

Itacho Offers Much More Than Standard Sushi

JAPANESE: Expansive menu, must-taste dishes make it an excellent choice.

FOR those in the know, traditional Japanese fare encompasses more than just raw fish. This lesson is being fed to Los Angeles foodies at Itacho, where preconceived notions fall by the wayside as hearty eats are served alongside sushi.

Founded more than 20 years ago by Chef Kohachi Hayasaka, Itacho (Japanese for master chef) serves up pub-style small plates, comparable to a Spanish tapas bar. The Japanese name for such an establishment is itzakaya, a more casual eatery intended as much for quaffing sake as snacking. Make no mistake, though: The small portions don't necessarily mean light fare,

BUSINESS LUNCH

LINDSEY STYRWOLL

but they are meant for sharing. After Hayasaka's retirement in 2007, a couple of regulars took over – talk about a dedicated following – affectionately referring to the cuisine on the company Web site as “Japanese soul food.”

Though the façade may look tiny from the street, the inside of Itacho is surprisingly ample due to the loft-style setup and vaulted ceilings. Exposed metal ducts add to the industrial feel of the warehouselike space that features a crow's nest in the back of the restaurant, perfect for private parties. The oversized, tie-dyed tapestries? Perhaps a bit reminiscent of a freshman dorm, but a noble bid to hide parts of those spare white walls.

The first thing we notice, however, is not the décor but the enticing aroma of fried food coming from the kitchen. As we take a seat at the sushi bar, a server races to present hot towels and take drink orders. Between the printed menu, the sushi ballot, the specials insert and the large chalkboard, we are covered. Deciding is overwhelming. We would have to visit a half-dozen more times just to scratch the surface.

We commence with miso soup. My dining partner opts for the traditional version with tofu and wakame seaweed; I choose the kabocha miso. While the regular miso is fine, the puree of Japanese pumpkin is outstanding. The fibrous, almost grainy texture is rustic and satisfying. This is not a thick, gelatinous bisque, but a thinner, more delicate version.

Dishes begin to arrive in a rapid succession as we struggle to keep up. That's not to say the server is not watchful: As soon as the last bite

is lifted from the plate, she is moving to replace it with a new dish. We are presented with thin slices of yellowtail, each crowned with rings of jalapeno and radish. As good as it is, it's hardly a standout as most every other Japanese restaurant serves a nearly identical version. The spicy tuna on crispy rice is along the same lines: delicious, but ubiquitous. It's a valiant attempt at keeping up with the Joneses, or rather the Katsuyas.

Itacho starts to hit its stride as the cooked dishes arrive. Shrimp shumai, delicate Japanese-style dumplings, come piping hot with a smear of mustard in the small bowl of sauce. They are simple and elegant, reminding me of the dim sum shops of San Francisco's Chinatown. Another must-try, a signature of Itacho, is the tatsuta age or fried chicken. Unbelievably crispy, the dark meat inside is still tender and juicy. Served with a side of mayo, it's a little bland, but with a squirt of lemon it is much better.

Next is the seared wagyu beef with ponzu sauce. The thin beef slices are slightly charred at the edges but so rare in the center they melt in your mouth. My companion, having never tried the ultrapremium brand of Japanese beef, is in carnivore heaven.

We finish with a few rolls: The spicy tuna and spicy yellowtail seem to be our best bet. Itacho doesn't mess with the fussier stuff. The spicy yellowtail has a nice kick with just the

ITACHO

Food: ★★★★★

Service: ★★★★★

Atmosphere: ★★☆☆☆

Where: 7311 Beverly Blvd., Los Angeles,

90036. Cross Street: Poinsettia Place

When: 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m., 5:30 to 11 p.m., Monday through Friday; 6 to 11 p.m., Saturday

What to Try: Pumpkin miso soup, seared Wagyu beef, shrimp shumai, tatsuta age

Noise Level: Low

Meeting Room: Yes, 35-40

Parking: Parking lot in back

Price Range: Small plates, \$4-\$16

Reservations: (323) 938-9009

right balance of mayo and spicy sriracha sauce. The rolls are on the small side and not overloaded with rice, unlike a lot of other sushi places. The spicy tuna is respectable, if not a little redundant after the spicy tuna on crispy rice, the clear favorite.

Our only regret is that we have not sampled more of the menu. The powder snow – steamed whitefish stuffed with chrysanthemum leaves and topped with that gloriously slinky grated mountain yam – well, that will have to wait until our next visit.

For dessert? Sadly, your best option is crossing Beverly Boulevard for ice cream at the desertcentric Milk, because the offerings at Itacho leave much to be desired. The mochi – are removed from the package in full view of customers. I guess the novelty has worn off since Trader Joe's introduced it to their freezer section. We have high hopes for the red bean tempura ice cream, but are defeated by the arrival of a scoop that's too hard to eat and covered by an impossibly thick shell of fried batter with chocolate syrup slathered on top. It is wholly inedible.

Itacho challenges American ideas of what Japanese food is by offering dishes you won't find outside downtown's Little Tokyo. It attempts neither the haute cuisine of more refined establishments nor the wildly popular “fusion” sushi we have come to expect. Though it has only opened recently for lunch, its expansive menu and private dining area make it an excellent choice. Two words of caution: Come hungry.

Reviewer Lindsey Styrwoll can be reached at L_Styrwoll@yahoo.com.