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Jin Sho: Thoroughly modern sushi

JIN SHO FOLLOWS IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF FAMED CHEF

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Mercury News

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Blame Nobu Matsuhisa, the celebrated Japanese chef who gave raw fish a Latin accent in L.A. before spinning off a galaxy of eponymous restaurants: Classic sushi no longer has the undisputed star power it enjoyed a decade ago.

Hip Japanese restaurants today are expected to stretch culinary boundaries, introducing new flavors and combinations within a framework of traditional techniques. When all the elements are in balance, this new cuisine feels like a natural evolution of the Japanese aesthetic.

Consider the gorgeous platter of raw yellowtail (\$15) - thinly sliced, dotted with slivers of jalapeño, and swimming in a bright ponzu - served at Jin Sho in Palo Alto. The fish, buttery and mild, gets a gentle jolt from the fresh chile, underscored by the sharp, citrus tang of the sauce. It's a fusion dish, but it doesn't stray far from its sashimi origins.

From N.Y. to Palo Alto If the yellowtail recalls one

of Matsuhisa's signature dishes, that's because Jin Sho owners Ichiro Takahashi and Noriomi Kaneko are alums of Nobu's New York restaurant. They brought that dish and several other favorites to Palo Alto from their years working as a sushi chef and a sous chef in the Manhattan kitchens.

The Japanese-born chefs opened their small restaurant on California Avenue last December. Located in a modest storefront, it's a sleek, minimally decorated oasis of calm in the heart of Silicon Valley. A long sushi bar and open kitchen line one wall of the 47-seat dining room distinguished by a high ceiling and exposed trusses. Dropped ceiling panels, painted a cheerful marigold yellow, float above wood benches and dark-stained tables on the opposite wall. Lights are low and the music soft.

Jin Sho's small menu is almost equally divided between more adventurous fusion dishes and traditional sushi and sashimi offerings, most made with fish flown in from Japan. The chefs take pride in serving varieties that are not readily available outside Japan, including octopus shipped live.

The sushi was uniformly good, the rice nicely seasoned and the fish fresh and expertly cut, on my visits. Still, it was the other items that set the restaurant apart. Flavors were vivid but not brash, and presentations were eye-catching on everything from the impressively tender slices of barely seared Kobe beef *tataki* (\$20) to the nicely balanced ceviche salad (\$15), dressed in olive oil, lime and Peruvian spices.

Savory black cod Miso-marinated Alaskan black cod (\$18), an often-imitated dish from Nobu, was elegant and satisfying, with a melting texture and deeply savory flavor. Rock shrimp tempura (\$12), also a Nobu specialty, were plump and juicy beneath their thin, crisp coat of batter. They were served with

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a handful of greens and a spicy mayo sauce.

I could be very happy here making a meal from the appetizer page of the menu. Even the usually unremarkable seaweed salad (\$8) stood out with its textural mix of four marine vegetables - *wakame*, green *tosaka*, red *tosaka*, and *mekabu* - tossed with a mellow sesame dressing. Slices of seared tuna sashimi (\$15), encrusted with pepper, were enlivened by a creamy onion sauce dressing mixed lettuces and crunchy rice sticks. Chunks of crunchy, salty pickled eggplant played against the soft, velvet texture of *nasu miso* (\$7), deep-fried eggplant accented by the caramelized flavors of sweet miso (\$7).

The chicken *kushiyaki* (\$12), however, was a letdown. The skewers of chicken were dry and tough from over-cooking, and no amount of the lively *anticucho* sauce - made with Peruvian chiles - could save them.

Perhaps the most delightful surprise was the lamb chops with wasabi garlic sauce (\$24) listed among the 10 entrees. A rack of six beautifully trimmed chops - simply seasoned with rosemary, bay leaf and thyme and perfectly grilled to medium rare - is served with very Western mashed potatoes and spinach. It's a wonderful dish but not what I'd expect to find on an Asian menu. "I like lamb chops," Kaneko explained later. "I made the menu with what I like to eat."

Server was flawless Guiding my companions and me through the menu both evenings was a gracious and charming server who hit just the right note of friendliness. His timing was flawless and his pride in Jin Sho's cuisine obvious. "Just to let you know, this is the real Kobe beef from Japan," he pointed out one night as he delivered the extraordinary *tataki*.

To accompany the food, there's an extensive sake

menu as well as sake-based cocktails, Japanese beers, and a quartet of wines. The sake flights are a nice way to become more familiar with the range of flavors brewed from rice.

One evening, the special was a young spring sake, Kasumi Tsuru (\$25 for a 300 ml bottle), served icy cold in a special carafe. It was delicate and fruity with a hint of almond on the finish.

Ending your meal with a good glass of sake may well be the best choice here. The only desserts offered at Jin Sho are mochi ice cream (\$2) and a bland panna cotta (\$6) with a thin, very sweet strawberry sauce.

Jin Sho 454 S. California Ave., near El Camino, Palo Alto (650) 321-3454.

The dish Japanese cuisine takes on a Latin accent at this hip new restaurant and sushi bar in Palo Alto's California Avenue neighborhood. The owner-chefs are alums of Nobu in New York.

Price range Lunch \$12-\$20. Dinner appetizers \$7-\$24, entrees \$12-\$28. Omikase (chef's tasting menu) \$60-\$90. Corkage fee: \$10.

Details Sake, beer and wine.

Pluses Extraordinary raw yellowtail with jalapeño and yuzu, elegant miso-marinated Alaskan black cod.

Minuses Dull, dry chicken *kushiyaki* and bland panna cotta.

Hours Lunch 11:45 a.m.-2 p.m. Mondays-Fridays. Dinner 5:30-9:30 p.m. Mondays-Thursdays, till 10

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