



PRESTON SHIN SLICES A TUNA AT IZAKAYA OYAZI'S GRAND OPENING JULY 14

PHOTOS BY TRASK BEDORTHA

DIFFERENTLY FAMILIAR

IZAKAYA OYAZI PROVIDES JAPANESE NIGHTLIFE AND 'TONGUE-HAPPY' TRADITIONAL FOODS

BY VANESSA SALVIA

If Eugene were Japan, there would be an *izakaya* on every corner — maybe several.

Most of them would be street stalls specializing in only one type of food, such as fish soup. Some, like the newly opened Izakaya Oyazi in the space of the former Granary Pizza restaurant, would have a broad menu.

“An izakaya is for casual comfort food where people go after work for bonding and talking,” owner Preston Shin says. “Business people go to not talk about work, for personal bonding. Each [izakaya] usually has a specialty, but we’re more of a ‘serves it all.’”

Sonny Moon, his wife, says, “It’s the food you would eat at home.”

Shin sees no competition between Izakaya Oyazi and the other izakaya in town, Meiji. “We coexist,” he says. “We knew that Eugene needed another place for Asian nightlife and good food and drink and atmosphere.”

Izakaya Oyazi had a soft opening April 19 and a grand opening July 14. The couple gathered feedback from customers and made some adjustments to their original menu. For instance, Moon says, customers seemed to want more of a fine dining experience for dinner, so they’ve expanded the menu and adjusted how they plated some food.

Moon says that serving skewers such as *yakitori* chicken skewers on a bed of cabbage is typical in Japan, but in Eugene, it came across as plain. “People didn’t like it,” she says. “So now we have a green salad with herbs.”

While Izakaya Meiji is focused on whiskeys, Izakaya Oyazi is rooted in sake. Shin says they offer the largest selection of sake in the Northwest, with servers who are trained to help customers make a good selection. “There’s so much variety in sake,” he says. “It’s like with wine. It’s like eating meat but not ever trying seafood. You’re leaving out a whole class of things.”

In addition to the rarer sakes, Izakaya Oyazi serves Oni Koroshi, an inexpensive sake Moon says is “the draft beer of sake.” She also stocks



unpasteurized Namasake, which must be drunk quickly in order to maintain its freshness. “We go through it,” she says, and customers can ask for a sample.

Moon and Shin say their establishment is already popular with the many Asian students in town. Once dinner wraps up upstairs, most of the action moves downstairs for a feel that is more about nightlife than table service. The decor was all brought in from Japan and is vintage from the 1980s.

“We wanted to bring in the things that would be familiar for people from Japan,” Moon says. “These are all fun things. We want you to be happy, and not just tongue-happy.”

But tongue-happy you will definitely be. The Osaka-born chef makes his own house sauce for the pork *katsu*, a hand-breaded and lightly fried cutlet, and gives his broth and curries rich, deep flavor from *kombu*, a type of seaweed rich in umami, and flakes of dried *bonito*, a fish. “No MSG,” Shin says.

The plates come out beautifully arranged, served with chopsticks. The menu centers around larger dinner entrees served in bento boxes and small sharable plates such as steamed soybeans and octopus salad.

The bento boxes, which cost from \$19 for tofu to \$27 for grilled eel, hold a large portion of food, including green salad, soup, three dumplings and three pieces of *takoyaki*, a snack similar to a savory griddle cake.

In addition to the varied menu, the second half of Izakaya Oyazi’s name sets it apart.

“The original word would be ‘oyaji,’ with a j,” Shin says. “That means something like ‘old man,’ or ‘uncle.’ Using the ‘z’ is like spelling crossing with an ‘x.’ It means we’re different. Some people think it’s a mistake.”

Not so. “We did that on purpose,” Moon says. “The new name makes it unique to Eugene. Izakaya is all about creation. It’s telling people we’re different.”

Find Izakaya Oyazi at 259 E. 5th Avenue. It’s open 5 pm to midnight Monday through Saturday. For more info, call (458) 201-7433.