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- Home
- News
- Sports
- Community
- Features
- Calendar
- Columnists
- About Us
- Submit An Article
- Meet The Staff
- Links

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Zo Delicious

By RICKMOND WONG
Rafu Contributor
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Sushi Zo in West Los Angeles reels in fresh fish, pure and simple.



Photos by AUDREY SHIOMI/Rafu Shimpo
Chef Keizo Seki hands over a plate of uni (sea urchin)

Move over, Matsuhisa. There's a new sushi sheriff in town, and his name is Zo. In Japanese, zo means elephant. And although Sushi Zo is named after chef/owner Keizo Seki (as opposed to the animal with the long trunk), the restaurant is very much the big new elephant on the Southern California sushi scene. Why all the fuss when there are already thousands of sushi bars in town? Because discerning sushi lovers agree that Sushi Zo is a cut above the rest.

Seki-san, or Keizo (most refer to him by his first name; he's that kind of guy) opened his namesake restaurant just five months ago, and the place has already become one of the hottest sushi spots among the cognoscenti. Patrons began flocking to this tiny sushi bar in West Los Angeles once word of its incredibly fresh fish and 'serious sushi atmosphere' began to get out. One won't find any California rolls here; Sushi Zo is at the forefront of a new boom in edomae-style sushi bars, restaurants that specialize in serving fish the traditional way, like in 'Edo-period Tokyo a century ago.'

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and ikura (salmon eggs) at Sushi Zo in West Los Angeles.



These are some of the other simple delicacies he prepares fresh daily.

An experience at the Sushi Zo counter is not unlike a visit to a would-be 'sushi Nazi,' albeit a very friendly one. Keizo is young for a sushi master; he looks no older than forty and bears more than a passing resemblance to the Japanese actor Ken Watanabe. He has a cutting (no pun intended) sense of humor that often finds him egging on his patrons for failing to order a particularly exquisite catch of the day. The restaurant is sleek but spartan; there is no wasabi for diners to spoon indiscriminately, and for every piece of sushi that arrives, the genial chef will make suggestions: 'Use a little bit of soy sauce only,' or 'Don't use soy sauce, it's already flavored.'



Few sushi gurus around town can command this level of authority. Most that can are very old, austere gentlemen. At Sushi Zo, however, customers instinctively want to trust Keizo, who cultivated his purist aesthetic over a long sushi apprenticeship in the trendy Tokyo neighborhood of Meguro before coming to the U.S. Several years spent at the no-frills but reputable Hide Sushi on Sawtelle further bolstered his resume.



The chef has a very particular vision of what sushi should be like. Nigiri (hand-formed sushi) is served by the piece. The few rolls on offer are traditional in nature—blue crab hand rolls for example. The menu can change not only with the season, but even the weather. 'A few weeks ago it was very, very hot,' Keizo explained, in reference to July's heat wave. Local sea urchin beds were not up to par. 'So we had no uni.'

Consistently high-quality control has garnered praise from sushi aficionados, most notably on the Internet 'foodie' message board, Chowhound. Although the restaurant is still relatively under the radar, primarily due to its location off the beaten path in a residential neighborhood, a cult of

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devotees and regulars has already begun to form.

On my first visit, I sat next to a man who ate at Zo weekly and pronounced himself 'Keizo's number one customer!' On my second visit, months later, the chef had already remembered me and begun to note my likes and dislikes.

With such attention to detail, it was not surprising to learn that the chef routinely imports catch from Tokyo's legendary Tsukiji fish market, where long-standing friendships with top fishmongers ensure access to tastes from the far end of the Pacific. Rare delicacies like shiro ebi (white shrimp) and flying fish take turns atop the daily list of specials.



Menu

Less adventurous diners may still opt to pick their sushi by the piece from a straightforward menu, but they invariably miss out on the shot of 'secret recipe' yuzu juice served at the end of the meal. Made from the fruit of a rare citrus tree native to southern Japan, the elegant dessert has been known to elicit squeals of delight from around the room.

Keizo is a recent father; his daughter as a matter of fact, was born around the time of Sushi Zo's grand opening. He takes it as a sign of good luck. He was a simple college student in his native Osaka when his love for his local sushi bar inspired him to become a sushi chef and someday open his own

Even common fare like tuna and yellowtail, Keizo explained, can taste different depending on the waters from which they were caught. When interviewed, the chef began an impassioned lecture on how variations in local plankton can affect the subtle taste of fish higher up on the food chain, and how tuna by way of Japan tastes different from tuna by way of, say, Boston. 'But (double-shelled) shellfish cannot be imported,' Keizo sighed.

Omakase is almost de rigeur at Zo. The Japanese custom of putting one's faith in the hands of the chef and letting him serve you what he wants has become an increasingly popular trend for American sushi fans. Like the best sushi chefs, Keizo will begin by asking his customers if there's anything they can't (or simply won't) eat.

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2/4/2009

restaurant. Years later and six thousand miles away, his dream has been fully realized.

Sushi Zo is located at 9824 National Blvd. For reservations, call (310) 842-3977. Open for lunch Monday through Friday from noon to 2 p.m.; Open for dinner Monday through Saturday from 5:30 to 9:30 p.m. Closed Sundays.

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