

# restaurants

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Ruby-red tuna becomes the base for a poke, which is a highlight of the menu at Zen Box Izakaya in Minneapolis.

## Corner bar turns to the East

• Want something different? Think raw hamachi, kimchi and ramen at Zen Box Izakaya.

Picture this: Walk into the latest entry in this gastropub epoch that we find ourselves living in, and here's what you won't find: an ironic slider, a tail-to-snout charcuterie parade, a farmstead cheese list as long as your arm, a chalkboard menu, or any other requisite of the genre.

Instead, **Zen Box Izakaya** looks to the East for inspiration, taking its culinary cues from Japan's pubs (*izakaya* is the Japanese word for casual, after-work bars that serve food) and home cooks.

Kudos to owners Lina Goh and John Ng for avoiding the yawning model followed by the vast majority of local Japanese restaurants. Those with a hankering for sushi, for example, must dine elsewhere, and it's almost a letdown to see something as familiar as edamame on the menu. That's because the husband-wife team — along with chef Junji Umezu — formulate their one-of-a-kind neighborhood corner bar on tofu and tripe, fermented soybeans and raw tuna.

Oh, that tuna. It's cut into thick, velvety, ruby-red shears and becomes the building block for a gorgeous poke, the fish splashed with sesame oil and dressed with sprightly radish sprouts and crunchy romaine lettuce.

It's difficult to imagine dropping in and not ordering it. Just thinking about it makes my fingers form their chopsticks position.

Another beauty: the kimchi salad, which alternates layers of feisty pickled cabbage and raw hamachi and tuna into an eye-catching deliberation in texture and most especially color — coral and pink flecked with tiny bursts of bright red chile accents. Each light, wonderfully refreshing bite manages to be both cool and hot, and utterly delicious.

More salad loveliness comes in the form of the unbeatable and artfully arranged combination of sweet crab and rich avocado. Umezu also has a way with mild-tasting yellowtail, cutting it into bite-sized pieces, giving it a quick sear and laying it out on a bed of pungent, thin-sliced raw onions. Shrimp croquettes have an appealing snap, and fried panko-crust oysters melt in your mouth.

### Beyond the sea

Non-seafood items in Umezu's small-plates regimen also stand out. He takes round cuts of pork belly, sears them on the grill and lays them out on a bed of caramelized onions, their sweetness an ideal foil to that fatty pork. I have a thing for the crispy dumplings, filled with well-seasoned ground chicken. Fried boneless chicken breast is bested only by the similarly juicy and crispy-skinned grilled chicken thighs.

Zen Box isn't a noodle shop, per se, but Umezu prepares a number of ramen and soba options. Best are the hot ramens, each generous portion carefully assembled in a wide earthen bowl. The results aren't complicated, but like all good comfort foods, they hit the spot: Tender crimped egg noodles swim in well-rendered broths, and are supplemented with cooked eggs and pork belly before being finished with kimchi or parchment-like seaweed.

The cooking is not without its issues. Sashimi sometimes tasted less than perfectly pristine, and mussels, simmered in sake and garlic, had tiptoed past their freshness date. Broths were occasionally — and punishingly — salty. Sautéed ramen noodles were greasy and overcooked on one visit, splendid the next. Spare ribs, grisly and fatty, routinely demanded a jaw-busting workout.

The fryer's heat seems to sap the supple essence out of tempura-style avocado. What a bummer to en-



Top: Owners Lina Goh and John Ng modeled their restaurant after the Japanese pub scene. Left: Chef Junji Umezu excels with his small-plate menu. Right: Sweet potatoes.



Ramen with pork belly and egg, above, and crab-avocado salad.



### ATMOSPHERE AND SERVICE

The setting resembles a Japanese showroom at Ikea; staff is enthusiastic and occasionally unpolished.



### PRICE RANGES

Rare is the price that exceeds \$10.



### RECOMMENDED DISHES

Poke, sashimi salad, crab-avocado salad, ramen, grilled chicken thighs, crispy dumplings, grilled pork belly, shrimp tempura, fried chicken.



### WINE LIST

Bare-bones. The real draw are the sakes and Japanese beers.



### SPECIAL MENUS

Enough vegetarian options to put the restaurant on non-meat-eaters' itineraries.

counter a fishy cast to that marvelous fried chicken, as if it had been fried in the same oil with those tasty shrimp croquettes, and the less-than-compatible flavors stuck. A mild vegetable curry was just plain boring; ditto the insipid *kani zosui*, a risotto-style rice dish.

### Good value, good food

But complaints begin to take a back seat when Umezu does his best to keep prices under \$10, a fairly remarkable feat, particularly given the restaurant's high-rent address, a few blocks from the Guthrie Theater. Umezu is continually evolving his menu, too (be on the lookout for sweet potato tempura, ramen in pork broth with pickled ginger and a Japanese-style sweet-and-sour chicken). And while the kitchen doesn't appear to value nuance above all else, that's not a trait often demanded of bar menus, particularly value-minded ones.

Other small details also add up. Tables are stocked with glasses filled with what looks like incense but is actually fried buck-

wheat noodles tossed with sea salt, a distinctively crunchy and addictive snack. The thoughtful beer list goes out of its way to feature Japanese selections seldom tapped in the Midwest. Service is relentlessly cheerful. The modestly hip setting could use more of the indoor/outdoor wall of windows that flank the restaurant's Portland Avenue side, a wonderfully breezy piece of dining-out real estate that certainly made the most of our freakishly balmy March.

Goh and Ng aren't newcomers to the restaurant business; their shoe-box-scaled Zen Box in the skyway is a short walk away, an under-the-radar lunch spot that has been making diners happy since 2004. This new venture is a much more ambitious undertaking, and kudos to these hospitable food entrepreneurs for tackling something different. And that's not the "different" (translation: We don't approve) of passive-aggressive Minnesota-speak. That's "different" as in "admirably unusual."

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