

## Ex-Nobu chef serves up serious fish in strip mall

By Michael Mayo

I have found near perfection on a plate. It's in a Boca Raton strip mall with a tattoo parlor, pawn shop and Papa John's, and across from Mizner Park. It's the \$18.99 sashimi lunch special at Sushigo, an unassuming, 30-seat restaurant where the chef takes fish very seriously.

The special includes three slices of tuna, three slices of salmon, three slices of hamachi and three slices of wahoo, each about a half-inch thick. It comes with a small mound of freshly grated wasabi. It also has a California roll, which is pretty much superfluous, a way to fill the plate and stomachs with sushi rice wrapped around seaweed, avocado, cucumber and imitation crab. The wahoo has flecks of jalapeno salsa — jalapenos, onions and grapeseed oil — drizzled on top. The hamachi (Japanese yellowtail) is topped by a few razor-thin jalapeno slices, shaved from a mandoline. The Scottish salmon is buttery. The Atlantic tuna is ruby red and firm. There's really no need for soy sauce, but it's there if you must. All the fish is pristine, and melt-in-your-mouth delicious.

At Sushigo, all focus should be on the fish. You can spend a small fortune on it here, where some of the prime cuts flown in from Japan — fatty tuna belly, rosy seabass — go for \$19.99. At dinner on a recent Saturday night, I saw first-time customers blanch at the prices and leave. If money is no object, you can have a feeding frenzy. If budgets are tight, the best bet is lunch, where the specials can give you a taste of the good life. The fish comes from the skilled hands of Chef Joe, a sushi veteran who spent five years at Nobu in Miami Beach and has kicked around South Florida restaurants for the past 25 years. His full name is Sung Gook Joe.



When he came to America from South Korea, he changed his family name from Cho to Joe. He grew up around sushi, working at his grandfather's restaurant in Seoul. He spent time at Sakura in Coral Gables, where he says he used to feed Jeb Bush and Madonna. After Nobu, he decided it was time to strike out on his own.

He wanted a small place, one where he could see every table and every customer from behind the sushi counter.

"This is my job, my mission," Chef Joe says. "I need it under my control."

He opened Sushigo four years ago. He says he is all about high quality and cleanliness. After my second visit, when I introduced myself and genuflected, he showed me one of his secrets: a "superfreezer" in the kitchen where fish gets stored at minus-44 degrees. He also has one at home that runs at minus-80 degrees. Not many people realize it, but most sushi must be frozen to kill parasites and bacteria. Originally developed for medical purposes, superfreezers prevent expensive cuts from degrading much better than standard commercial freezers.

"When I first opened, the health inspector saw it and couldn't believe that I had one in such a small restaurant," Chef Joe says. "Now, that health inspector eats here."

If this all sounds a bit incongruous — inspirational sushi in an uninspiring setting — it is. I can see how some people might not like it. When he's working, Chef Joe exudes seriousness and severity, and that carries over to the staff.

Don't expect genial shouts of "irasshaimase" upon entering, or a goodnight smile and wave. On my first visit, Chef Joe had his head down behind the counter nearly the entire night, knocking out platter after platter. On crowded nights, things can get slow. And the crowd can veer from oblivious to obnoxious, with one woman loudly FaceTiming her son from her table while on a date.

Chef Joe chose Boca because it has the well-heeled clientele needed to sustain his business, and also because it has good schools (he and his wife have a young daughter).

"The customer is king," Chef Joe says. "Japanese tastes, Korean tastes, American tastes are all different. I give people what they want."

At Sushigo, that means dozens of Americanized rolls featuring a mash-up of ingredients. I found some of them busy and overly sauced, including the spicy girl roll (\$18.99), which features chunks of spicy salmon atop a California roll.

Ditto for the Hokkaido spicy scallop roll (\$18.99), with scallions, masago, jalapeno and cucumber mixed with spicy kimchee sauce and sesame-seed oil.

The Chilean sea bass bomb (\$21.99) had creamy baked fish on top of an avocado-and-cucumber roll with a sweet spicy chili sauce. Some dishes come drizzled with truffle oil or adorned with edible gold flakes, a bit too ostentatious for my liking.

In my mind, simpler is better. The hamachi jalapeno appetizer (\$18.99) features six generous slices of shimmering Japanese yellowtail, dressed lightly with a ponzu sauce and topped with thin slices of jalapenos. Miso soup (\$2.99) is subtle and flavorful. Salmon sushi (\$3.99 each piece), with sticky vinegar rice, was outstanding.

Even more outstanding were the wallet-busting special slices. Hamachi belly (\$9.99 each) and medium fatty ju-toro tuna belly (\$9.99 each) were so texturally luscious and delicious, we nearly went full-scale Meg Ryan from "When Harry Met Sally." Instead of the green tea cheesecake for dessert (\$7.99), you'd be better off getting one more fish slice.

At lunch, I got one sushi piece of rosy Japanese sea bass (\$19.99) that cost a buck more than the entire platter of sashimi. The crazy thing: If someone put a gun to my head and said choose one, I might go with the rosy sea bass.

Chef Joe knows some people are price sensitive, but he says eating healthy fish rich in omega-3 oils and accompaniments such as black garlic and grapeseed oil may end up being cheaper than medical bills in the long run.

I'll just have to consider the \$18.99 lunch special my co-pay for an office visit, and the \$19.99 on top the fee for a specialist.