

A Great

## Raw Deal

by s. irene virbila

BEFORE MICHAEL HIDE CARDENAS OPENED Sushi Roku on 3rd Street a few months ago, he sought out advice from a slew of Los Angeles' most successful chefs. Make it look good, they all told him, but keep your focus on the food. The former manager of Matsuhisa in Beverly Hills must have listened. Sushi Roku is not only one of the best-looking restaurants to open in L.A. in a while, the food is respectable, too.

The funky beach shack that housed the short-lived Antartica next to the Beverly Connection has been transformed into a studiously stylish sushi bar and restaurant. Open till midnight all week (but get your order in by 11:30), Sushi Roku has become the latest place where people in black flock for sushi. Maybe it's because the interior's grays, blacks and pale bamboo make everyone look as if they're vamping for a fashion shoot. Or maybe it's the two little piles of salt set discreetly on the steps outside to bring good luck. Personally, I think it's the food, a shrewd combination of straightforward sushi and trendy California-Asian cuisine.

Larger and more comfortable than most sushi restaurants, Sushi Roku uses concrete, wood, rock, bamboo and rice paper to great effect. In the middle of the bar, a boulder's deep hollow becomes a pool where orange and white *koi* swim restlessly. Behind the sleek sushi bar, where executive chef Hiro Nishimura (who comes from R23 downtown) wields a flashing knife, is a wall of black granite relieved only by a graceful *ikebana* arrangement in a plaited-bamboo vase.

Rectangular flagstones form the long wall opposite; another is inset with dove-gray rocks the size of ostrich eggs. And in the private dining room, where eight Japanese businessmen are dining one night, boulders are dramatically piled up on the floor. The restaurant's sober colors are offset by saffron beams and tabletops of pale bamboo veneer. Despite the frenetic table-hopping, the effect is serene.

Cardenas managed Matsuhisa for five years—and helped open Nobu in New York and London. To his credit, Sushi Roku is not a dish-by-dish knockoff of the wildly popular La Cienega Boulevard restaurant, though Nishimura does occasional riffs on Nobu's eccentric palette of chiles, olive oil, caviar and garlic. What Sushi Roku does offer is something for everyone from sushi novices to serious aficionados, plus an array of other interesting dishes. For anyone who likes to graze, this is the place.

On one visit, I concentrate mostly on *nigirizushi*: the hand-shaped ovals of rice topped with ochre-colored *uni*, milky squid, shiny blue-skinned mackerel and crunchy red clam. I like an *umeboshi* (Japanese pickled plum) and *shiso* roll jacketed in pearly grains of rice, but I'm too much of a purist to



Monkfish pâté wrapped in salmon and topped with caviar and *uni*.

ever enjoy the rich grilled eel with sweet barbecue sauce—and avocado. While I tease strands of seaweed from a terrific salad composed of four different types of seaweed, two hipsters at the table behind me discuss spinning (not what Rapunzel did, but what you do at the gym) and where to buy Cristal and "Dom" on the cheap. They natter on, complaining about prices at Matsuhisa and what a bargain this place seems in comparison, too busy to notice their friend snatching up every piece of beautiful *toro*.

Another time, I order enough appetizers to cover the table. Twice. Yet I barely make a dent in the menu. Fried baby calamari, usually pretty dull, is excellent here, sheathed in a lacy tempura-like batter that's delicately crisp, flavored with bits of olive paste and a light drizzle of *ponzu* sauce. Seafood ceviche in a lively avocado sauce spiked with *shiso* and capers is scooped into mussel shells. Yellowtail sashimi strewn with chopped red and green chiles would be fine if the sizzling truffle oil didn't taste a little old. I like the Japanese mushroom salad, too—a mix of *frisée*, tender lettuce, purple basil, sumptuous julienned *shiitake* mushrooms garnished with a flurry of white radish

tipped with red. The shrunken regular brown-mushrooms and flavorless diced tomatoes, however, take the salad down a notch.

Mixed vegetable or seafood tempura, cloaked in a gossamer batter and fried in clean oil at the right temperature, is terrific. Every piece of whole shrimp, spears of asparagus, bright orange *kabocha* squash, whitefish, *shiitake* mushroom and more is just what you hope to get when you order tempura.

But the kitchen really shines with the specials. Be sure to have the waiter tell you what they are before you order, and listen to Cardenas' counsel when he comes around. I had spectacular, fresh Santa Barbara sweet shrimp that was coarsely chopped and served raw with some diced *tokobushi* (baby abalone with an appealing crunch) and a little Beluga caviar. The caviar isn't gratuitous; it adds a salty intensity to the more delicate flavors of the prawn and abalone. The dish also includes a bamboo cup of the meticulously fresh prawn "brains" in pungent red *miso*, a taste I find strong but irresistible. The shrimp heads, red-and-white banded tentacles and all, come back two courses later as superla-

tive tempura. Superb octopus sashimi, fine wavy slices of violet-edged tentacle, comes lined up like dominoes, each slice with a drop of delicate green-gold olive oil and a sprinkling of a special Japanese salt. Called *aguni*, the pure sea salt from an island off Okinawa brings out the sweetness of the octopus flesh. Delicious soft-shell crab tempura comes with lemon juice, that Okinawan salt and a bowl of *ponzu* for dipping. But another night, when I give the kitchen free rein, we end up with the odd combination of whitefish sashimi dabbed with strawberries and olive oil. Go figure.

If you ask, Cardenas offers good suggestions from the mostly California wine selections. Some of the waiters know their stuff, too. The list also offers premium sakes by a half or full bamboo carafe.

Dessert is easy: Pass on the obligatory green tea ice cream and have the profiteroles filled with vanilla ice cream or the banana cream tart cloaked in caramel and chocolate sauces.

Sushi Roku is off to a good start. If it can keep the sushi consistent and produce specials equal to the Santa Barbara shrimp sashimi, its luck—piles of salt or not—is sure to hold. ■

## SUSHI ROKU

**CUISINE:** Japanese. **AMBIENCE:** Stylish sushi bar and restaurant with stone walls, pale bamboo veneer tables. **BEST DISHES:** octopus sashimi, seafood ceviche, fried baby squid, tempura, profiteroles. **WINE PICK:** 1994 Etude Pinot Blanc, Carneros; premium sakes. **FACTS:** 8445 W. 3rd St., Los Angeles; (213) 655-6767. Lunch weekdays, dinner nightly. Appetizers, \$3 to \$13. Sushi, \$3 to \$7 per order. Entrees, \$17 to \$20. Corkage \$15. Valet parking.