

# Hooked on Yoshi's

The Best Sho—and Sushi—in Town

BY STETT HOLBROOK PHOTOGRAPHY BY LORI EANES

The food at Yoshi's doesn't have to be very good. As the Bay Area's premier jazz venue, music lovers pack the nightclub, and many would dine at the adjoining restaurant even if it were mediocre because it's so convenient to eat there before or after a show. But the food is far from mediocre: Since chef Shotaro "Sho" Kamio came aboard in 2006, he has elevated the fare at Yoshi's to cement its status as Oakland's top Japanese restaurant. ▶▶





Kamio made a name for himself at San Francisco's Ozumo (which garnered three stars from the San Francisco Chronicle) before striking out to open a top-rated Japanese restaurant in Sacramento. Now, in addition to reinvigorating the menu at Yoshi's with a modern Japanese flare, Kamio is designing his "dream kitchen" from the ground up for the soon-to-open Yoshi's in San Francisco's Fillmore District.

Kamio achieves a delicate balance at Yoshi's, fashioning a menu that is approachable for the average diner to whom a California roll and bowl of miso soup feel like a culinary adventure, while offering plenty of rarefied dishes and ingredients to keep devotees of Japanese cuisine interested.

Sushi rolls are sure-fire crowd-pleasers, and the middle page of the new Yoshi's menu offers 20 varieties. The best I tried was the spicy geisha (\$17), sections of seaweed-wrapped, spicy shrimp tempura topped with snow crab and lipstick-red slices of *maguro* (bigeye tuna) sprinkled with light and crunchy bits of *arare* (toasted rice). The dish would please newcomers and aficionados alike. The grilled veggie roll (\$9) was a good

choice, too. The charred and smoky grilled kabocha squash, shiitake mushroom and Japanese eggplant create unexpected flavors in a sushi roll.

The one dud was the o-toro roll (\$16). The addition of halibut, shiso leaves, daikon radish sprouts, cucumber, fish eggs and other ingredients crowded out the deliciously fatty tuna belly—a delicacy best appreciated on

its own.

Indeed, when I ordered the tuna belly nigiri (\$14), the few fat slices yielded one of the most transcendent sushi experiences I've ever had.

The fish was so marbled with fat that it was more white than pink and melted on my tongue with an incredible richness. Forget chicken of the sea—this tuna is the bacon of the sea.

If you love sashimi (sliced raw fish) and nigiri (sliced raw fish on rice), the Tsukiji special is a must. Tsukiji is Tokyo's, and the world's, biggest fish market; Yoshi's imports a changing selection of familiar and rare white fish that is flown overnight from Tokyo to SFO. The five-piece nigiri (\$18) offers a chance to taste some truly delicious fresh fish. The plate, like almost every one I

sampled at Yoshi's, is an exquisitely adorned landscape in miniature. In this case, the long platter was garnished with a wispy sprig of bamboo, a copse of braised broccoli raab and a verdant bed of pungent shiso leaves. The fish itself was arranged like a flight of wine and ranged from firm-fleshed golden-eye sea bream to delicate and wonderfully buttery blue sea robin.

Other highlights of my two visits included the *hamachi* carpaccio (\$14), thinner-than-sashimi slices of yellowtail tuna fanned out with avocado, topped with delicious bits of mushroom confit and dribbled with a warm *yuzu*- and chili-enlivened ponzu sauce; and *yaki hirame* (\$12), sliced halibut cheeks roasted on a cedar plank. And I'm convinced that if more restaurants handled sea vegetables as well as Yoshi's does in its *kaiso* salad (\$10), more people would learn to love seaweed.

Sake is the obvious beverage choice at Yoshi's. The list is small but well chosen. Deciphering sake labels is tricky, but here the selections have been helpfully broken down by grade and annotated with tasting notes. I loved the delicate floral notes and crisp acidity of the Yuki No Bosha, a *junmai* sake from Japan's Akida prefecture. Yoshi's sometimes offers special off-menu sake selections, so be sure to ask.

## Forget chicken of the sea—this tuna is the bacon of the sea.



On my second visit, I sat at the sushi bar, hoping for a little one-on-one attention from one of the sushi chefs, but I was disappointed. Because of the volume of sushi these chefs must cut and roll, they don't have time to deal with customers in the personal way a smaller sushi counter would. So instead of the guys behind the bar taking your order directly, the servers do it. That said, service at Yoshi's is brisk without being brusque. The wait staff is friendly and knows the menu well.

Desserts seldom shine at Japanese restaurants, and that's the case here. The chocolate-yuzu crème brûlée (\$8) missed badly. There was none of the bright, citrus yuzu flavor in evidence, and the pudding itself was grainy and lacked the brittle mantle of burnt sugar for which the dessert is named. The booze-spiked berries and vanilla bean gelato (\$8) was OK but nothing special.

But there are enough inspired dishes and top-notch ingredients here to round out the few flat notes. Instead of being known as a top jazz club that also serves food, Yoshi's, thanks to Kamio, is now a top jazz club with a first-rate Japanese restaurant as well. ■



OPENING PAGE: The exemplary *kaiso* salad at Yoshi's could make anyone love seaweed; Chef Sho Kamio (inset) assembles grilled vegetables. OPPOSITE PAGE (clockwise from left): the grilled veggie roll includes kabocha squash, shiitake mushroom and Japanese eggplant; the Tsukiji special features fish flown in overnight from Tokyo's legendary Tsukiji fish market; sushi chefs maintain a breakneck pace behind the always-bustling Yoshi's sushi bar. THIS PAGE: the *hamachi* carpaccio (left), thin slices of yellowtail tuna, is adorned with avocado and mushroom confit; Chef Kamio (above) puts the finishing touches on his architectural arrangement of grilled vegetables.

#### THE DETAILS

**YOSHI'S.** Japanese. Serves dinner 5:30 p.m.–10 p.m. Mon.–Thu., 5:30 p.m.–10:30 p.m. Fri.–Sat. and 5 p.m.–9 p.m. Sun. 510 Embarcadero West, (510) 238-9200. CC ☎ 📞 \$\$\$