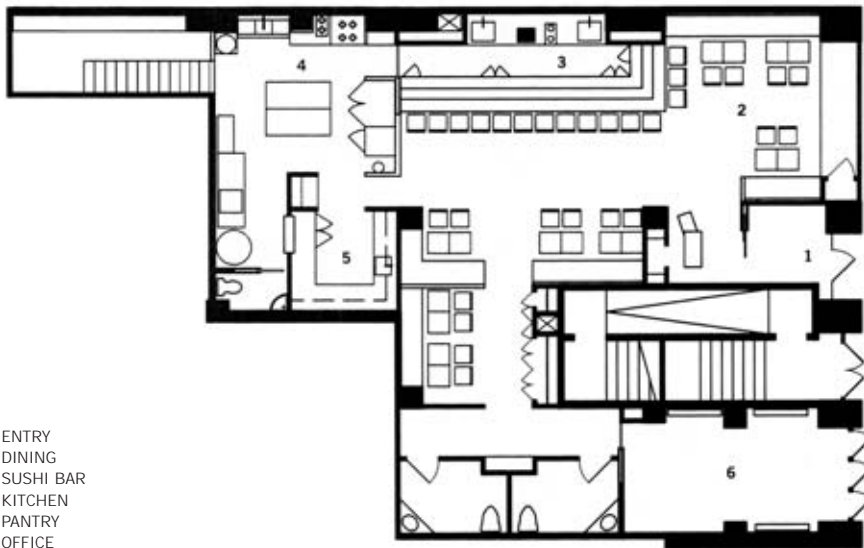


Bamboo Box

Matsuyama International designs a spare interior for a Manhattan sushi restaurant.





- 1 ENTRY
- 2 DINING
- 3 SUSHI BAR
- 4 KITCHEN
- 5 PANTRY
- 6 OFFICE

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Front: The all-bamboo interior of Sushi Yasuda is announced through the geometric storefront framing device. At left is a custom light-box whose color is adjusted seasonally.

Above: In contrast to the soft curve of the sushi roll and the often bright colors of the raw fish, the interior is geometric and neutral.

Opposite: The entrance is lined with bluestone. The maître d' stand is bamboo.

Back: A basket-weave pattern of bamboo on the walls creates an artistic effect.

BAMBOO MILLWORK: SMITH & FONG COMPANY. CHAIRS: KNOLL. LIGHTING FIXTURES: HALO; REGGIANI. UPHOLSTERY: KNOLL TEXTILE. GLAZING: HYUN DAE GLASS & MIRROR. STONE: O&G INDUSTRIES. PAINT: RALPH LAUREN. MECHANICAL ENGINEER: ANDY KIM. LOGO: MASATOSHI TODA.

PHOTOGRAPHY: DAVID JOSEPH

THE MIDTOWN MANHATTAN area just east of Grand Central Terminal is not exactly a hotbed of fine dining, let alone high design. This makes Sushi Yasuda a curiosity, not just for its crisp, all-wood interior but also for the three stars it received from *The New York Times* food critic William Grimes. The 55-seat restaurant is an oasis of fine lines and fresh fish in a sea of chain-restaurants and take-out counters.

Architect Yoshinari Matsuyama of Matsuyama International, a nine-year-old New York firm, aimed to create a distinctive environment for the work of chef and co-owner Naomichi Yasuda, who, in the words of Mr. Grimes, is a “former star sushi chef at Hattuhana,” a Midtown institution. In an effort to avoid the typical look of fancy restaurants in this neighborhood, as well as the trendy ambience of downtown haunts, Matsuyama opted to wrap this restaurant in a singular skin: bamboo. He applied this material to every horizontal and vertical surface in the dining room of the 2,500-sq.-ft. restaurant (which comprises a 1,700-sq.-ft. dining area, kitchen, office, and staff changing room). Bamboo, which is a renewable resource, appealed to Matsuyama and his client because of its fresh, pure look and feel.

In fact, the feeling of this tropical wood is crucial to the design. While the bamboo on the walls, ceiling, and floor have a clear finish, the bamboo tabletops are left in their natural state. The architect wanted Sushi Yasuda customers to have the opportunity to touch the very soft, slightly textured surface of the wood. This gesture of tactile purity sounds idealistic—what happens when customers spill a little soy sauce or fumble with a bottle of Japanese beer over the untreated surface of the table? The tight grain of the bamboo, explains Matsuyama, keeps the wood from rapidly absorbing liquids. The material was put to the ultimate test by the client, who poured soy sauce directly onto a piece of bamboo and left it there for a couple of days before agreeing to the architect’s tabletop design.

Matsuyama makes fine art from his limited palette. He has treated the bamboo much as a painter would approach a canvas. While the bamboo is installed in a regular tongue-and-groove fashion on most surfaces, that which is applied to two walls appears as a pattern of

interlocking pieces, a flat tapestry to relieve the otherwise relentless march of the bamboo planks throughout the restaurant’s interior. It is a pattern echoed by the aluminum-framed window treatment on the street façade. From the street, the all-bamboo interior of Sushi Yasuda is a striking presence. The geometric rigor of its soffits and dining niches look like they’ve been carved from a solid block of wood.

Lighting was carefully conceived to show off the texture of the select material and emphasize the space’s unusually high ceilings. To this end, Matsuyama employed both incandescent and fluorescent sources. The yellow glow of incandescent downlights hits the floor beneath the built-in bench seating,

while the entrance area and sushi bar are illuminated with fluorescent lights. Lighting hidden in coves around the edges of the dining room both defines the ceiling plane and throws soft illumination across the walls.

The architect added only one other material to his palette: bluestone tiles line the walls and floor of the maître d’ station. The dark-gray, heavily textured rectangular slabs of stone, arranged in the same basket-weave pattern as the bamboo on the dining room walls, create a strong contrast to the bright interior. With few flourishes beyond the bluestone entry and a special logo by Masatoshi Toda, Matsuyama has designed a monochromatic stage for the main event a Sushi Yasuda: the three-star cuisine. —Abby Busset



