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Double whammy of umami

Review -- Shuraku Sake Bar & Bistro

BY THE VANCOUVER PROVINCE JANUARY 29, 2009

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Review

Shuraku Sake Bar & Bistro

Where: 833 Granville St.

Payment/reservations: Major credit cards, 604-687-6622

Drinks: Fully licensed.

Hours: Mon.-Thurs., 11:45 a.m.-11 p.m., Fri.-Sat., noon-midnight, Sun., noon-11 p.m.

Just like the Cheers theme, sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your name and they're always glad you came and your troubles are all the same except for the guy with the tinfoil hat and welding goggles you just saw on Granville Street. At least that's the way it seems when you've joined the izakaya craze and the greetings come fast as a shogun's blade as you walk through the door.

Of course, it's in Japanese and they aren't really saying your name, but the general air of camaraderie is enough to make even the most cynical take heart, ready to seek solace in a pint of Sapporo, a cup of sake, a plate of sushi and some grilled meat morsels, meditatively masticated in an ambience that hugs you like an old lunatic uncle who disappeared years ago, only to reappear as if only a week has gone by and though you barely know him he's still family and there's an odd warmth to his mothball-scented body.

So, Peaches and I got our greeting, leaving us warm and fuzzy as we were shown to a booth seat in this hipster setting. The open kitchen is up front along with the bar, backdropped by a strange curvaceous

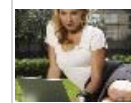
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architectural construction of wood, metal, clay and bottles of sake ebbing and flowing across the wall.

Deeper into the interior is banquette seating, its length illuminated by a long horizontal backlit translucent panel upon which faint grey and black designs play upon the white surface to emulate the vaporous quality of ancient Japanese landscape paintings. In a way, you could say this is a metaphor for Japanese cuisine, where flavours are just hinted at to give them a bridge into reality, their subtle natures revealed with the slightest brushstroke.

At least this is what I was so smugly thinking until I sank my teeth into the Volcano Roll (\$9.50). And on that note, there's nothing subtle about dull green wasabi kicking your nasal passages around like the Incredible Hulk.

As great as it was to eat the roll, it was also stunning to behold, shaped on the plate into a volcanic mountain with lava trails of spicy sauce running down the sides and long prongs of crispy noodle exploding upwards from the top. Inside were spicy tuna and cucumber with crunchy bonito flakes crackling the surface and on all counts this eruption was well worth braving.

Also tried a wild salmon teriyaki (\$13), a daily special of edamame potato sticks (\$4.20), beef-wrapped asparagus (\$6.25), an order of ebi gyoza (\$8.50) and a yam tempura roll (\$3.25).

The wild salmon teriyaki sat atop a pillow of crispy rice that was great, the saucing was subtle but the salmon was a tad overcooked. As for the edamame 'tater creation wrapped in a spring roll carapace with three types of dipping sauces -- cheese, spicy ketchup and a mayo-ketchup mixture -- this was deep-fried perfection and a textural journey from crispy to soft to crunchy all in one bite.

Now it's always been my motto if you don't like your veggies then wrap them in meat and the beef asparagus with its light dribbling of soy was OK, although the meat, although thinly sliced was tougher than a Yakuza sent to collect a gambling debt. The tempura roll was OK, but the ebi gyoza were outstanding, filled with a succulent mix of pork, shrimp and chicken.

Eclecticism built on the back of familiarity is the recipe for this place, evident both in the names of dishes and ingredients. Check out the Pink Igloo or the Enchanted Forest Rolls, the Renkon Hasami Age with shrimp sandwiched between slices of crunchy lotus root, wrapped with nori and deep-fried or the Samurai Champloo with cubed fried tofu, kimchee and kikurage mushrooms tossed in a miso-spiked spicy meat sauce. Hey, you'll be glad you came even if they don't know your name and after enough sake you won't remember your own name anyway.

THE BOTTOM LINE:

A sudoku for the senses, each piece fitting together expertly.

RATINGS: Food: B+ Service: A- Atmosphere: B+

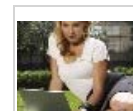
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