



REACHING THE TOP

The three restaurants in the new wing of the Forum Shops—Boa, Sushi Roku and Il Mulino—may be off the beaten path, but are worth the journey. **BY MAX JACOBSON**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY PETER HARASTY

PHASE III AT THE FORUM SHOPS IS ONE OF THE MORE IMPRESSIVE architectural feats to grace Las Vegas over the past year. But the journey to the top level on the third floor requires a trip up the mall's spiraling escalators, a jaunt many casual visitors simply don't bother to take. That's a pity. The top-floor restaurants—Sushi Roku, Boa and New York import Il Mulino—have yet to receive the attention they deserve.

The entrance to Sushi Roku has a latticed wooden front that recalls a *shoji* (a traditional Japanese paper screen); it's a handsome, but slightly ambiguous design statement, and I wonder if passersby realize there is a Japanese restaurant behind it. Beyond the façade, though, is a dining room that uses stone, bamboo and gently cascading water for a soothing and elemental space in tune with the nature-intense Japanese aesthetic.

The à la carte menu was designed by Vernon Cardenas—an American raised in Japan who trained at La Petite Chaya in Los Angeles, one of the first Asian fusion restaurants in this country. The sushi bar is overseen by Yoshi Nakazawa, and turns out a product rivaled in quality locally only by Nobu and the MGM Grand's Shibuya.

In Los Angeles, the three Sushi Rokus cater to the hip and the body conscious, reflecting what it describes as a "modern Japanese style." The Las Vegas restaurant is Japanese to a degree, thanks to such "you've got to be Japanese to love" fare as *ankimo* (monkfish liver pate) and *kinpira gobo* (simmered burdock root).

But I think of this food, even the sushi, as California-Japanese, a cuisine

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MAX'S PICKS

APPETIZER

Sushi Roku's yellowtail sashimi is a delicate, delicious marriage of the earth and the sea, with impeccably fresh fish whose flavors are enhanced by tiny, diced green chiles.

SIDE DISH

Boa's broccoli rabe, dried apricots, chile flakes and toasted pine nuts is a dish made in heaven, with all the components of a great side that doesn't overwhelm whatever else is on the table.

DESSERT

Boa's chocolate hazelnut crunch bars with fresh raspberries use corn flakes to give crunch, and a rich chocolate hazelnut cream between the layers to provide the body.

largely invented in the late '80s on L.A.'s west side. That doesn't diminish it. Yellowtail sashimi with diced chiles, and tuna carpaccio with a sesame soy dressing, are both amazing. So is New Style chicken salad, which is chock-full of tiny wonton skins, mesclun greens, shredded chicken and a tangy soy sesame dressing.

Japanese baked cod *sakuyoyaki* is melt-in-the-mouth tender, thanks to a white miso marinade that caramelizes the fish when it is broiled. Rock shrimp popcorn tempura

has more batter than an authentic Japanese tempura would, but is excellent anyway. And I can't resist soy garlic-marinated lamb chops, simply grilled.

For the sushi lover, there is a long list of sushi and rolls, hand and cut. Every one I've tried has been fresh and tasty, using fragrant rice mixed with a subtle amount of vinegar. The restaurant also has a heady list of sakes, by the glass or bottle, ministered to by a real sake sommelier. Premium sakes are always served

cold, incidentally, so their floral scents will not be obliterated by heat.

Next door is Sushi Roku's sister establishment, Boa, the renamed clone to the Sunset Strip steakhouse that was once called Balboa. Both belong to Innovative Dining Group, and both restaurants do the company name proud with innovations.

When I dined at the then-Balboa in L.A., I had what was perhaps the greatest Caesar salad of my life, which was mixed tableside by a waiter who actually listened to my instructions. The meat was excellent, too. So naturally, I went to Boa with high expectations. And generally speaking, they were well met.

Much of the credit for this operation goes to general manager Clinton Clausen, one of the most charming hosts this city has, and chef Josh Thomsen, onetime chef de cuisine at Simon Kitchen and Bar. It also helps that service here rarely misses a beat.

I'm not sure what to think about this design, which employs amber and stainless steel, as well as a considerable number of twigs that serve as room dividers and frame the entrance. I do love the low, sleek booths,

The pan-fried lobster, scallop and jumbo shrimp (above); the rainbow roll with uni, salmon, tuna and sweet shrimp sashimi (below), all from Sushi Roku.



which afford comfort but not much privacy. Boa would like to be intimate. But the buzz is raw excitement.

Almost everything you will eat here is delicious, even if the Caesar is mixed in the kitchen at the Vegas restaurant. Goat cheese beignet is like a grown-up jelly doughnut, with cheese standing in for jelly. Caramelized onion soup topped with Gruyère, as rich and beefy as the law allows, is simply magnificent.

My favorite salad here is the BLT: lettuce, tomato, avocado and a creamy dressing based on applewood smoked bacon. Steaks, in the menu's "turf" section, get a rub or crust, and a choice of sauces and mustards. The restaurant's signature J-1 sauce and violet mustard are recommended for the 40-day bone-in New York Strip with a blue-cheese crust, for example.

Bone-in rib-eye and flatiron steaks are also terrific, as is a free-range veal chop. Composed entrées are fine, too, such as salmon cooked on a cedar plank with fingerling potatoes and Castroville artichokes. Side dishes are unusual. Dried to tango with are the broccoli rabe with dried apricots, chile flakes and toasted pine nuts, and the truffled mac and cheese. I opt for both.

Don't miss chocolate hazelnut crunch bars for dessert, paired with fresh raspberries. Boa happens to be a solid performer, but so far, its audience has been limited.



Bone-in Kansas City filet mignon (top); warm chocolate brownie cream, with cinnamon-sugar doughnut holes in the background (above); all from Boa.

PHASE III DINING

LOCATION: Inside Phase III at the Forum Shops, Third Floor, Sushi Roku and Boa 733-7373

HOURS: Both Sushi Roku and Boa are open 11 a.m.-11 p.m. Sunday-Thursday; until midnight Friday-Saturday.

PRICE: Sushi Roku is moderate to expensive: entrées \$8-\$20; Boa is very expensive: entrées \$22-\$42.

CREDIT CARDS: All major.
RESERVATIONS: Recommended.