

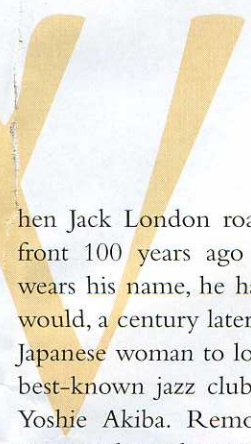


The dining room at Yoshi's, above, offers a variety of seating options—from tables to tatamis. Yoshie Akiba, right, the restaurant's namesake and co-founder.

# All That Jazz and Sushi

**YOSHI'S PUTS OAKLAND ON THE MUSIC AND FOOD LOVERS' MAP**

By Wanda Hennig  
Photography by Anthony Pidgeon



When Jack London roamed Oakland's waterfront 100 years ago in the area that now wears his name, he had no idea his writings would, a century later, inspire a music-loving Japanese woman to locate one of the world's best-known jazz clubs there. The woman is Yoshie Akiba. Remove the "e" from her name and you have Yoshi's. If you live in the East Bay and you don't know it, pinch yourself and wake up. Yoshi's is widely regarded as one of the three top jazz clubs in the United States, along with New York's Village Vanguard and Blue Note. Some people will say it beats those clubs. The reason? Yoshi's has the unique distinction of serving up sushi with its jazz.

Sushi to Yoshi's is like avocado to a California roll—inseparable. The present-day Yoshi's that moved to Jack London Square in 1997 is its third incarnation. Its sushi history dates back to 1973 when Akiba was a student at UC Berkeley. A Japanese World War II orphan, she was in the United States studying dance and painting and needed to support herself. When one of her best friends, Hiro Hori, a painter, said, "Let's open a small Japanese restaurant so we can eat," it sounded like a sensible idea.

They borrowed \$7,000 and, with the help of a third friend, journalist and handyman Kaz Kajimura who put together the interior, they opened a 32-seat sushi joint they called Yoshi's that instantly gave life to a dead spot on Euclid Avenue, near the UC Berkeley campus. The trio remain friends and business partners. Hori, as he did then, manages the kitchen at Yoshi's. Kajimura does whatever is needed. Akiba is still the visible presence—the unique and eccentric spirit of Yoshi's. She is married to a Japanese Zen monk, the Rev. Genko





Legendary musician Taj Mahal is one of many jazz greats who have appeared on Yoshi's stage.

Akiba, who heads a Zen community in Los Angeles and also a small Zen temple, Kojin-an, in the garden of their Oakland home. Akiba chants and meditates every morning, dances every day—she expresses her spirit through dance and loves to share it with an audience—and teaches the exacting art of Japanese tea ceremony. She sees all these as connected, part of her spiritual practice and the energy she brings to Yoshi's.

A good trivia question to ask a Bay Area friend who claims to know about music is: What do Oscar Peterson, Taj Mahal, Woody Allen, Diana Krall, George Duke, McCoy Tyner, Norah Jones, Harry Konnick Jr., Dee Dee Bridgewater, Bruce Hornsby, Jane Monheit and Huey Lewis have in common, other than musical talent? Answer:

“In Yoshi's history almost every name in jazz has been here,” says artistic director Peter Williams, who, in a given year, books about 170 acts. “We have artists who play here not because they need to, but because they like it. The owners love music and want the artists treated well. Pat Metheny has grown beyond club size but probably will come back every few years. Oscar Peterson does maybe two other clubs in the U.S.—he likes to play here. Branford Marsalis, George Duke, McCoy Tyner, Charlie Hunter—they can all draw large crowds and still play at Yoshi's. Krall can fill a 5,000-seat hall. She played here before she was well-known—

If you're a Bay Area jazz fan, you've probably engaged in the Yoshi's train-spotting experience.

If you're a Bay Area jazz fan, you've probably engaged in the Yoshi's train-spotting experience. This involves standing on the pavement at night, between the club and the railroad tracks, with a growing line of well-heeled patrons all waiting to rush the door to claim a first-come, first-served jazz club seat. Every so often you're deafened by a passing Amtrak train noisily warning Jack London pedestrians to keep off the track. In between, conversation gets

Marshall Lamm, Yoshi's director of publicity, is responsible for getting the word out up to two shows a night, seven days a week, 363 days of the year (Yoshi's closes Christmas and Thanksgiving), which adds to more than 700 shows a year. The club seats up to 330 people. Demographics range from age 2 to 92 (there's a weekly Sunday matinee for families and Yoshi's encourages children). Lamm cites three main challenges with his task. One is the specific location: "This still keeps some people away." Another is the Japanese cuisine: "We're marketing to adventurous diners." And the third is the jazz focus itself: "It's not mainstream music."

Williams confirms this last point. Jazz CD sales are less than 2 percent of the U.S. market, he says. "Take out Diana Krall and Norah Jones, and it drops to less than 1 percent. Pull Tony Bennett and Harry Connick Jr., and it's even lower.

"Someone will have heard one thing and they don't like jazz," says Williams. "And there are so many different jazz forms and often they haven't given themselves a chance." For example, there's what he calls mainstream acoustic jazz (think Wynton Marsalis); avant-garde jazz (think Ornette Coleman); mainstream jazz, including bebop, post-bop and jazz-rock-fusion—all very different. And then there's Latin jazz, Brazilian music that's considered jazz and a lot more.

"If you want to make a lot of money, you can't do jazz," says Akiba. "I like to support jazz as an art form. There's so much spirit in jazz. It's about life, dedication and hard work. It's a delicate, sensitive business—more of a community service. People need a place like this—good food, good music, good spirit."

Williams says his challenge is to present the highest quality of artists, keep ticket prices affordable (most are below \$30) and get artists to fill a room as big as Yoshi's. Lamm boasts that with someone popular like Charlie Hunter, he can sell more than 1,000 tickets in a week. But Yoshi's also likes

to support artists with a limited audience base. "We rely on reputation, customer service, value and atmosphere," he says. "We sell the overall experience. This is a date place where you can eat, see a show and you only



Vibraphonist Bobby Hutcherson, one of the defining voices of jazz, performs at Yoshi's.

For the 8 p.m. show, doors open at 6 p.m. You rush the club's entrance, claim a seat, then have two hours until the show. You might dine at Yoshi's, or somewhere in the neighborhood. If you book the 10 p.m. show and eat first at Yoshi's, your seat is

side the train tracks only to find all the best seats taken by diners.

The jazz club—three-tiered, acoustically exceptional and totally insulated from the trains—has a one-drink minimum requirement. There's a good cocktail selection, wine