

CITY NEWSPAPER

RESTAURANT REVIEW: Tokyo Japanese Restaurant Miso, shiso, and more

By James Leach on December 9, 2009



Ahi tuna, butterfish and salmon sashimi, and miso ramen (pictured, left to right) at Tokyo Japanese Restaurant. PHOTO BY JEFF MARINI

The wall just inside the front door of Tokyo Japanese Restaurant in Henrietta is covered with photographs of people sitting in front of empty basin-sized bowls, their faces flushed with the heat and exertion of taking the Miso Ramen Challenge. Eat a full bowl of the restaurant's incredibly spicy miso ramen in less than 30 minutes and it's free. I didn't bother to count how many people have managed to perform the task (or gone belly up in the attempt), but I know for certain that I'll never be one of them (although I really wish I could be).

Quyen "Peter" Au's miso ramen (\$8.25, \$9.95 as a combo with gyoza) comes in seven levels of spicy intensity, and the waitress who took my order encouraged me to aim low on my spice tolerance. I asked for somewhere between a three and a four, and I was grateful that I listened to her advice: the brim-full bowl of fiery goodness was not too spicy to eat, but certainly pushed the edge of what I could easily endure. Seven must be reserved for people with cast-iron

mouths and stomachs. The huge bowl contained what was surely a full pound of fresh, wonderfully chewy ramen noodles, finely shredded cabbage, sliced green hot peppers, chopped scallions, small rectangles of seaweed, and several slices of gorgeously marbled roasted pork, all floating in a broth the color of a Thai red curry - tan to pink shot through with dots of deep red.

The taste was nothing short of incredible, spicy yet indescribably rich, the garnishes adding heat, brine, crunch, and meat to every bite. Try as I might, I couldn't even finish a third of the bowl, stopping now and then to quench my burning mouth with sake and mop my brow before diving back in.

What all of the folks who have won the Miso Challenge missed out on, or at least I assume they did, was the sensational sushi that Au and his sushi chefs have created at Tokyo. Japanese sushi is often an exercise in minimalism: the chef displays his talent, channeled through several hundred years of highly refined tradition, through laser-precise knifework and an artist's eye for how to best present the fish. American sushi, on the other hand, is often an exercise in exuberance that uses the Japanese tradition as a jumping-off point for interesting combinations of flavors and textures incorporating rather than featuring the fish in the roll (California rolls and their kin are great examples of this). Tokyo exists somewhere between these two extremes, offering simple, technically perfect sushi alongside stunning excess.

While you could order off the menu and have an entirely satisfying experience at Tokyo's sushi bar, you'd do much better allowing Au to decide what and how much to send you. A recent meal started with a carafe of nigori sake - unlike the more familiar sakes, this one is milky rather than clear, is usually served cold, and has a fruity flavor profile - and a kampachi salad (\$6.95). I was immediately intrigued by this artful tangle of long shreds of lightly pickled daikon, roasted garlic chips, vibrant green and white radish sprouts, bits of hot pepper, and strips of rich kampachi (a distant relative of yellowtail) in a light vinaigrette. The flavor was delicate with spicy notes from the radish and pepper, all of which complemented the briny, meaty fish - a warm-up act for the main event.

On the heels of the salad, we received some of the best-looking tuna I've ever seen. The plate had two pieces of ruby-red fish: a lozenge of it dressed with a dot of wasabi and finished with extra virgin olive oil, and a rose-shaped wasabi-dotted piece atop a shiso leaf. The flavor was akin to the most sensational rare steak you've ever eaten. The olive oil and the anise-scented shiso conspired with the tuna's beefy texture, enhancing rather than drowning out the briny character of the fish (\$5.95).

Next up, two white Chinese soup spoons containing roses made out of paper-thin slices of lemon and salmon, the centers of the flowers heaped with orange salmon roe and florescent green wasabi caviar, finished with a spritz of yuzu (a Japanese citrus) and a sprinkling of pink sea salt (\$5.95 each). Au encouraged us to eat this in one bite. The bursting fishiness of the roe, the bright blast of citrus, just a hint of bitterness from the skin of the lemon, and the tingle of good salt lit up my tongue like a Vegas slot machine.

Following this orgy of flavors, we received two pieces of snowy white butterfish nigiri (\$4.25). Each slice of the fish - which fully lives up to its name - was blowtorched before being served, lending each of the tiny fillets a caramelized richness. While we were enjoying this palate cleanser, we were also watching one of Au's associates make an elaborate roll containing smoked eel and a tempura-fried crab leg topped with a generous heap of spicy tuna and several dollops of hot chili sauce. We assumed that this tour de force was going to another diner, and were delighted when the young woman making it finished it with drizzles of chili-flavored mayonnaise and eel sauce and placed it in front of us. Spicy, fatty, crunchy, silky, this "Mexican" roll brought every flavor and texture imaginable to bear on each of its four delectable bites, the mayonnaise unifying the flavors while the chili and eel sauces kept it from becoming heavy on the palate (\$11.95).

If you can tear yourself away from the ramen and sushi, or if you happen to be coming here with your kids, Tokyo also offers tableside hibachi cooking. While the cooks are, for the most part, very polished in their acts - there's lots of fire leaping into the air, lots of clanging knife and spatula work, and occasional artful serving flourishes - the food itself is merely adequate, especially when you consider the excellence of the fare in the rest of the place. Still, there's nothing saying you can't keep everyone happy: dazzle the kids with smoke and fire, order yourself up a plate of sushi or a bowl of ramen, and enjoy the spectacle.

Tokyo Japanese Restaurant

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Mon-Thu 11:30 a.m.-10 p.m., Fri-Sat 11:30 a.m.-11 p.m., Sun 4-10 p.m.