



Hanazen offers traditional sushi and an amazing sake selection. (Jose Carlos Fajardo/Contra Costa Times)

Try this precious gem, for Hanazen's sake

By John Birdsall

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On the pavement outside Hanazen -- a tiny sushi restaurant in Orinda -- there's a small dish of moist salt pressed into a steeply tapering cone.

It's a Japanese ritual gesture: Merchants put out salt to lure the horses of people wealthy enough to ride in carriages. If an animal stopped to lick the salt, its owner might be persuaded to cool her heels inside the shop. Once inside, she might be tempted to open her purse.

Whether it was the salt's magic or the opportunity to prove myself wrong, I can't say. But a recent meal at Hanazen (followed by the restaurant's once-a-month sake dinner) snared me long enough to recognize it: Hanazen is a treasure in miniature, offering a rare taste of authentic Japanese cooking, and an even rarer opportunity to learn about sake from a woman of uncommonly deep knowledge.

About proving myself wrong: Last October, in a review of Calypso, I complained about the quality of Orinda's restaurants. "What is it about Orinda," I whined, "that seems content with mediocre restaurants?"

But my first taste of Hanazen's Salmon Skin Salad (\$6.50) shuts my mouth to anything but chewing. It's a pile of crispy broiled skin, sticky shards of belly meat, the thinnest possible wisps of yellow onion and a nest of greens, in a dressing spiked so heavily with lemon juice, it makes the whole dish glow. I hate raw onion. Here, it provides not only heat and crunch, but also a measured distraction from the potentially turpentine wallop of oily salmon.

With the opening of Hanazen last summer, Orinda has a restaurant that's capable of food that's not only delicious, but also has a distinct personality.

With just six tables, and another six seats at the sushi bar, it's also minuscule. The husband-and-wife team behind the place do everything themselves, from going to the fish market to cooking and serving the food and scrubbing up afterwards. Chef Kenji Horikawa studied sushi-making in Osaka, Japan, and worked in a string of Bay Area sushi bars before striking out on his own. But it's Kenji-san's wife, Coco, who has the more unusual story. And it's Coco-san who makes Hanazen such a remarkable place.

Daughter of a respected Tokyo sake writer, Coco-san grew up in a household immersed in sake culture. And though it's unusual in Japan for a woman to be a sake expert, Coco-san brings the passion and knowledge of sake sommelier to her roles of host and server.

On a recent visit, I stupidly ask for nigori-zake (sweet, unfiltered and as thin and white as low-fat milk) to go with sushi -- as unappetizing a choice as ordering port to drink with raw oysters. Coco-san brings the bottle, as well as glasses of two other nigori-zakes, lighter, crisper and more delicately perfumed than the one I've asked for. The extra glasses don't show up on the tab -- a pure desire to fix bad sake judgment seems to drive Coco-san. Next time, I won't hesitate to ask her opinion first.

You get the feeling that Hanazen's dishes are designed to enhance sake, and not the other way around. A special appetizer of cold Steamed Monkfish Liver (\$7) -- the large pink-and-white liver has been marinated in sake, pressed into a thick cylinder and steamed -- is as delicious with a light, fruity junmai ginjo sake as a slab of foie gras with some steely, elegant Riesling.

Kenji-san's sushi seems understated. Made with kanburi yellowtail instead of the usual hamachi, Fresh Yellowtail Nigiri (\$6) is smooth and buttery. Maguro Nigiri (\$6), cut from bluefin tuna, has good texture despite its many striations (separate segments of flesh linked by connective tissue). Ironically, the most expensive nigirizushi -- Otoro (\$12) -- is the least successful. The pieces of opaque, fatty tuna belly taste rich and buttery, but the texture is ever-so-slightly mushy -- that's a flaw even a sip of some crisp, silky-textured sake can't fix.

Reach East Bay food writer John Birdsall at jwbirdsall@sbcglobal.net.

Sake tastings

Each month, Kenji and Coco Horikawa offer special five-course sake dinners (\$70 per person, including sakes). Based on a recent dinner, I can report that these dinners offer not only a great way to learn about sake, but also a way to taste traditional Japanese dishes we don't usually see here. A recent dinner included cubes of red tuna under a mound of frothy, finely grated Japanese sweet potato; grilled whole smelt next to hunks of sweet potato cake coated with spicy Alaskan pollack roe; eggplant and some quenelle-like fish paste steamed inside tofu skin; poached daikon topped with red miso; and a variety of sashimi. A different premium sake accompanied each course. Keep in mind that you may have to arrange for a ride home -- Coco-san never lets your sake glass get empty.

Hanazen

REVIEW VISIT ON JAN. 9

- WHERE: 87 Orinda Way (near Camino Pablo), Orinda.
- HOURS: Lunch 11 a.m.-2 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays; dinner 5-10 p.m. Mondays-Saturdays; closed Sundays.
- PARKING: Free on the street.
- CONTACT: 925-254-3611; www.myhanazen.com.
- DATE OPENED: June 7, 2005.
- PRINCIPALS: Kenji and Coco Horikawa.
- RESERVATIONS: Any size party.
- PRIVATE PARTIES: No.
- NOISE LEVEL: Moderate.
- DINING ALONE: Perfect at the sushi bar.
- SPECIAL AREA: Chat with Kenji-san at the sushi bar.
- SERVICE POINT: Coco-san offers great recommendations on sake.

Food

- 4 forks (overall value rating of our visit out of a possible 5)
- CUISINE: Sushi, sake and small, sake-friendly dishes.
- PRICES: \$\$ (sushi \$5-\$12).
- HOME RUN: Salmon Skin Salad, Steamed Monkfish Liver.
- STRIKEOUT: Otoro Nigiri.
- VEGETARIAN: Some appetizers and a few vegetable sushi rolls.
- KIDS: Try shiitake nigiri.
- DESSERTS: None.
- FREEBIES: Orange and watermelon slices with the check.
- FOOD COST (before tax and tip): \$49.50; three appetizers, six orders of sushi.

ABOUT THE RESTAURNT

Hanazen

87 Orinda Way
Orinda CA 94563
(925)254-3611

DETAILS

Rating



Cuisine type

Japanese

Style

Sushi, sake and small, sake-friendly dishes

Hours

Dinner M-Sa 5-10pm

Meals Served

Dinner

Reservations

Not required

Attire

Casual

Prices

Inexpensive - Entrees \$15 & under

Specialties

Salmon Skin Salad, Steamed Monkfish Liver

Services

Private parties
Coco-san offers great recommendations on sake

Alcohol

Specializes in sake

Parking

Street parking