading away the moment you step out of the door.



The table in the private dining room rotates on its own axis, doing away with the need for extraneous staff and creating an intimate ambience