

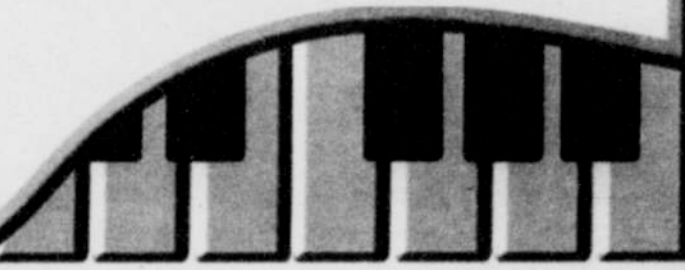
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epiQueerean

BY JENNY NGUYEN

Feng sushi

Masu • 406 S.W. 13th Ave.

Masu, located just above American Apparel, can be somewhat deceiving no matter what you think. The dark, candlelit stairwell opens up to a majestic burgundy cushion-lined wall and a stunning backlit sushi bar encasing dozens of the namesake masu—cedar boxes for serving sake. High ceilings, a few curtains, a large mural and a central bar establish sleek neomodern starkness in interior design, something not foreign to Japanese simplicity. But as the lights mellow down and the sun sets after 7 p.m., the warehouse windows expose a night life gleaming below as the bar inside begins its own gentle hum.

Every table comes equipped with its own masu, which gets generously embellished with edamame—gently boiled soybeans littered with sea salt. Perhaps the Japanese version of pretzels, edamame is the perfect accompaniment to any of the fabulous martinis.

The menu is small and precise, yet boasts some pretty hefty entrees for a sushi place. A glance around the room found gorgeous plate-ups of miso-marinated rack of lamb and sake-poached filet of halibut, but not a single sashimi platter. Suspicious, I stuck to sushi, pure and sinful. I mean *simple*, of course.

The Maiso salad, a delicate blend of seaweed in an effortless sesame and rice wine vinegar dressing, was artfully plated and texturally delightful. My very American companion ordered the California Rolls, which in all respects may just be the definitive way of judging a sushi restaurant in the United States. The rolls were packed full of imitation crab, cucumber and avocado, but the rice was dry and disappointing considering rice is sushi. Although it was difficult for me to get over how glutinous rice can be dry, the young pickled ginger was authentic, not burning with red No. 40 and gezer ginger taste like those found at other sushi spots all over town.

Beefed-up tamaki had their own page in the menu; specialties from the Butterfly Roll with teriyaki eel to the Masu Roll with albacore ranged from \$9 to \$13. Plates were always stunning, with rolls curving, sauces stroked and shiso leaves just so. The Butterfly Roll was also dry and lacked the salty oomph of teriyaki eel, which made it barely distinguishable from the California Roll. Just as I'd thought I was ready to walk out, out came the Monkey Tasa. A crazy name fitting for the crazy concept: ahi tuna-stuffed mushrooms, tempura-battered and deep-fried. Anyone familiar with the omniscient fifth taste, umami (pronounced "ooh mommy," really), should rejoice. This appetizer is a must-have.

Perhaps sensing my disappointment with the sushi, our server brought us another bottle of sake on the house. And as I sat and pondered the popularity of Masu over my warm rice wine, I noticed friendly wait staff, gorgeous-looking food, tranquil scenery and the endless flow of attractive people sipping neon martinis...this isn't a sushi bar but a "feng sushi" bar. Masu fills the niche of those seeking picturesque food in a zenful atmosphere. And that ain't bad. **J**