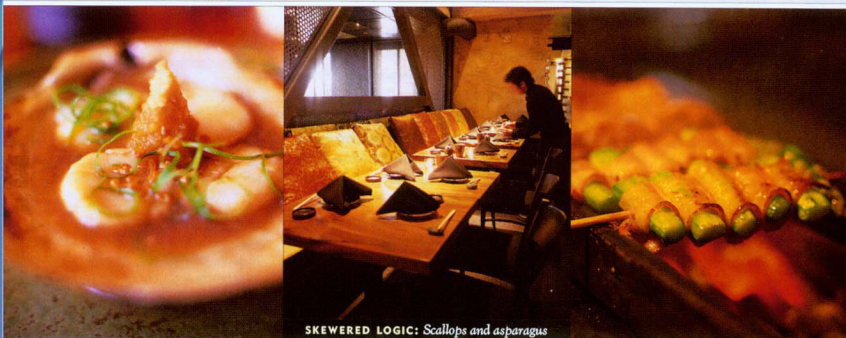


ESCAPE los angeles

MAGAZINE

RESTAURANTS



SKEWERED LOGIC: Scallops and asparagus



Strip Show

KATANA, THE LATEST INSTALLMENT FROM THE HIP HAUTE GROUP
BEHIND SUSHI ROKU, MAKES A NEW SCENE ON SUNSET **BY PATRIC KUH**

BECAUSE ALL THREE OF THE YOUNG men at the table affected a certain dishabille, it was hard to tell who were the writers and who was the suit. Two, however, were doing the talking, while the third intermittently said, "That's funny." He was ordering the food. They shot

some *kaki*, or oysters cooked in the shell, and ate *tebasaki*, *hatsu*, *sunagimo*, and *leda*—chicken wings, heart, gizzard, and livers—speared with wooden skewers and served hot from a charcoal grill. When the pitch had concluded and the bottle of sake resting in its wicker basket was almost empty, one of the writers picked up the cleaned skeleton of a *hokke*—grilled mackerel—and like a true connoisseur began chewing on the charred tail. Sitting by a giant fig tree on the patio of Katana, the new restaurant on Sunset Boulevard from the Sushi Roku team, he was a man happy with his place in life.

Considering the number of restaurants in the Sushi Roku empire—this is the fifth since 1997—the slick efficiency with which they're run, and the instant success of each, it might seem that they are backed by a conglomerate. They're not. Owners Lee Maen, Craig Katz, Philip Cummins, and Michael Cardenas are entrepreneurs in their thirties. Each brings separate skills to the operation. But it is Cardenas and his brothers—Tom, a partner and general manager of all the Sushi Roku properties, and Vernon, Katana's executive chef—who bring the day-to-day restaurant smarts. Their mother is Japanese,

their father Mexican American. They were born in Japan and moved to Southern California as teenagers. Michael was general manager at Matsuhisa; Tom was GM at Chaya Brasserie, both here and in Japan.

This is a very clever team. They know that another one of their sushi restaurants in L.A. might cannibalize the brand, so they must come up with new concepts for successive projects. They recently proved they could give steak houses their signature hip veneer with the wildly popular Balboa. At Katana, right across the street, they returned to the Japanese theme that got them where they are. Though there is a sushi bar, the focus is on what comes from the individual grills behind a refrigerated counter displaying raw fish, meats, and vegetables. *Robata-yaki* is the traditional way of cooking foods over an open hearth. "Ages ago, fishermen in coastal villages would cook their catch over an open flame and then share with others by passing food on oars from boat to boat," ac-

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