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A Touch of Tokyo, But Very California



JONATHAN ALCORN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

BOTTOMS UP Photos of the fashionable denizens of the Harajuku district in Tokyo hang in Robata.

Robata Bar

1401 Ocean Avenue (entrance on Santa Monica Boulevard.)
Santa Monica, Calif.
(310) 458-4771

GETTING IN No reservations, but a list is started after the tables fill. Thursday through Saturday, expect to muscle your way to the bar.

SIGHTINGS Ryan Seacrest, Chris Tucker, Michael Bay.

MUSIC No D.J., but a restaurant partner, Lee Maen, has come up with his own compilation CD including Mickey Avalon's "So Rich, So Pretty."

SIGNATURE DRINK The Kyoto Rose: Belvedere vodka infused with Bulgarian tea roses, served in a martini glass with a red rose-petal floater. Tastes more like hibiscus tea than grandma's pot-pourri, thankfully.

By SAMANTHA BONAR

SANTA MONICA

"IRASSHAI!" the hostess yelled when the lost-looking couple wandered into the new Robata Bar here. The servers paused, small plates aloft, and joined in the greeting: "Irasshai!"

The couple appeared puzzled. "It means 'Welcome,'" the hostess explained.

Coming from tall white women clad in black mini-dresses and ankle boots, the Japanese word jarred. We're not in Little Tokyo anymore, Dorothy — we're on the West-side.

We are in a space where Zen meets bordello. (Zendello?) On the ceiling, beams display more gold tassels — more than 5,000 — than you can shake a chopstick at. Somewhere in the city, strip-

pers are feeling a draft.

Wooden screens imported from Southeast Asia accent the space, which is taken up by a 20-foot-long walnut bar running its length. Giant photos of the fashionably kookoo denizens of the Harajuku neighborhood in Tokyo hang above the few booths hugging the wall.

Robata is drawing men who arrive solo (a flat-screen TV above the bar showing ballgames is a nod to them); pairs of girlfriends not necessarily on the prowl; and some couples, largely Hollywood producer types — paunchy balding men — speaking of stock market dives with terri-

bly skinny blond women, more reheated than hot.

Some wander over from the Third Street Promenade shopping district, or a too-busy Sushi Roku, the restaurant next door that is owned by the Innovative Dining Group, which opened Robata in early October. Other patrons roll in from their steps-away beachside condos. Knowledge of the spot seems to be spreading less by word of mouth than by happenstance. (Of the stroll-on-by, peek-inside, become-bedazzled-by-gold-tassels variety.) Still, the place, which seats only 50, has ambitions of becoming the neighborhood hangout.

The scent of grilling meat envelopes customers sitting at the bar in a savory cloud as they watch the chefs at work, quickly searing chunks of shrimp and Kobe beef — and chicken cartilage — on bamboo skewers over 1,200-degree flames. Robata is modeled after the casual robatayaki pubs in Japan, where people go to enjoy a few meat skewers with sake or beer.

But seeing flesh sizzle isn't the only draw. "I seriously need a beer right now — or two," said Carrie Sun, 33, a Korean-American high school tutor who stopped in on a Thursday night to meet a girlfriend. Luckily for her, Robata stocks several hard-to-find Japanese microbrews, like Hitachino White Ale and Echigo. "The snackies are a big plus," she said, her priorities clearly on the drinking side of the bar.

For others, the food is a good social lubricant. "It's easy to share," said Julia Jun, 28, who was there with her friends Lilly and Charlotte Lee, Korean-American twins celebrating their 28th birthday. The pair said they were checking out Robata for the first time. "It's a nice vibe — you get the bar feel, with the restaurant," said Helen Kim, another friend. "You can try a lot of foods without picking one entree.

"It makes you feel less guilty," she added in typical diet-conscious Angeleno fashion.

When customers depart, the servers shout "Arigato!" yet somehow, the taste it leaves stops short of amasugiru (too sweet).