diablo

The Magazine of the East Bay

Million Dollar Man

Northgate alum Yul Kwon on winning *Survivor*, playing fair, and being named one of *People*'s sexiest men. Page 23

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food scene

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Yoshi's

A longtime showcase for musical talent now features a culinary star

THE QUALITY of the bookings at Yoshi's, the East Bay's best jazz venue, is extraordinary. Over the years, the club has drawn the world's most celebrated jazz musicians. Legends such as Ruth Brown, Milt Jackson, Abbey Lincoln, Pharoah Sanders, and McCoy Tyner have played Yoshi's, and the club has also fostered such local talent as Berkeley saxophonist Joshua Redman and Oakland vocalists Ledisi and Goapele.

The quality of the food at Yoshi's, however, has always been a different story. No jazz fan ever argued with the convenience of dining at Yoshi's before a show. The restaurant, adjacent to the club, had serviceable Japanese food. It never struggled, but the food was known more for its functionality—management reserves good seats in the club for patrons dining at the restaurant—than its exceptional quality.

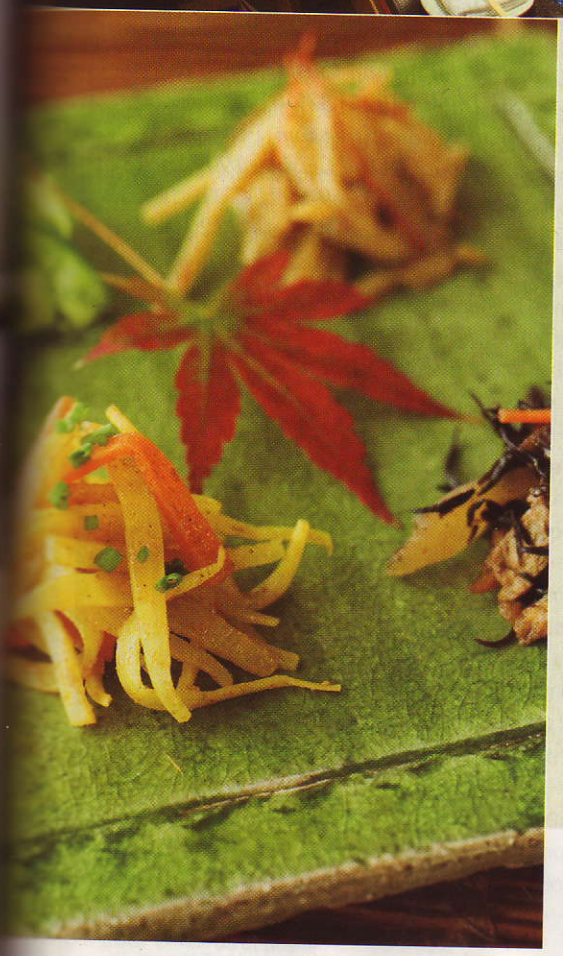
No more. Last fall, Yoshi's owner, Kaz Kajimura, poached chef Shotaro Kamio from Ozumo, the modern Japanese restaurant near San Francisco's Embarcadero. Kamio will help Kajimura open a new Yoshi's this summer in San Francisco's Fillmore Center. When the new location opens, Kamio will serve as executive chef for both restaurants. In the meantime, he's turning around the menu in Jack London Square, the club's third East Bay home—the club got its start in 1973 across the street from UC Berkeley's North Gate, then stood on Claremont Avenue in Rockridge for 20 years.

While at Ozumo, Kamio was lauded for his playful way with traditional Japanese ingredients—think sea urchin risotto. One of his specialties, which now appears occasionally on Yoshi's menu, is his geisha roll, a complicated assemblage of shrimp tempura, crab, teriyaki and spicy sauces, and maguro (tuna). It's a perfect example of Kamio's cooking style: a preparation that sounds impossible to execute well, but the moment you pop a piece in your mouth, the interplay among all the ingredients is instant and delicious.

Kamio's daring impulses in the kitchen may be the result of a youth spent competing in motocross (the rip-snorting motorcycle sport) in the Japanese countryside outside Sendai. After becoming a motocross champion at age 14, the trim, serious-faced Kamio, who also exhibited skill in the kitchen, went on to apprentice at top restaurants in Tokyo.

Kamio's creative touch works far more often than it does not. For his agedashi tofu, he quickly deep fries the tofu so it retains its soft texture. He then stacks the tofu with crescents of avocado tempura and a sprinkling of grated daikon and ginger. Finally, he pours in a broth made from soy sauce and dashi (bonito fish stock). It's a preparation

BY SCOTT HOCKER | PHOTOGRAPHY BY MITCH TOBIAS



at a glance

WHAT MAKES IT SPECIAL: The arrival of chef Shotaro "Sho" Kamio has revitalized the Japanese food at this legendary East Bay jazz club.

DON'T MISS: The ocean *sunomono.* It's an inspired combination of crab, salmon roe, and shiso leaves—all over a lightly vinegared bed of shaved cucumber.

WHAT TO ORDER: The nigiri and rolls, *kurobuta* pork chop, Japanese country-style vegetables, and any of the tempura dishes.

THE SPACE: Sit at the sushi bar if you like your meals interactive; the tatami room if you want a break from the norm.

WHEN TO GO: For a quiet meal, weeknights. To be in the thick of it, a Saturday night with a popular act.

BONUS: Anyone who makes a reservation to dine in the restaurant gets a reserved table in the club for the second show.

PREVIOUS PAGE: Chef Kamio works his magic. THIS PAGE: (top) The sushi bar looks the same, but what's coming out is different—and better; (bottom) Japanese country-style vegetables reflect Kamio's balance of tradition and innovation.

that *mama-san* would never recognize, but after tasting it, even she would concede that the spirit of the dish remains intact.

Although Kamio clearly enjoys innovation, he is well versed in traditional Japanese cooking, as his perfectly rendered "country-style" vegetables, including braised lotus and gobo (burdock) roots, attest. Kamio plates his food beautifully, and Yoshi's understated decor creates an elegant backdrop for his work.

On occasion, Kamio's wanderings into fusion territory stray off course. His spin on *nasu dengaku,* an eggplant dish, involves mozzarella cheese, and his beef nigiri puts layers of grilled tenderloin atop ratatouille and tempura-fried jalapeno halves. The multiple loud flavors of both dishes seem as though they belong in a sports bar.

These are exceptions on an otherwise impressive menu. The nigiri is solid, and dishes such as the ocean *sunomono*—crab and delicate shiso leaves wrapped in daikon radish and placed on a tangle of vinegar-marinated cucumber—and a grilled *kurobuta* pork chop with sweet potato puree possess a breathtaking clarity of flavor.

When Kamio came to Yoshi's, he reunited much of his staff from Ozumo, including General Manager Andrew Generalao, who has instituted a sea change in the waitstaff. Servers used to be tight-lipped and rushed, but now they are gracious and accommodating. Runners explain the elements of each dish in detail.

And that smooth service extends to the club itself, where once it wasn't unheard of to order food that *never* came and had to be struck from the bill at the end of the set. Now the kitchen knows how to prevent a meltdown on a busy Saturday, such as the night I visited when local favorites Tuck and Patti were performing.

The club was packed, but the waitstaff didn't miss a beat, ducking, bobbing, and weaving their way through the crowd. The servers were as graceful as dancers.

When Tuck tore through a solo, the crowd broke out in riotous applause. These days, the performance from Yoshi's kitchen is equally impressive and no less well received.

CONTACT: 510 Embarcadero W., Oakland, (510) 238-9200, www.yoshis.com
HOURS: Dinner daily
PRICE: Appetizers $5–$15, entrées $13–$26
ALCOHOL: Full bar ■