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style restaurants

Katana
8439 W. Sunset Blvd.
West Hollywood
(323) 650-8585
CUISINE: *Robata* and sushi
RATING: 1/2 star



Katana's edgy interior, above, and the *robata* bar, where the sizzling skewers are prepared, left.

The Next Big Thing?

The Creators of Sushi Roku Are Betting That It's *Robatayaki*
by s. irene virbila

Every year restaurant trendcasters try to fathom what the next big hit will be, hoping to predict this season's equivalent to Nuevo Latino, tall communal tables à la Philippe Starck, or revolting flavored martinis.

The team behind the trio of Sushi Roku restaurants seems to know just what the young urban middle class with pretensions to hip will go for. Opened by a couple of alumni from Matsuhisa and just blocks away from the influential Japanese seafood restaurant, Sushi Roku borrowed ideas from Matsuhisa, brought their new-style sushi dishes in at lower prices and produced it for a crowd. Most important, owner Michael Cardenas and partners set Sushi Roku in a hyper-stylish framework of river rock, boulders and hand-hewn wood. He also made a full bar an integral part of the equation, giving the people in black a place to look beautiful and nibble rather than commit to a full meal.

The concept has been so successful, one Sushi Roku has become three. The fact that the sushi is not particularly good doesn't seem to bother its fans. Next, Cardenas and his partners took on the steakhouse with their Balboa restaurant inside the Grafton on Sunset hotel, retooling the concept to appeal to presumably the same crowd. As with the Sushi Rokus, the edgy design of the restaurant is a key component.

Now with Katana, their latest restaurant, Cardenas and company have put their bet on *robatayaki* as the next big thing. Basically, it's slender bamboo skewers of meats, vegetables and seafood grilled over Japanese hardwood charcoal. If this were a movie concept, it would be the perfect pitch for the restless urban

young: exotic, but not too much so, food you can nibble on, and the lure of something new to master—sake. Not just any sake, but artisanal sake from small producers in the Japanese countryside. The list of 40-plus sakes by the bottle ranges in price from \$37 to \$165.

Like Sushi Roku and Balboa, Katana stars because of its looks. The landmark building, just across the Sunset Strip from Balboa, is 1920s Spanish in style and, incidentally, headquarters for Miramax Films. It boasts a gorgeous—and that's the only word for it—terrace a flight of steps up from the street, one that looks on the action below and is a great place for a drink at dusk.

Inside, we leave Spain and the '20s for a restaurant designed by Dodd Mitchell that feels like a "Mad Max" set that's had some feng shui done. The walls of the angular concrete bar are covered in railroad spikes. Under light as dim as in a cave, hostesses will lead you back, past a wall of textured rock, to the dining room constructed of pierced and gouged metal and lined with tatami-covered banquettes.

The noise is deafening, more so as the half dozen sushi chefs and the entire serving staff shout out a greeting that makes newcomers cringe. Next to the sushi bar is the *robata* bar with the various skewered choices laid out in a case. Behind, the cooks with black kerchiefs tied around their heads tend the charcoal coals in a cloud of steam and vapors. Around the room, diners murmur urgently into their cell-phone mikes, no doubt reporting the scene to their listeners.

It is quite a scene. A floppy-haired fashion critic in a monkey fur vest shoots around the corner, his posse of fashionistas close behind. Waiters rush plates of sizzling skewers to the table, and sushi chefs decorate platters of clumsy sushi rolls with bright red lobster shells. Behind me, a young man blithely orders a \$75 bottle of sake. It's one of the few L.A. places that has a real New York vibe, says a New Yorker friend.

And the food? Well, the less said the better. Start with an order of *edamame*. The boiled soybean pods come hot and nicely salted, the better to take the edge off your hunger while you try to make some sense of the menu. For drinks, there's the daunting list of sakes, divided into three or four general categories, but without further explanation. I suspect people order by price, as they do when they don't know wine.

Though Katana had been touted as having its own sake sommelier and a cart of premium sakes, neither was in evidence on any of my three visits. My waiter one night steered me toward a lower-range \$45 bottle, which he claimed is served in Japan Airlines' first-class cabin. Whatever. It was a pleasantly complex rice wine, kept cool in a bamboo box filled with ice. For those who don't like sake, they also serve Japanese beers and a delicious, full-bodied Red Sun ale on tap.

To make things simple, you could order one of the three *robata* combinations, but if you choose yourself from the more than two dozen offered, you'll get a more interesting selection. The sets tend to offer chicken, chicken and more chicken—wings, tenders, chicken with green onions, little chicken meatballs—none of which have much taste.

Take a video tour of Katana and find previous Los Angeles Times restaurant reviews at The Times' Web site. Visit www.calendarlive.com/restaurants.

A Walk Down Vermont Avenue

Peter H. King Retraces the Footprints of a Riot and Asks: How Has Los Angeles Changed?