



ROBATA BARS

Finding a Home in L.A.

Over the past few months, Los Angeles diners have been embracing all things Japanese. From Hollywood to Westlake, Japanese restaurants have been cropping up by everyone from SBE Nightlife Group to former Hollywood heavyweight Michael Ovitz.

But these are not just sushi bars with great design and saketinis. Katsuya Hollywood has a dramatic "dragon lounge" and a tableside presentation of salt-baked white fish, while Kumo features high art and omakase — or chef's choice. All are wonderful additions to the dining scene, but what really seems to be captivating L.A. right now is the traditional robatayaki technique of grilling mini-bamboo skewers of meat, chicken, fish and vegetables. Call it Japanese tapas, but robata translates to "by the fireside" in Japanese, and is a centuries-old style of cooking by the country's northern fisherman.

Lee Maen is a founding member and general partner of Innovative Dining Group whose eateries include Katana, BOA, Sushi Roku and now Robata Bar in Santa Monica.

When the group opened Katana featuring a sushi and robata grill a handful of years ago, they were clearly ahead of their time. Maen recalls, "We wanted another twist or idea. We traveled to Japan and went to Roppongi to a traditional robata bar and fell in love with the concept. We wanted to Americanize it and bring it to L.A. We didn't know how everyone would take to it — a cooked version of sushi that you can share — but it's the best of both of worlds." Maen continues, "If you look at sushi 30 years ago to now, it's become very Americanized. We presented robata like a farmer's market with food laid out; and then there's a showmanship or entertainment value with the open grill and smoke. It's a unique food that is relatively healthy, served small-plates style, and easy to like because it's a different spin on items you already know."

So, when the space next to Sushi Roku in Santa Monica became available, they decided to shake things up once again and open a robata-bar-meets-

Photo by James Merrell



WHERE TO FIND THE BEST ROBATAYAKI IN LOS ANGELES ...

Robata Bar

1401 Ocean Avenue; Santa Monica
(310) 458-4771

Best Dish: filet mignon, foie gras and asparagus skewer. Price: \$-\$\$

Zu Robata

12217 Wilshire Blvd; Los Angeles
(310) 571-1920

Best Dish: grilled king crab leg (on the robata grill) with cod roe sauce. Price: \$\$

Takami Sushi & Robata Restaurant

811 Wilshire Blvd, 21st floor; Downtown
(213) 236-9600

Best Dish: grilled baby lamb chops with truffle dipping sauce. Price: \$\$

Katsuya Brentwood

11777 San Vicente Blvd; Brentwood
(310) 207-8744

Best Dish: yellowtail collar or marinated beef short ribs. Price: \$\$-\$\$\$

Suki 7

925 S Westlake Blvd; Westlake Village
(805) 777-7579

Best Dish: barbecue kalbi - small cubes of skirt steak or Chilean sea bass - both on the robata-yaki. Price: \$\$

Katana

8439 W. Sunset Blvd; West Hollywood
(323) 650-8585

Best Dish: quail egg wrapped in smoked bacon or lobster with pink peppercorn miso glaze. Price: \$\$-\$\$\$

"Japanese charcoal produces a different heat so that all the juice and flavor stay inside whatever you put on the grill."

Japanese pub where people can drop in and take a seat at the bar for "the show" and a glass of sparkling sake. Japanese-trained Chef Takuma Fumoto works his magic on a custom-designed grill that keeps the charcoal performing at optimum levels for the filet mignon, foie gras and asparagus skewers — these alone are worth trying to find a parking space at The Promenade. The more adventurous delve into every part of the chicken from the heart, liver and cartilage. "The masses are not into that," Maen says, "but the more adventurous foodies are. It's great for people to experience new things. We like to educate people and get them excited. And you need to stay true, this is a Japanese restaurant."

