



VERNON CARDENAS of Sushi Roku

Wearing his chef's whites and trademark Blatz beer cap, he looks like a conventional L.A. chef, but Vernon Cardenas, 37, has a Japanese soul. Cardenas, the corporate executive chef for Innovative Dining Group's Sushi Roku and Katana, cooks—and speaks—idiomatic Japanese. The chef grew up on a Navy base at Yokohama with his American dad, Japanese mother and siblings Tommy and Michael. All three brothers are fluent in the language. We nibble on some of his creations in the new Sushi Roku at The Forum Shops at Caesars, while seated on woven leather banquettes framing the restaurant's stunning, layered bamboo tabletops. This new restaurant's broad appeal relies on a combination of killer design (using stonework, cascading water and richly stained wood), youthful energy and the freshest sushi around.

"I grew up eating Japanese food at home," says the chef, "like nabemono, *odori* and *kamameshi*," referring to rustic fare that is stewed and simmered, fishcakes braised in a hotpot, and rice dishes. "And that is why my menus go far beyond just sushi."

"I started my career at 14 in a San Diego restaurant called Kobe Misono Hibachi Steakhouse, as a dishwasher, and I made it to kitchen helper by the time I was 16." His brothers also worked there and, in his words, "bullied me a little, because I am the youngest, and that's sort of a Japanese tradition."

"The owner mentored me, and we all spoke Japanese at the restaurant, in a terrific environment for learning." Both he and his older brother Michael learned the art of sushi under a master chef at Misono called Ota-san, who was considered one of the best in San Diego, according to Cardenas. After honing his skills, Vernon was ready to move on to the big city, L.A., where his further culinary education would begin.



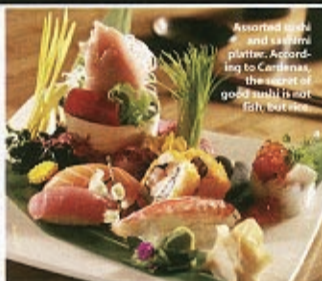
Vernon Cardenas is the very model of a modern sushi master.

We taste a creative cut roll made with *maguro* (tuna), fatty tuna belly, yellowtail, salmon and salmon roe. A sea-urchin sushi could not taste any more of the sea, and all the others are impeccably fresh and sweet.

In L.A., he found work at the restaurant La Petite Chaya, a restaurant many credit for having begun the Pacific Rim fusion craze in the early '80s. Susumu Fukui, La Petite Chaya's chef, influenced him greatly, teaching him passion, technique and how to combine ingredients—tools he uses today when he pre-

pares his peppercorn-infused oils and sauces such as his trademark champagne *beurre blanc*.

Cardenas spent one and a half years at La Petite Chaya, and then another eight at Chaya Brasserie and Chaya Diner, and for those who remember, the influence of those places is clear when you taste a



Assorted sushi and sashimi platter. According to Cardenas, the element of good sushi is not fish, but sea.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ART GARDEN

IN THE KITCHEN



Stained wood and metalwork give a medieval, martial character to the dining room.

Chinatown (a purveyor also favored by Wolfgang Puck), and others are flown in daily from all corners of the world.

Soon we taste a creative cut roll called Roku and Roll, made with ingredients such as *maguro* (tuna), fatty tuna belly, yellowtail, salmon and salmon roe. A sea-urchin sushi could not taste any more of the sea, and all the others I taste are impeccably fresh and sweet. "What I most like about being a chef is that you get immediate rewards," he says, after he hears my praise for his sushi. "The customers usually give you positive feedback, and that's validating for a professional."

He also acknowledges the challenges of doing a sushi bar in Vegas. "We use a lot more batter on our tempura than they would in Japan, for instance, because that's what our customers like, and we know that many traditional Japanese tastes, like raw egg and natto, fermented soybeans, will not go over well here."

That's not to say that Sushi Roku isn't doing authentic Japanese food, because it is. In fact, all the Cardenas brothers are regular visitors to Japan, so that they can keep up with the latest food trends there (Thomas is the director of operations and Michael the owner/partner of the Innovative Dining

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few of Sushi Roku's specialties. Just try the chef's New Style Chicken Salad, shredded chicken on a bed of mesclun greens laced with chives and cilantro, tossed in two dressings replete of sesame oil, ginger and creamy mustard, or halibut *osuzukori*, razor-thin slices of raw halibut fanned out with two flavors: grated chili paste in little heaps on top, and ponzu (citrus and soy) sauce below.

After tasting those dishes, you'll be ready to try the restaurant's signature sushi. I discuss sushi with the chef, and he is quick to point out it is often misunderstood in the U.S. "Sushi is first and foremost about rice, not fish, although we go to the ends of the earth to find the freshest fish for toppings," he said.

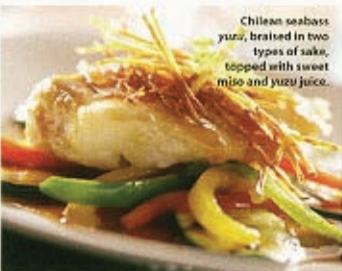
What makes great sushi, in his opinion? "Great rice from a great harvest, proper cooking, the right amount of vinegar. I know one sushi master in Japan who can grab a clump of rice, and be within five grains every time, and I've heard of sushi masters who can make every grain of rice in a piece of sushi point in the same direction."

You may not get that type of precision at Sushi



Soy citrus-marinated lamb chops with seasonal baby vegetables.

Roku, but you can count on them meeting the other parameters. Much of the fish comes from the purveyor Ocean Fresh Seafood in Los Angeles'



Chilean seabass *yuzi*, braised in two types of sake, topped with sweet miso and yuzi juice.

Group, which owns the Boa steak houses as well as Sushi Roku and Katana. "Japan infuses a lot of different types of cuisine with its own special cuisine, and I'm looking for cutting-edge modern ideas," says Vernon, "Asian infused with Western styles." ♦

Sushi Roku: The Forum Shops at Caesars, 3500 South Las Vegas Blvd., telephone 702-733-7373.