

Tokyo Teriyaki

The restaurant's Americanized, Japanese-light offerings don't withstand deep inspection or offer sublime flavor — they simply, cheaply, fill your belly

It was one of those unceasingly dark, stormy days we've seen all too much of lately: The rain was coming down in sheets, and the wind whipped it sideways. Everywhere you went you had to be mindful of it — holding on to your hat, making sure the car door wouldn't be blown shut, and hopscotching to avoid plunging ankle-deep into overflowing puddles and gutters. Running errands in Astoria in the midst of this mess, I thought maybe a meal might warm and lift my spirits. Perhaps a steaming hot bowl from Tokyo Teriyaki might do the trick?

I took off my raincoat and sat down in the long, yellow, skeletal dining room and began pursuing the menus — one for teriyaki, one for sushi. The restaurant was mostly empty, save for a couple quietly dining. Pop rock radio filled the silence. With so many items on the two menus (mostly choices of meat served with either white or fried rice, yakisoba or ramen noodles) I asked for guidance. The server recommended the Spicy Chicken Teriyaki plate (\$9.50), if I liked spicy stuff. And certainly I do.

The dish arrived with a mound of uniformly sliced, charbroiled strips of chicken breast, onions and a few long chutes of green onion, all covered in the house-made teriyaki sauce. On the side were two round dollops of sticky white rice and a lump of steamed vegetables — cabbage, carrots and broccoli. The chicken itself was well cooked, just blacked on the edges, and the teriyaki sauce was balanced, not too sweet. It didn't quite live up to its "spicy" billing, but on this frigid day the actual temperatures of the dish — as measured in degrees — were more dispiriting. While the chicken was served not entirely hot, the steamed vegetables were hardly above room temperature — a bit ironic as they'd been steamed so long as to sweat out almost all their flavor. The limp, soggy, tasteless cabbage seemed like it'd be more at home in the sad pots of the castle dungeon.

Indeed, on this chilly day, it was as if I longed for a hot shower but the water heater wasn't quite up to the task. But it's about more than temperature: The very Americanized, Japanese-light offerings of Tokyo Teriyaki aren't ready to withstand deep inspection or offer sublime flavor. They simply, cheaply, fill your belly.

In the coming days (all rainy) I returned to the Astoria location as well as venturing to the newly opened outpost in the Seaside Factory Outlet Mall. The design and atmosphere in Seaside was

cleaner, more modern and welcoming. The food and menu, however, were duplicate. In these subsequent trips, the Spicy Chicken remained the standout.

The fried Yaiksoba noodles (\$8.50) had a subtle bit of perky seasoning that I found enjoyably vexing (the kitchen couldn't explain what it was, as the owner creates the sauces, and the recipes are apparently kept secret). But the deep-fried tofu I had with them was squishy and sad. It more resembled having been steamed. Also, for no good reason whatsoever, the noodles came with a dollop of white rice.

I had marginally better luck with the Beef Short Rib Teriyaki Bowl (\$9.75). The beef had a nice char while remaining tender, though it was marred by too many globs of rubbery fat and gristle.

Then there's the sushi, which is made in the kitchen rather than in front of the customers at a dedicated sushi bar. I'd be lying if I said I didn't miss the visual component of preparation, the



The Ichiro Roll was deep fried and featured avocado and imitation crab.



The Spicy Chicken Teriyaki didn't quite live up to its "spicy" billing.

pomp and circumstance, or the chance to peer at the uncut fish steaks. (Or the opportunity to order some sake or Japanese beer but, alas, Tokyo Teriyaki has neither.) All of this would be moot — or a trade I would make — if what emerged from the kitchen was both delectable and a square deal. Tokyo Teriyaki's sushi delivers on one of the two: It's cheap.

I tried a few rolls and all shared similar attributes: They were large and mostly rice. Now, any sushi chef worth his knife will tell you that rice matters even more than the fish. But they're talking about creating the perfect platform on which to feature the fish. At Tokyo Teriyaki, it's the other way around: The rolls are like rice balls with mere suggestions of flavor. Indeed, their take

on sushi is akin to a burger joint that had really big buns and itsy-bitsy patties, or a shave-ice — where a single pump of syrup colors the whole thing.

The eel in the Unagi Roll (\$6) was little more than a sliver, identifiable mostly by the sweet sauce. The sizable Cannon Beach Roll (\$9), which was topped with avocado and tuna, looked as if it contained more than a modicum of fish, but the slices on top were quite thin. The wrapped innards, rather than containing whole tuna, held some sort of spicy fishy paste. It didn't look that way at a glance and might have passed without some disassembly. The same went for the nigiri, which featured long, loping, steak-like cuts over rice beds. The Salmon (\$3.50 for two pieces) was woefully thin, and one piece was a little shriveled, dry, and less fresh than the other.

But at these prices it isn't really slight of hand. You're just getting what you pay for — which, at Tokyo Teriyaki is often a good deal of starches to fill up on. And hey, sometimes that does the trick, though it didn't for me on these cold, stormy evenings. As I dined a number of folks came in to pick up their take-out. Maybe they'd re-heat them once they got home...

mouth OF THE COLUMBIA

COAST WEEKEND'S LOCAL RESTAURANT REVIEW

Story and photos by THE MOUTH OF THE COLUMBIA • mouth@coastweekend.com

TOKYO TERIYAKI

Rating: ★★½

1446 Commercial St. Astoria

503-338-5151

1111 N Roosevelt Drive, Seaside

503-717-9292

HOURS: 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. daily.

PRICE: \$ — Most entrées less than \$10

SERVICE: Order at the counter

VEGETARIAN / VEGAN OPTIONS: Bland but numerous

DRINKS: Bottled soda and juice

KEY TO RATINGS

- ★ poor
- ★★ below average
- ★★★ good & worth returning
- ★★★★ excellent
- ★★★★★ outstanding, the best in the Columbia-Pacific region