

Hanazen takes sushi back to basics

Jennifer Tomaro, Special to The Chronicle

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The Tokyo fish market is a feast for the eyes as well as the stomach. The largest of its kind in the world, it carries more than 400 different varieties of seafood, fish and shellfish.

Nestled along the outer edges of this enormous marketplace are slim sushi houses with lines of people waiting patiently outside to get in and devour the fresh catches of the day. Patrons overlook the cramped space and rushed service for the fresh-from-the-water commodity that is unlike anywhere else.

It's nearly impossible to replicate that experience in the super trendy California-style sushi joints, but Hanazen comes close. An unpretentious wooden sushi house with sliding glass doors and a screen-door entrance, Hanazen has a mere six tables, with six stools at the sushi bar. Within these walls, however, is back-to-basics sushi with a welcome focus on the fish rather than reinventing the art of sushi.

Fresh starters

To start, let chef-owner Kenji Horikawa assemble a plate of his chef's choice sashimi (nine pieces \$18.50; 12 pieces \$23). Our order arrived with three pieces each of deep red, rich and meaty maguro (tuna); lemony, buttery hamachi (yellowtail); and bright orange, soft and oily sake (salmon). All three taste as fresh as if they were just pulled from the sea.

If one of the specials of the day happens to be otoro (\$12 for two pieces), don't pass it up. Otoro is the best grade of fatty tuna available, and comes from the belly section of the fish. Its even marbling of fat creates a velvety, melt-in-your-mouth texture.

Horikawa flexes his creativity with the Super Roll (\$12), which comes packed with tuna, salmon, tamago (egg), asparagus and avocado. This jumbo roll is too big for a single bite, which is unfortunate, because the combination of sweet egg, crisp asparagus, fresh avocado and firm, meaty fish is something that should be enjoyed all at once.

The dragon roll (\$12) is more manageable. This roll's sweetness comes from the teriyaki-like sauce that covers the eel and is typically made from soy sauce, mirin, sake (rice wine) and sugar.

There are, of course, sushi staples such as the spicy tuna roll (\$6.50), which delivers a nice, even heat that doesn't overpower the tuna; and the California and eel hand roll (\$5) packed with sweet real crabmeat, eel and avocado. The spicy scallop hand roll (\$4.50), however, had too much spicy dressing, which drowned out the sweet scallops and overwhelmed the toasted nori cone.

Small hints of California are evident throughout the sushi menu, with pairings such as avocado and eel, and salmon and asparagus (\$6). Both representations are common duos and are well executed at Hanazen with fresh ingredients packed between the layers of rice.

A particularly interesting bite is the kanpyo maki (\$4.50) -- dried gourd (squash) shavings that are rehydrated, then cooked in a soy sauce and sugar broth. Similar in texture and sweet fruit flavor to a dried apricot, the kanpyo roll would have fared better if the rice wrapped around it wasn't seasoned; the vinegar in the sushi rice overpowered the kanpyo.

The agedashi (\$6.50) -- fried tofu served in a hot liquid of mirin, shoyu and dashi and topped with grated daikon -- also didn't measure up. Another dimension of flavor or thinly sliced scallions would have lifted this appetizer out of mediocrity.

Despite these slight misses, Hanazen delivers fresh, honest sushi. The restaurant doesn't strive for over-the-top combinations, which can often overwhelm the fish.

Sake tasting

In addition, Hanazen keeps the Japanese sake tradition alive and flowing with an engaging menu of sake and sochu and a monthly sake-pairing night led by Kenji Horikawa's wife and co-owner, Coco Horikawa.

This monthly sake-tasting menu (starting at \$70 per person) consists of five appetizers, each paired with a different sake. The seasonal appetizers are traditional Japanese dishes inspired by Kenji's days as a chef in Osaka, and aren't on the regular menu. Announcements of the events are sent to those who have signed the guestbook in the restaurant; space is limited to 15.

Hanazen is the closest thing that I've found to the sushi houses I ate at in Japan. Like sushi restaurants on the outer edge of the Tokyo fish market, Hanazen is all about the freshness of the fish. And between Kenji and Coco, diners will learn to appreciate the skill of sushi-making or the art of sake pairing, whether they're eating at the counter or attending the dinner.

Just be sure to make reservations -- the locals have already caught on to Hanazen's sushi, so it's usually pretty crowded. Luckily, Coco and Kenji are swift and move diners through quickly -- and offer chocolate to those on the sidewalk outside, waiting for one of the coveted tables to open up.

E-mail comments to food@sfchronicle.com.

Hanazen

87 Orinda Way, Orinda;
(925) 254-3611.
Dinner 5-10 p.m. Monday-Saturday.
Beer and wine.
Reservations and credit cards accepted.
Street parking easy.

Overall: TWO STARS
Food: TWO AND A HALF STARS
Service: TWO STARS
Atmosphere: TWO STARS
Prices: \$\$\$
Noise Rating: TWO BELLS

Pluses: Neighborhood restaurant in a traditional Japanese setting with focus on fresh, quality ingredients.

Minuses: Vegetarian items such as the kanpyo (dried gourd) and agedashi (tofu) need improvement.

RATINGS KEY

FOUR STARS: Extraordinary

THREE STARS: Excellent

TWO STARS: Good

ONE STAR: Fair

(box): Poor

\$ Inexpensive: entrees \$10 and under

\$\$ Moderate: \$11-\$17

\$\$\$ Expensive: \$18-\$24

\$\$\$\$ Very Expensive: more than \$25

Prices based on main courses. When entrees fall between these categories, the prices of appetizers help determine the dollar ratings.

ONE BELL: Pleasantly quiet (under 65 decibels)

TWO BELLS: Can talk easily (65-70)

THREE BELLS: Talking normally gets difficult (70-75)

FOUR BELLS: Can only talk in raised voices (75-80)

BOMB: Too noisy for normal conversation (80+)

Chronicle critics make every attempt to remain anonymous.

All meals are paid for by the Chronicle.

Star ratings are based on a minimum of three visits.

Ratings are updated continually based on a least one revisit.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/chronicle/archive/2006/04/26/FDGJPIE0V61.DTL>