

Two Dolla Holla

THE ART OF CHEAP SUSHI By Isabel Zacharias

Though perhaps not the salmon nigiri you'll rave to your friends about or the most amazing Cali roll you've ever had, 541 Sushi Bar's conveyor belt-style fare really isn't half bad — especially at a consistent \$2 a plate. And the restaurant, which opened Dec. 10, doesn't aim to be fine dining, anyway. Owner Wookyn Lee would be the first to tell you this.

Lee had been toying with opening a sushi place for about two years when, this summer, he noticed the open space at Broadway and Pearl where Lebanese restaurant Dalia had just vacated. "I saw the sign and thought, 'It can't happen,'" Lee tells EW. "But it happened."

Two weeks later, the lease was signed; Lee's restaurant vision began to materialize, but from the get-go, his values were different from those of other, more traditional local sushi joints.

"The sushi is just food for me," Lee says. "Sushi is just sushi. If they're looking for some kind of art, then go to some fine dining and pay for it. If they need some food ... then come here to eat, to sit. Different ideas."

Though Lee says he's been making sushi since he was young and it feels "familiar" to him, he expresses some disdain for the idea of sushi as an artistically pretentious or competitive craft. Restaurants more formal than 541 Sushi Bar, he says, "approach it from, 'I've been working in sushi for a long time. I am the sushi master.' We don't do it that way, and it doesn't matter. We're selling the

same fish and same food."

In fact, Lee says that most sushi places in town buy from the same supplier, and that more expensive sushi is simply sold at a higher mark-up price.

"They're selling service, not food," Lee explains. "They make some good decorations, which is not about eating."

It's more than being all about eating, though. 541 Sushi Bar's name itself points to its dual function as a drinking establishment, and Lee says the restaurant's liquor license has played a big role in its identity.

"In this area, they drink a lot," Lee says of the usual patrons. "They drink a lot of sake; they drink a lot of beer." And with food at such a bargain price, "they have some room to drink."

To seal the deal, 541 Sushi Bar eliminates the most common fear associated with conveyor belt sushi: "People say, 'Oh, if it's out on the belt, it's been sitting there all day,'" Lee says. "But no."

Not only are there health codes in place to prevent this from happening, but 541 Sushi Bar's system is sophisticated: Each dish is given a bar code, and a machine "kicks out" a dish from the rotation after two hours.

For the first time, maybe ever, Eugene's sushi scene sees a harmonious midpoint between economy and quality — one that'll be hard to compete with. Never had sushi before? Don't hesitate. "Try it," Lee says. "Two bucks." ■

541 Sushi is at 898 Pearl St. and is open 11 am to 9 pm daily.



DICING UP SUSHI AT 541 SUSHI

THE WORLD'S FUNNEST FOOD MADE HERE IN EUGENE

SIZZLE PIE

FAMOUS PIZZA BY THE SLICE OR BY THE PIE

VEGAN, VEGETARIAN, OMNIVORE

homegrown PUBLIC HOUSE

Mention this ad and receive **1/2 OFF APPETIZER!**

Weekly Specials • Taco Tuesday • Burger & Brew Wednesday "Pasta Party" Thursday • Weekend Specials & Sunday Brunch

Hours: Weekdays 11-Close Sunday 10-2

294 Laurel, Florence | 541-997-4886 homegrownpub.com

Track Town PIZZA

Pint Night Every Tuesday

Late Night Specials

Free Delivery! (\$10 MINIMUM)

541-284-8484

1809 FRANKLIN BLVD

(Across the street from Matthew Knight Arena)

SUN-THURS 11AM-MIDNIGHT
FRI-SAT 11AM-1AM