



Kappo Masa's inner sanctum is a magnet for A-listers such as George and Amal Clooney (left), who dined there earlier this month.

# THAT'S RICH!

Despite middling food and stratospheric prices, VIPs can't get their fill of clubby new Upper East Side eatery Kappo Masa



By **DANA SCHUSTER**

**P**AST the iPad-wielding hostess, down the staircase, past a second hostess — this one backdropped by an electric Cy Twombly — sits a magical, golden-lit basement where New York's elite come to peacock and pick at \$240 maki rolls and \$150 plates of beef tataki.

Kappo Masa, the 82-seat, windowless restaurant from global art dealer Larry Gagosian and famed chef Masayoshi "Masa" Takayama, has drawn in all the right names and all the biggest wallets since opening five months ago in Gagosian's Madison Avenue gallery.

"A lot of the people that go there are FOL — friends of Larry," says society photographer Patrick McMullan. "They are very influential and drive the scene."

Designer Vera Wang tells The Post she's eaten there at least 40 times since its debut. Professional gallivanter Derek Blasberg and his well-heeled pals Instagram so many pics at Kappo

**\$240 sushi!**



Toro with caviar costs \$30 a bite.

Masa, you wonder if they're shilling for the joint. Even newly anointed New Yorkers George and Amal Clooney have made the privileged pilgrimage to the luxe sushi den (George twice this month alone).

"All my friends love it and want to go every night," says designer Nicole Miller, who adores the restaurant's \$26 Peking duck foie gras mini tacos.

Kappo Masa is officially the newest canteen for Manhattan's upper crust, but for those who actually boast a palate (and a budget), the restaurant has been one of New York City's most disappointing openings of the past year.

While the equally clubby Polo Bar (which employs a full extra gatekeeper than Kappo Masa) has the industry's collective tongue wagging for its delicious, relatively affordable comfort food and theatrically on-point waitstaff, Gagosian and Takayama's joint venture has left critics nonplussed. The restaurant has been comically panned for serving up some of

the city's most overpriced — and underwhelming — fare.

"You must be out of your mind to go to a place with zero stars," says Julian Niccolini, co-owner of the Four Seasons restaurant, a Park Avenue society staple with \$60 short ribs, a \$38 mushroom appetizer and two stars.

"A lot of people like to be taken advantage of, and Kappo Masa

See **RICH** on Page 30

# PULSE

# UPPER-CRASS DINING

“THESE REVIEWS ARE THE REVENGE OF THE MIDDLE CLASS. WHAT THEY ARE COMPLAINING ABOUT IS MONEY AND THAT THEY CAN'T AFFORD IT.”

— SOCIALITE R. COURI HAY ON THE NEGATIVE REVIEWS OF KAPPO MASA



Karlie Kloss

Martha Stewart

Robin Wright

Vera Wang

From **RICH** on Page 29

has a perfect address for that: Madison Avenue people don't know how to get rid of their money.”

In December, The Post's Steve Cuozzo dismissed Kappo Masa as an inferior version of Masa's namesake Michelin-starred restaurant in the Time Warner Center, lamenting its absent chef on all four of his visits there.

The New York Times, meanwhile, delivered perhaps the toughest blow when Pete Wells demolished the eatery, writing in January that “the cost of eating at Kappo Masa is so brutally, illogically, relentlessly high, and so out of proportion to any pleasure you may get, that [the pricing's] large numbers start to seem like uninvited and poorly behaved guests at the table.”

Celebrity publicist R. Couri Hay says the bad reviews are just rooted in jealousy. “These reviews are the revenge of the middle class,” says Hay. “What they are complaining about is money and that they can't afford it.”

Some insiders like Danyelle Freeman, founder of restaurantgirl.com, theorize that Kappo Masa is on its way to becoming a Teflon restaurant, “much the same way Cipriani is a critic-proof restaurant.”

“Cipriani is a terrible restaurant with terrible food, [but] you don't see it suffering because of that,” Freeman explains of the famed Italian establishment that's become so synonymous with luxury over the years that patrons happily get gussied up to snack on

mediocre \$60 grilled scampi.

Plus, for label-obsessed New Yorkers, there's no better name tag than “Masa” when it comes to haute cuisine. The chef famously flies in fresh ingredients like clams and octopus daily from as far away as Japan. His NYC flagship, Masa, is the city's single most expensive meal, where dinner for one costs between \$450 and \$600 (that's before tax, tip or drinks).

“With the Masa name, you just know it's the best. I don't have to look at the rating or the review to know it's good. I know it's going to be good,” says Michael Lorber, a real estate agent at Douglas Elliman — where his father, Howard, is chairman — who's dined at Kappo Masa four times (his favorite is the \$45 scoop of white truffle ice cream).

While Lorber admits the restaurant is too lavish to be an everyday spot, for many diners, the scene alone is worth a king's ransom.

“If you hear the word ‘Masa,’ it means expensive, and people go to show they have juice and to demonstrate their social position,” says Richie Notar, owner of swanky Midtown restaurant Harlow. “Larry is powerful and his friends are helping put it on the map. They don't really care that much about food if it's a place they think they should be seen at.”

Perhaps it's of little surprise that the sleek restaurant has been a hit among the fashion crowd. After all, it's elite, expensive and elegantly low-calorie.

Moda Operandi founder Lauren Santo Domingo, Everlane founder Michael

Preysman, model Irina Shayk and Vogue staffers Chloe Malle and Mark Guiducci have all been spotted at the subterranean hangout.

“It's an Upper East Side restaurant that doesn't feel like you're going on an anniversary dinner,” says Joyce Chang, editor-in-chief of Self magazine, who visited Kappo Masa for the first time last week for a Nike dinner.

Wang credits the appeal to Gagosian's “understanding of the scene” and the artistry of Takayama's plates.

“The proportions are so elegant, and that makes it fun eating there. It's not just getting a huge slab of food. It's just very personalized,” says Wang.

Plus, as chef Takayama points out, “The models like it here because we have carb-free, gluten-free pasta made of fish.” Three different types of Masa Surimi pastas (\$24 to \$38), to be exact, which the chef created especially for Kappo Masa so his lithe diners would have health-conscious alternatives.

(Restaurant critic Gael Greene wryly tells The Post that dieting diners make Kappo Masa's prices a bit easier to digest: “If you're on a budget, order accordingly. Chicken wings are cheap and good, too. If you are anorexic, it's even cheaper.”)

Despite the dietary perks, some patrons are getting fed up with Kappo Masa's disappointing fare.

“You go out to dinner, you think I mind how much it is? As long as it's great, it doesn't matter,” says party planner Harriette Rose Katz. “But there's just enough of what you can take of Kappo Masa,” says Katz, who has eaten at



Supermodel Naomi Campbell sits pretty at the restaurant's October opening.



**Carb-free pasta!**

Diet-friendly dishes, such as \$28 bottarga pasta made from seafood, were made specifically to please the city's social X-rays.

the establishment seven times and is sick of the megaprices for meh meals.  
“It's not a warm, fuzzy place where people are very friendly. It's too expensive and they don't make you want to be there. It's a place that is forgettable. Isn't that awful?”

expensive. That's what we need to change a little bit.” In August, he plans to introduce kaiseki, a Japanese tasting menu, which will be even pricier than the current offerings.

Not that Kappo Masa's regulars will mind. “It's a club for the 1 percent of the 1 percent and nobody pretends it's not,” says Hay. “There is a lot of disparity of income and we would like to correct that, but we still have to eat, and we are not going to McDonald's!”

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