

Fearless Critic Austin

Brutally honest reviews. By undercover chefs and food nerds. No restaurant sponsors.

Fearless Critic restaurant review

Uchiko

The apple falls just far enough from the tree in Uchi's more Southeast Asian offspring

It's a tough time to be a fish. Some estimates threaten a largely fishless ocean by 2048. It's much worse for the bluefin tuna; we're looking at a 2012 tail-wave good-bye from those guys, and words like "global trade ban" have everyone running for (or from) the sushi bar. If we're going to eat fish, in other words, we'd better make it count.

Until now, that's meant enduring up to two-hour waits for the city's best sushi at Uchi. Happily, Uchi has spawned Uchiko a few miles north in a Michael Hsu-designed building with space-aged curves and sleek wood striations. Inside is Austin's finest restaurant design yet, a hand-carved puzzle box decorated by the elements. One wall evokes glowing embers; another, rich, black soil. The sushi bar glows oceanic blue, and a stunning length of art suggests the cross-section of a hundred twigs. Compared with Uchi, parking is plentiful (there's still a valet), and there's much more room in the bar for waiting or dining on alarmingly cheap "social hour" specials between 5-7pm. The acoustics are also vastly improved. For that matter, Uchiko's most accomplished feat is that it offers a totally different experience, all the while maintaining the level of inspired perfectionism associated with the original.

On the menu, that means there's a distinct Southeast Asian bent: cilantro, fish sauce, chili peppers, and cucumber. Crispy fried chicken karaage is addictive as any street food ought to be, and this is one of few places in town serving whole grilled fish. Tempura and nigiri continue to excel, with garnishes tugging the flavors south and westward from Japan; basil instead of shiso leaf for uni (we prefer the latter), and a curl of black truffle and heirloom tomato on saba instead of ginger and daikon (each is uniquely ideal).

Mackerel also appears on one of the most accomplished dishes here, grilled with bluefoot mushrooms and a complement of huckleberry sauce. If at first glance an odd pairing, the charred umami and sweet-tart notes make wild sense in the mouth. Mediterranean sea bass carpaccio is a spicy, puckery delight with shaved myoga (ginger blossom) and the essence of Thai chili; mussels served chilled with tomato water and basil blossom accentuate the plump firmness of the meat in a way that even the best steamed preps cannot. But the crowning achievement here may be the simplest: beef tongue nigiri, whose tender meatiness is so well suited to the sweet rice that it seems cruel to have kept it from us all this time.

The service is some of the finest: professional, capable, and vigilant. The wine and sake list is as committed and full of undiscovered delights as the food menu; even those who insist on an expensive Cabernet Sauvignon with their sushi (please don't) will be forced to drink a more well-balanced one. Desserts are ever improving, and will no doubt continue to do so. This is, after all, a kitchen that makes everything count.

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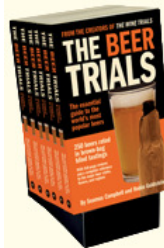
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