



Photographs by LAWRENCE K. HO LO

**EEK:** The mood at Orris is casual, the vibe young and urban. The restaurant occupies a choice spot on Sawtelle Boulevard in little Tokyo West, ground zero for Franco-Japanese fusion cooking.

CRITIC REVIEW

# At last, fascinating fusion

Orris in Little Tokyo West, chef Hideo Yamashiro is expressing a wilder side with an unconventional menu.

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WE'D barely sat down when my guest snatched up the menu and pored over it, skipping the cold dishes and eddily scanning the hot dishes. "catfish?" he asked, eyebrow hed. Don't let Shiro hear you, I sed as he pouted, just a little. I couldn't believe it. I'd aldy explained on the way over t at the new Orris, Hideo Yamashiro wasn't having any. The r guy's been a slave to that p-fried whole catfish for rs. He cooked it at Chinois, I then 17 years ago when he ned his own restaurant, Shi- in South Pasadena, nobody id let him retire it from the u. In fact, that single dish is so requested at Shiro that more or less given up trying educe his customers into oring something new and, for , more interesting to cook. This little restaurant on Saw- Boulevard is his escape in re ways than one. He's landed oice spot on a block in the old anese neighborhood filled n noodle shops, boba parlors n smart casual cafes. On the aer is a stylish *shabu shabu* nter watched over by a paint- of a frowning Felix the Cat. dents fill up on *pho* at the Vi- anese cafe next door. And n the street, there's a line out door of tiny Sawtelle Kitch-

This is ground zero for L.A.'s

## Orris

Rating: \*\*

Location: 2006 Sawtelle Blvd., Los Angeles; (310) 268-2212.

Ambience: Bright modern cafe with a lively, casual atmosphere and a menu of small Asian and fusion plates, most less than \$10.

Service: Enthusiastic and efficient.

Price: Cold dishes, \$5.50 to \$11.50; hot dishes, \$6.50 to \$9; desserts, \$4.

Best dishes: Seafood spring roll, ravioli, grilled quail with white beans, crab cakes, roasted Sonoma duck breast, lamb loin carpaccio, steamed mussels or clams, halibut tempura, potatoes Dauphinois, Ciao Bella ice cream.

Wine list: Just over 20 selections, which are all available by the glass. But not enough of them truly complement the food. Corkage, \$15.

Best table: The one in the front corner.

Details: Open 6 to 10 p.m.

home-grown Franco-Japanese fusion cooking. Cafe Katsu started out here. And Sawtelle Kitchen and 2117 across the street are frequent haunts of wine buffs who arrive with their bottles, share a glass with the chef, and settle in for a bargain-priced evening of eating and drinking. The vibe is urban and young, like a Tokyo neighborhood set down in the middle of West Los Angeles.

And at Orris, the chef is trying on accents — Italian, French,



SMOKY: Grilled romaine salad with Parmesan.

Monday through Thursday, 5:30 to 10:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday. Closed Sunday, Beer and wine. Valet parking, \$2.50 in lot behind the restaurant. Thursday through Saturday. No reservations.

Rating is based on food, service and ambience, with price taken into account in relation to quality. \*\*\*: Outstanding on every level. \*\*\*: Excellent. \*\*\*: Very good. #: Good. No star: Poor to satisfactory.

mostly, a word or two of Chinese. Wearing an unconventional toque, an African hat he bought at a store that went out of business down the street from Shiro, he's darting from one end of the open kitchen to the other, working side by side with his young, enthusiastic crew instead of hidden in the back. Their friends drop in. His old customers, too. There are no reservations, so the tables just keep turning. Ruby slices of beet are lined

up on a skinny white platter, their sweet earthy flavor set off by slivers of Basque sheep's milk cheese and a few drops of olive oil. Spring rolls burst with chunks of scallop and shrimp in a crisp gold jacket, the plain taste of the seafood filling played against a juicy *yuzu* sauce.

If you feel like a salad, Shiro finds a lovely balance in sharp, emerald arugula and the pale crunch of endive embellished with prosciutto and Parmesan shavings. Sometimes he sets fresh Dungeness crab on a salad of julienne cucumbers in a ginger-sparked dressing.

A grilled romaine salad is oddly compelling, its hearts of romaine suffused with gentle smoke. But I'll take his trio of plump little crab cakes, almost all crabmeat with very little filler. The taste is pure and sweet.

### Halibut transformed

I tried the fried chicken à la Japonaise one night, which is more like tempura chicken, and found it disappointingly bland. Fried chicken needs real crunch. One taste of his halibut tempura, though, and I recognized it for what it is: this restaurant's signature dish, the veritable catfish. It is fingers of firm-fleshed halibut cloaked in a light batter to dip in grains of Okinawan sea salt and/or a smoldering other curry powder fired with cumin and cayenne. It's fireworks in the mouth.

In his French mode, Shiro turns out dainty grilled quail with white beans simmered with sage leaves, and a fabulous version of potatoes Dauphinois served in its own little casserole, nice and loose, with the cream sliding off the sliced potatoes.

On the Italian side, he has a ravioli that's Italian in name only, filled with a light shrimp mousse and extravagantly sauced in shiitake and cream.

At Orris, Shiro has put together a small, manageable menu: half a dozen cold dishes and about the same number of hot dishes, plus a page of seasonal specials that he'll change, depending on what he finds at the market or what he feels like cooking.

It's odd, though, that almost two years after A.O.C. showed how well the small-plates concept could work in Los Angeles, and long after New York and San Francisco have explored every aspect of small plates from French to Basque to Moroccan and Asian, we're becoming newly enamored of the idea.

Maybe that's because it seems to suit everybody's scattered lifestyle in a city where you can't get away from driving. It's fast food for the adventurous, highly motivated set.

It's awfully appealing, before a movie, to slip into this casual place decorated with abstract contemporary prints, and order a glass of wine with some Italian cured meats or a small plate of roasted Sonoma duck. Serving the duck at room temperature seems to concentrate its flavor. Instead of mustard, it comes with a dab of sharp, salty — and completely delicious — *yuzu* chile paste.

I'd also go for a bowl of Prince Edward Island mussels or cherrystone clams steamed in white wine and served with plenty of the delicious garlicky juices. Bread, a short length of Wonder Bread-soft baguette, arrives with it, about the only time you'll get any bread here.

But this isn't really sturdy enough to stand up to dipping, and a rustic loaf would serve the cheeses better too.

I'm happy enough, though, to get any bread at all, especially since Shiro doesn't believe in rice, at least not for this restaurant and his idea of tapas.

The wine list seen been put together with sidering what would g this food. Chardonnay, not, doesn't really v most of the dishes, Viognier. They need Gewürztraminer, Chay ray — wines that have edge and a high-wire a

In reds, Rhônes a nets are going to obli more delicate flavors. quired are softer, sill friendly wines — in ot more Pinot Noirs.

That said, every bot ro's one-page list is als by the glass, turning into an *ipso facto* wi course, there's sake to doesn't he have Sherry ing tapas?

At Orris, Shiro do the space or the staff t rate desserts, so he' smart choice. He's s screams from L.A.'s ow cellent, Ciao Bella: a snowball of any of th flavors, all blessedly s sugar.

Vanilla is freckled w bean for a true vanilla fee has the mellow flav a lait; and my fav blackberry-Cabernet ends things on a refe not-too-sweet note.

For someone who cooking the same c years, Orris and its tional menu must be s You can see the spring step. Though he's still a bit safe, it's a good ki with appealing, crispy dishes at reasonable p

If he's having this now, I can't help bu as soon as he catches l Shiro is going to burs more wild and crazy d he's been itching to years. At age 57, he's j his second wind.