

RESTAURANTS

William Grimes

A Sushi Showcase With a Cool Demeanor

SUSHI YASUDA looks like a restaurant that was headed for TriBeCa and took a wrong turn. In the grim stretch between Grand Central Terminal and the United Nations, one of the city's dreariest restaurant neighborhoods, it glows like a strange mineral, with a cool, celery-green facade nearly as enigmatic as its emblem, a slightly blurry ink print of a sea bream.

Manhattan has absorbed several sushi waves. The city abounds in modest establishments that serve up standard assortments of sushi and sashimi, with a bowl of miso soup and a small salad to start. There are temples of sushi worship, like Sushi-say and Kuruma Zushi, where top-quality fish fetch top prices. Somewhere in the middle lie the new wave sushi parlors like Yama and Tomoe Sushi, where the diners are young and the owners would rather be cool than correct. Nobu and Bond Street have pushed sushi into new theoretical territory.

Sushi Yasuda is different from all these. You feel it entering the restaurant, when the manager springs forward to slide open the glass door framed in brushed steel, a Modernist shoji screen. Inside, the dining room is bathed in light. Floors, walls and ceiling are lined in blond wood. The severe banquettes are upholstered in green-gray fabric. The refusal to decorate is almost palpable. The only color relief is a wall panel behind the sushi bar painted the color of green tea.

The mood is quiet, contemplative, austere. But Sushi Yasuda has a lot of downtown in its soul. The manager and the waitresses are young. The exemplary service has an open, friendly quality to it, even when the server is performing a precise gesture, like giving a half-turn to the lid on a box of sharpened bamboo toothpicks. (It comes with the helpful announcement, "Bamboo toothpicks.") At the same time, the menu is dead serious, a purist's paradise of multiple choices among fish species — nearly 30, a startling number for a small restaurant — and elegantly presented appetizers and side dishes.

Sushi Yasuda is a showcase for Naomichi Yasuda, formerly the star chef at Hatsuhana, one of Manhattan's deluxe sushi shrines, and before that a sushi chef in Japan. Now Mr. Yasuda has struck out on his own with Hatsuhana's former manager, Shige Akimoto, and Scott Rosenberg, an amateur sushi fanatic. Sushi Yasuda makes a point of carrying fish that most sushi restaurants either can't get their hands on or don't want to bother with.



Carol Halebian for The New York Times

BATHED IN LIGHT Blond wood and a contemplative mood surround patrons at Sushi Yasuda in Midtown.

They never did have tashi uo, a member of the mackerel family called hair-tail fish, but there were five other mackerels to choose from. Buttery, velvet-textured hamachi (young yellowtail) was only one of three yellowtails on the menu, along with kanpachi (very young yellowtail) and shima aji (yellow jack). The restaurant offers four kinds of eel (Mr. Yasuda started his career as an eel chef in Tokyo). And the prized fatty tunas, chutoro (medium fatty) and otoro (super fatty), come in six ascending levels of fatness, priced from \$4 to \$6.50 a piece.

At the high end, you are paying for that luxurious sensation on the tongue suggested by the meaning of toro, which is "melting." At \$4, you get worsted wool. At \$6, it's cashmere.

But sushi is only half the story. The daily menu includes a small, transparent sheet of special appetizers, and they are worth jumping for. At one lunch, the special list included two hefty slices of steamed monkfish liver in a tart ponzu sauce, and hering pieces fried so hot that not a molecule of oil adhered to the skin.

On another visit, the selection included a textural medley of six seaweeds, arranged like small tumbleweeds on a white rectangular plate. Deep-fried eel backbones, as salty and crunchy as crisp bacon, but with a rich fish flavor, struck me as the finest bar snack ever devised. A pile of steamed clams arrived in a bowl of smoky broth, and a delicate egg

custard, just this side of runny, concealed all sorts of surprises — little curls of shrimp, bits of lily root, earthy slices of mushroom and one very green, marble-size ginkgo bean, for good luck.

It is often said that the test of a real sushi restaurant is its omelet, bought ready-made from outside suppliers at most restaurants. Sushi Yasuda makes its own, and it is excellent — dozens of compressed, tissue-thin layers of egg with a crisp edge.

The nonfish maki rolls provide simple, single-note refreshment. Radish sprouts, in particular, release a quick burst of palate-cleansing heat, but firm strips of stewed Japanese squash, sweet but not cloying, offer another taste alternative to fish. Maki rolls also come with pickled radish, kishu plum, pickled burdock root, fermented soybean and other stuffings.

Dessert is not usually an exciting moment in a sushi restaurant. Mochi rice makes the difference at Sushi Yasuda. Japan's answer to flubber, mochi is a highly glutinous rice that can be rolled out into a sticky, pasta-like wrapper ready for filling with something sweet, in this case homemade red-bean ice cream and green-tea ice cream. The ice cream deserts look like smooth stones, an illusion enhanced by a mosslike dusting of powdered green tea. Simple, restrained and playful, the mochi twins are just the right characters to send diners away with a cheery wave.

Sushi Yasuda

★★★

204 East 43rd Street; (212) 972-1001

ATMOSPHERE: Sushi in abundant variety served in a cool, contemplative room.

SOUND LEVEL: Quiet.

RECOMMENDED DISHES: Sushi (especially otoro and eel), seaweed, fried eel backbones, steamed custard, radish sprout maki, squash maki, mochi rice ice cream balls.

SERVICE: Excellent.

WINE LIST: No wines, but four Japanese beers and a half-dozen sakes.

PRICE RANGE: Lunch and dinner, appetizers, \$4.50 to \$9.50; sushi, \$3 to \$6.50 a piece; desserts, \$4 to \$6.

HOURS: Lunch, Monday through Friday, noon to 2:15 p.m. Dinner, Monday through Saturday, 6 to 10:15 p.m. Closed Sunday.

CREDIT CARDS: All major cards.

WHEELCHAIR ACCESS: Restrooms on street level.

WHAT THE STARS MEAN:

- (None) Poor to satisfactory
- ★ Good
- ★★ Very good
- ★★★ Excellent
- ★★★★ Extraordinary

Ratings reflect the reviewer's reaction to food, ambience and service, with price taken into consideration. Menu listings and prices are subject to change.

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