

RESTAURANTS

Eric Asimov

Quiet, Please: Sushi Being Served

WHEN a good friend insisted a few years back on dining by herself at the French Laundry, the renowned Napa Valley restaurant, I found it hard to comprehend. Wouldn't she miss out on the communal relishing of shared flavors, delights and memories?

Of course, she said. But more important to her was the opportunity to savor each nuance with unobstructed emotions, to laugh or to weep as the mood dictated, without the sort of inhibitions companions might pose. Her meal turned out to be exactly the uncompromised joy she had imagined.

Being a somewhat stolid male, I have rarely found crying at the table to be an issue. Yet I have come to embrace my friend's point of view when I visit exceptional sushi restaurants, and particularly Sushi Yasuda, the stand-out shrine to sushi now in its second decade on the East Side of Manhattan.

Since it opened at the end of 1999, the trio of owners, Naomi-chi Yasuda, a master sushi chef; Shige Akimoto, the restaurant manager; and Scott Rosenberg, the business and design manager, staked the restaurant's reputation on a pure, uncompromised expression of the traditional art of sushi making. They succeeded brilliantly. In 2000, William Grimes, The New York Times's restaurant critic at the time, awarded Yasuda three stars.

That was the last full review of Yasuda. Early in 2011, Mr. Yasuda retired to Japan, leaving the sushi-making operation in the hands of his disciples, Tatsuya Sekiguchi and Mitsuru Tamura. It seemed high time to pay Sushi Yasuda a return visit.

Even with the equivalent of a full restaurant lifetime under its belt, when other places might want to renovate or at least freshen up their interiors, Sushi Yasuda continues to make a vivid visual impression. The dining room is surprisingly small, dominated by an L-shaped sushi bar.

Within the room, the floor, ceiling, walls, tables and the sushi bar itself are all made of smooth blond bamboo planks, unadorned and saturated in light. No music intrudes. No wine list or cocktails to distract, although a small selection of sake and beer is available. Anything with the potential to divert attention from the food itself has been minimized or eliminated. The effect is to be transported to a calm sanctuary where one may experience sushi artistically, pleasurably and, dare I say, spiritually.

Aside from the somewhat brusque experience of making a reservation — you are told when your meal will start and when it must end, issued a confirmation number and ordered to call back the day before your meal — Yasuda is a warm, friendly place. Servers will laugh and joke. While they may coax you in a



DENNIS YERMOSHIN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

TAKE THEIR ADVICE Chefs at Sushi Yasuda have guided diners since it opened in 1999.

SUSHI YASUDA

★★★

204 East 43rd Street, (212) 972-1001, sushi-yasuda.com.

ATMOSPHERE Calm and cerebral, with the focus squarely on the food.

SOUND LEVEL Pleasantly quiet.

RECOMMENDED DISHES Sushi and sashimi, flash-fried shrimp, grilled fish liver, flash-fried eel bones.

WINE LIST No wine; small selection of beer and sake.

PRICE RANGE Appetizers, \$4.50 to \$24; sushi, \$3.50 to \$8.50 apiece; omakase, \$80 to \$200; desserts, \$4 to \$6.

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

RESERVATIONS Essential, two weeks ahead.

CREDIT CARDS All major cards.

WHEELCHAIR ACCESS Entrance, dining room and restrooms are on one level.

WHAT THE STARS MEAN Ratings range from zero to four stars and reflect the reviewer's reaction to food, ambience and service, with price taken into consideration. Menu listings and prices are subject to change.

particular direction, they rarely seem rigid, despite the fairly narrow parameters of the Yasuda vision.

Here, the creative liberties taken with sushi are a world away. Avocado is an unknown. The chefs do not play around with seasoning, adding jalapeño here and mayonnaise there. Monstrous portions of fish do not overlap the rice like flopping filets. The classic proportions endure.

The restaurant takes pains to advise against overly liberal dousings of soy, wasabi or pickled ginger. No better opportunity may exist to take, on its own terms, what sushi has to offer.

For better or worse, most people arrive with their own distractions: friends, loved ones, business companions. They may dine in small groups of four or six at the handful of tables, or in twos at the bar. I have done that myself, but I've come to believe that Yasuda is best enjoyed solo, at the bar.

Here, one of the half-dozen chefs places himself at your service. You may order à la carte or pre-set combinations, but best is omakase (to let the chef choose), which may run around \$100. It's

expensive, but a surprisingly good value compared with other sushi bars.

Sashimi to start, he asks? Yes, please. The chef places a long, smooth bamboo tray before me, with a tangle of daikon, some pickled ginger and a bit of coarse salt on one end. Then, on the tray, giant clam, squid tentacles, thick slices of blue-gray mackerel and thin slices of white fluke. The salt is for the clam, and indeed it amplifies the rich flavor. Each item contrasts with the others, the depth of flavor of the clam, the texture of the chewy squid, the bracing freshness of the mackerel, the saline fluke.

Now, a new tray and sushi. With quick, efficient movements, the chef slices and scores the fish. Without looking, he grabs a handful of rice, massaging it into shape. Regulars, it is said, can tell the chef by how the rice is shaped. A dot of soy, a slice of kanpachi (young yellowtail), and there it is in front of me.

I pick it up with my fingers and place it on my tongue, fish-side down. It feels as if it's melting in my mouth, the fish supremely pure and the rice delicate and subtle with a suggestion of vinegar and a hint of soy.

The parade of sushi begins, each piece with an individual touch. A bit of coarse salt with buttery sea scallop; a few tiny leaves of cress with Spanish mackerel; a dollop of sweet soy on tender eel; sea urchin so intense, complex, subtle and soulful it sends shivers down my spine.

With each piece, I close my eyes as I eat, concentrating on the exquisite flavor sensations. My shoulders relax. For a moment nothing exists but me and the sushi.

Between courses I overhear the couple next to me starting to bicker. "I am not confrontational," she says. "I want to know why you say that!"

I retreat to my cocoon. A cooked dish arrives from a small selection of special appetizers: tiny delicate pieces of grilled monkfish liver, an oceanic foie gras. Then, a fresh sea-eel roll, a quietly delicious dish.

And finally, omelet, both smoky and sweet, the perfect final flavor for a meal that was beautiful to observe, both in preparation and result, that stretched the boundaries of deliciousness and that offered a rewarding, though quick (under an hour) contemplative journey.

One disheartening moment: I was served fatty bluefin tuna, prized yet horribly imperiled. I ate it. I can't lie, I adored its richness and soft texture, which is like that of Kobe beef. But I did not enjoy it, and on subsequent visits I specified no tuna. With dozens of fish selections that change daily, I didn't miss it.

With its devotion to sushi in its purist form, unalloyed with other Japanese cuisines or American twists, Yasuda occupies a singular position in New York's sushi landscape, even without Mr. Yasuda. It excelled back in 2000, and in 2011 it continues to meet its high standards.