

Hanazen

Four words will get you into this unique restaurant: We have a reservation
By Michaela Jarvis and Photography by Mitch Tobias

The owners of Hanazen restaurant in Orinda are trying hard not to hire a bouncer and become the CBGB of Contra Costa. And on the dark stretch of little-traveled road where their tiny Orinda restaurant is located, you'd think that would hardly be a problem.



And yet it is. Hanazen offers a warm, elegantly rustic ambience. Its engaging hostess and server, co-owner Coco Horikawa, knows more about sake than most people know about anything. Coco's husband, co-owner and chef Kenji, brings skill to the kitchen and charm to the sushi bar. Factor in the exclusivity that comes with having only 18 seats, and the next thing you know, there's a line out the door. "We don't want everyone to come the same night and have a long line," says Coco, an outgoing woman whose English is inflected with a Japanese accent. "It drives us crazy."

Coco says that on some nights, the restaurant has run out of both fish and rice. After two local newspapers ran reviews of the restaurant not long after it opened in June 2005, the place was mobbed. Since then, Hanazen has had a relatively steady and persistent crowd, and the owners have shied away from publicity.

When they're not busy trying to accommodate all comers, Coco and Kenji focus on a monthly sake and food pairing dinner that showcases their talents, expertise, and complementary passions. For Kenji, who as a teenager was apprenticed to a master chef in Osaka, Japan, his passion is *kaiseki* cuisine, a specialized method of food preparation that marks the seasons in Japan. Completely different from everyday American-style tempura and chicken teriyaki, *kaiseki* cuisine makes use of fish, vegetables, and even presentation specific to the seasons.

"It's very special, requiring more technique," says Coco. "It's very beautiful."

Kenji spent years mastering *kaiseki* and, in the old style of learning from a master, was required to wash dishes, make the employee lunch, sharpen the knives, and set up other chefs' stations. "Sometimes he was able to touch the fish," says Coco, "but only the very cheap fish."

Coco's sake expertise also comes from Japan. Her father is a writer who studied literature of the Edo period (1603–1867), which has references to sake. She says he wanted to write a book about the culture of the period, but ended up writing a book about sake instead. Similarly, Coco studied ceramics at the California College of the Arts, but she too fell into sake, returning to Japan to earn a sake sommelier license.

At Hanazen, Coco's willingness to share her culture comes through as she delivers food and drinks with explanations of how they are enjoyed in Japan.

For instance, Coco says the Ramune soda, which comes with a glass ball inside the bottle, is traditional. Her grandmother used to drink it. In summer, it's displayed in big tubs of ice outside shops in the downtown neighborhood of Tokyo where Coco grew up. She also explains that Hanazen's seasonal draft sake is a fleeting pleasure: If she runs out, she can't get more until next year. When explaining *kaiseki* cuisine, she offers that *kaiseki*-style meals are served in Japan in March for "girls day" and in May for "boys day," among other holidays.

This past January, Hanazen's sake and *kaiseki*-style food pairing celebrated Japanese New Year with foods that have been associated with the New Year for 1,200 years. They included herring roe, which symbolizes a wish for numerous children; black beans for health; and shrimp, a symbol of longevity. A delicately spicy and stunningly fresh raw tuna salad began the meal, followed by the black beans, roe, and a huge, sweet, succulent

prawn grilled in its shell. A perfectly grilled scallop was next, followed by the creamiest, sweetest eggplant we've ever had, which had been deep-fried whole then peeled. The fifth course was a small platter of beautifully presented sashimi and sushi.



Coco paired each course with sake—because it's premium sake, it's served unheated—with all the care that goes into pairing high-end wines and food. For instance, she paired an extra-flavorful sake with citrus aromas with the piquant tuna salad. She chose a sake with creamy aromas of dairy products—we thought cheese—as a rich counterpart to the eggplant. The flavor sensations intrigued the customers at the intimate dinner—only 16 attend—and they traded opinions and raved about their favorites, especially as Coco's generous pouring got well under way.

For Coco and Kenji, one of the beauties of the sake dinner is that diners reserve by phone, providing their credit card, ahead of time. Only customers who have dined at the restaurant before and signed its guest book may reserve. On regular nights, Hanazen's owners aren't so lucky: The restaurant is often mobbed unless people call to make reservations, so Coco can stem the flood.

If you want to check out this minute establishment, make a reservation. This ain't no disco, but it's a thrill to have your name on the list.

Contact: 87 Orinda Way, Orinda, (925) 254-3611, www.myhanazen.com
Hours: Dinner Mon.–Sat. Ask at the restaurant about dates of monthly sake dinners.
Price: Appetizers \$8, entrées \$20, sake dinner \$80
Alcohol: Mostly sake, beer, and wine. ■

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