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FOOD DRINK DISH!



DOMO ARIGATO, MR. ROBATA From top: Robata Bar in Santa Monica; assorted *robata-yaki* at Katana in West Hollywood.

STICK UP! *Robata makes a move on L.A.*

The story of *robata-yaki* is told like legend. At least, that's the way a server at Katsuya makes it sound. "In ancient days," the waiter begins, "Japanese fishermen would roast their catch over a small grill, called a robata, which would reach temperatures of 1,600 degrees..." At Katana, the menu tells a less dramatic story: "Robata means cooking with open flame." Ah, well, knock for storytelling aside, the idea's the same: These little kebabs are taking L.A. by storm.

Honda-Ya (333 S. Alameda St., L.A., 213.625.1184), a new izakaya in Little Tokyo, with red and white paper lanterns and wooden blocks for stools, is where USC hipsters and Japanese businessmen share skewers of pork belly and guzzle shots of *shochu* until 1AM. It's a far cry from the bankers-and-lawyers scene at **Takami Sushi and Robata** (811 Wilshire Blvd., L.A., 213.236.9600), where floor-to-ceiling skyline views surround suited-up diners who dip skewers of sea bass into Champagne *yuzu* sauce. On the Westside, there's **Katsuya** (11777 San Vicente Blvd., Brentwood, 310.207.8744), where huge, glossy geisha lips on the wall seem to be puckering up at the sight of grilled king crab. The robata chefs don black jackets and bandanas—they're the badasses of an otherwise white-on-blond (in more ways than one) dining room.

It was at **Katana** (8439 W. Sunset Blvd., West Hollywood, 323.650.8585), of course, that the commotion began. Spun out of Sushi Roku, the WeHo hot spot was the first major player to bring upscale robata to the West Coast.



Building on that success, the same team recently launched **Robata Bar** (1401 Ocean Ave., Santa Monica, 310.458.4771), a 50-seat pub that looks like one of those unmarked, matchbook-sized joints you'd stumble upon in Tokyo. It's fun to perch at the crowded bar for a skewer of *negima* (chicken and green onion) with a rose-infused Martini.

Most *robata-yaki* are blissfully simple—just cubes of the food threaded onto sticks and grilled, unadorned. And that's pretty much the formula followed by Katsuya and Takami. But not everything that is cooked on a robata is skewered. Enter Katsuya's succulent conch, grilled in its gorgeous green shell then plucked out like a giant escargot. And not everything that comes on a skewer is necessarily simple, either—and that's where Katana and Robata Bar, as well as

Honda-Ya, deviate from the others. At Honda-Ya, okra is encased in pork belly, which is blasted to a crisp. At Katana and Robata Bar, kobe beef is wrapped around foie gras.

The thing that sets robata apart from other types of grilling is a special Japanese charcoal called *bincho-tan*, which burns at near-volcanic temperatures and is virtually smokeless. At Katsuya, there is literally no smoke; by contrast, Katana's menu draws attention to the use of *bincho-tan*, but there sure is a lot of smoke swirling around the chefs' heads. Could it be that the charcoal isn't quite right? No, it's just a result of all that foie gras and kobe fat dripping onto the coals. —Stevie Stacionis