

The New York Times

Dining & Wine

RESTAURANT REVIEW | 15 EAST

Does the Squid Get a Mani-Pedi?



Evan Sung for The New York Times

Ushiwakamaru

By FRANK BRUNI

Published: July 11, 2007

SHIATSU, deep-tissue or maybe even Roling: Which manner of pummeling becomes a cephalopod most? I asked a server at 15 East, and he looked at me as if I were some nutcase troublemaker. But he had started this, volunteering that the restaurant's slow-poached octopus was so tender because "it's massaged 500 times." I was just posing the obvious follow-up question.



Evan Sung for The New York Times
15 East

I can't tell you the answer, which I never got. But I can tell you that this octopus is outrageously good. Its tentacles are cut into thick, thick coins and arrayed beside a hillock of sea salt, which you can sprinkle on the octopus or, if you dare, dredge the octopus through. It accentuates the sea creature's distinctive meatiness.

"What have they done to this?" marveled one of the two friends with me the second time I tried it. He hadn't been around the first time to hear about the massaging, which gives new meaning to the phrase spa cuisine.

The other friend responded: "I think they've turned it into lamb."

Whatever the precise trick, it's a reflection of the serious efforts behind a meal at 15 East, which manages to stand out in a crowded marketplace of Japanese restaurants that focus on uncooked seafood.

It does this in part with cooked dishes, like the octopus, that augment the selection of sushi and sashimi. It does this with the sushi and sashimi itself: carefully sourced and carefully assembled, the rice warm, the seasonings sensible.

It does this with gracious service; with around-the-edges embellishments like a respectable list of wines in addition to the very fine sake selection; and with a split-the-difference atmosphere that's neither overblown extravaganza nor underdressed broom closet, the extreme directions in which some Japanese restaurants veer.

The space near Union Square that 15 East inhabits used to belong to Tocqueville, which moved just a few dozen feet down the block last year. It's owned by Marco Moreira and Jo -Ann Makovitzky, the same husband-wife team still behind Tocqueville.

They have put a gleaming sushi counter roughly where Tocqueville's bar was and gray paint on walls that were once yellow. In the process they've achieved the look of a high-priced dermatologist's waiting room, which isn't a bad thing. Both environments soothe the nerves while flattering the complexion.

They have also recruited Masato Shimizu, who worked at Jewel Bako, to supervise that sushi counter, where he's doing exemplary work. Be sure not to miss the sweet shrimp, delicate and almost translucent; the scallop, bathed in yuzu; the needlefish, slick and substantial; and the jack mackerel, wrapped in a shiso leaf, whose perfume remains even

after it's peeled away.

The top surfaces of pieces of barracuda and o-toro sushi, the latter of which came with a \$75 bluefin tuna flight, were seared by a torch, and that char brought the richness of the fish into relief.

Away from the sushi counter, 15 East's performance was markedly uneven. An appetizer called "BBQ frog's legs" did a riff on Buffalo chicken wings that should never, ever be done again. The name of "Grilled Bigeye Tuna Waldorf" piqued the curiosity, which was rewarded — or, rather, not — with a humdrum hunk of grilled fish beside a Waldorf-like salad using Asian pear in place of apple. Be still, my beating, cholesterol-spared heart.

With Honmura An gone but not forgotten, there's a soba lacuna in the land, and 15 East addresses it with excellent hand-cut buckwheat noodles done up different ways on different days. It also serves a squid-ink risotto with a rising orange center — hello, my beloved friend uni — and small ringlets of squid.

At 15 East the uni was terrific; at Ushiwakamaru, which the chef Hideo Kuribara opened on Houston Street about two years ago, not so much. Ushiwakamaru is like that: for every two examples of faultless sushi or sashimi there will be one that doesn't measure up.

The restaurant was recently promoting, as a special, Copper River salmon, but there was nothing special about the fish, which had a weirdly flat taste, shadowed by nuances that suggested it had been sitting around a bit too long.

So why mention Ushiwakamaru? The fish that's terrific is terrific at lower prices than at 15 East, and finding first-rate sushi that's not grievously expensive is getting tougher all the time.

What's more, the restaurant's proudly ragtag subterranean setting stole at least one ventricle of my aforementioned heart. Ushiwakamaru has an underdog charm that's irresistible, with its bilious green walls; its artlessly clumped-up plastic wrap over displayed fish; and its spindly, unsmooth chopsticks, the kind that make you worry about tongue splinters.

It also has some intriguing dishes you don't often find, like turban shell, a sea snail cooked and served in a well of dark liquid in its natural spiraled domicile. You keep lowering a tiny spoon into the well and coming up with fleshy nuggets, more of them than you expect. Some vaguely recall geoduck clam in texture and taste. Others are livery. Still others stake a claim to being anointed the sweetbreads of the sea.

The sushi and sashimi selection is also adventurous, including banded blue sprat, halfbeak and saury.

But you can decide to stick with the usual suspects, and here a piece of o-toro sushi is \$8 instead of the \$12 at 15 East, while amberjack is \$4 instead of \$6. You can have a chef's selection of 15 pieces of sushi for \$49.

That's meaningful compensation for the cramped seating, negligible desserts, limited beverages and an octopus therapy program that — as best I could tell — isn't quite so lavish with the pressing and kneading.

15 East

15 East 15th Street; (212) 647-0015. 15eastrestaurant.com.

ATMOSPHERE A front room with a gleaming sushi counter leads to a soothing, gray-walled, larger dining room with well-separated tables.

SOUND LEVEL Moderate.

RECOMMENDED DISHES Sushi; sashimi; soba noodles; mountain yam spaghetti; slow-poached octopus; bluefin tuna tartare; squid ink risotto; passion fruit pudding.

WINE LIST International and varied, with nearly a dozen wines by the glass. The sake list is extensive and more impressive. Interesting beers and special cocktails as well.

PRICE RANGE Lunch appetizers, \$6 to \$22; sushi samplers, \$28 to \$55; a tasting menu is \$75; entrees, \$22 to \$35; three-course prix fixe, \$29. Dinner appetizers, \$6 to \$22; sushi samplers, \$55 to \$75; entrees, \$24 to \$45. Desserts, \$8 to \$10.

HOURS Lunch from 11:45 a.m. to 2 p.m., Monday through Friday, and dinner from 6 to 10:30 p.m. Monday through Saturday. Closed Sunday.

RESERVATIONS For prime dinner times, call at least a week ahead, especially for the sushi counter.

CREDIT CARDS All major cards.

WHEELCHAIR ACCESS Small step up to entrance. All of restaurant on one level. Accessible restroom.

Ushiwakamaru

*

136 West Houston Street (Sullivan Street); (212) 228-4181. ushiwakamaruny.com.

ATMOSPHERE A cramped, disheveled room with a long sushi counter and separate tables.

SOUND LEVEL Tolerably loud.

RECOMMENDED DISHES Sushi; sashimi; turban shell; clam soup; black cod skewer.

WINE LIST A short, uninspired selection of wines by the glass and bottle, plus Japanese beers and more than a dozen kinds of sake.

PRICE RANGE Appetizers, \$3.50 to \$16. Sushi and sashimi samplers, \$22 to \$100. Desserts, \$5 to \$6.

HOURS From 6 p.m. to 11:30 p.m. Monday through Saturday. Closed Sunday.

RESERVATIONS Call at least two days ahead.

CREDIT CARDS All major cards.

WHEELCHAIR ACCESS Inaccessible.

WHAT THE STARS MEAN Ratings range from zero to four stars and reflect the reviewer's reaction to food, ambience and service, with price taken into consideration. Menu listings and prices are subject to change.

