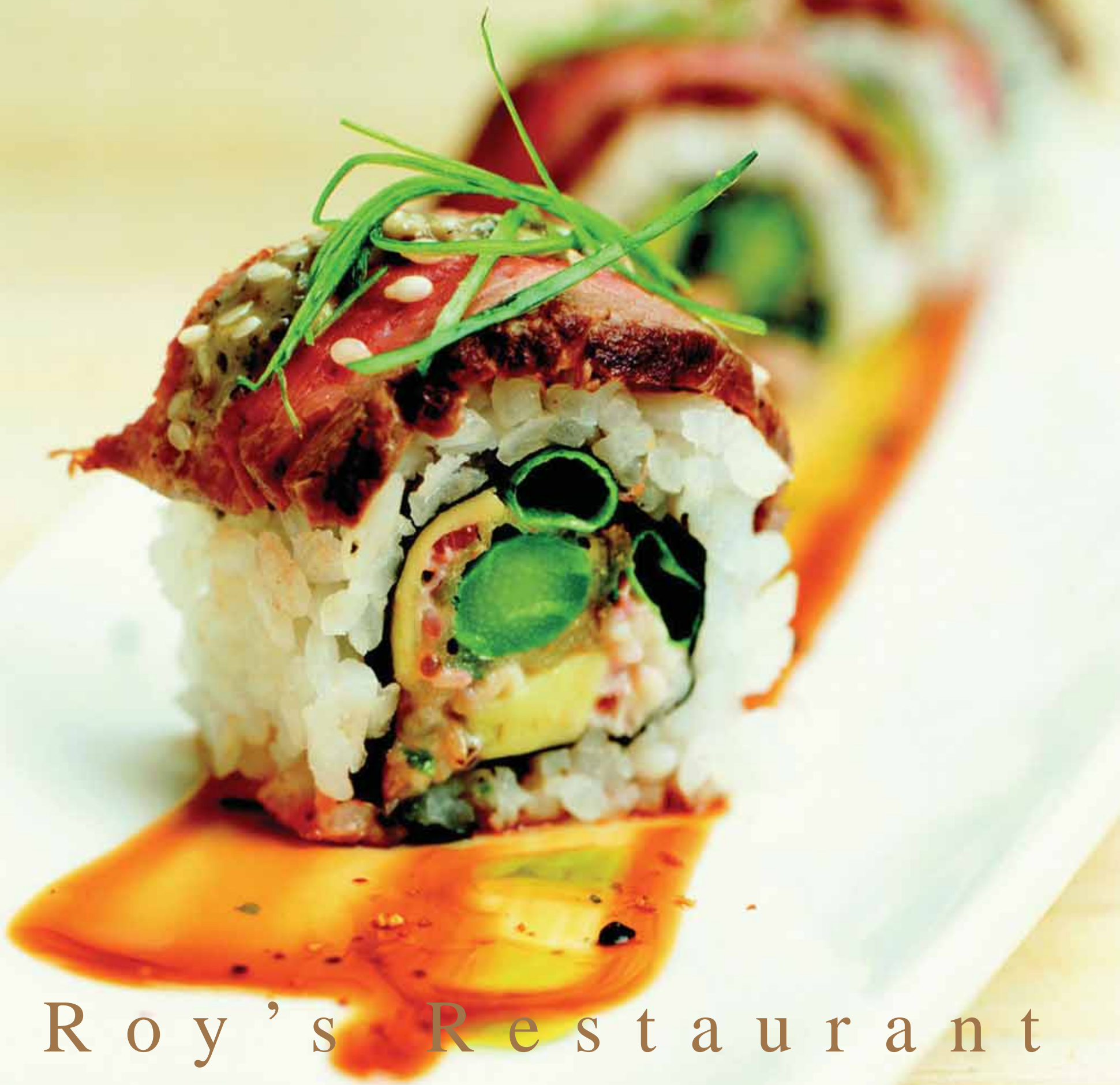


AS SEEN IN BOULEVARD MAGAZINE

# Oriental



R o y ' s R e s t a u r a n t

# Theater

By Elyse Glickman

*Whether traditional or fusion-y, L.A.'s eclectic mix of Asian Cuisine has a flair for the dramatic*



All photos on this spread are from Roy's Restaurant

Whether you live in the city, the West Side, the Valley or Pasadena, chances are you have at least one favorite Asian restaurant that's near and dear to your heart. In fact, since there seems to be as many different genres of Asian restaurants as there are people—

from neighborhood hangouts to hidden best-kept secrets to high-concept destination dining, it is no surprise that the Asian round-up has become an annual tradition for Boulevard.

Though it is tempting to revisit some of our sentimental favorites for food (Koi, Yi, Typhoon, Blowfish, Max, Twin Dragon, Chan Dara, Saladang, Shiro), value (Sri Siam, Midori Sushi, The Banyan) or ambiance and exotic drink menus (Monsoon, White Lotus, Sushi Roku, Chi, Yamashiro, Crustacean), we owe it to ourselves and the readers to venture to new Asian provinces that have recently appeared on the horizon or long-standing institutions that deserve a fresh look. Though one can argue Polynesian food is a genre of its own, a closer analysis of the ingredients and presentation reveals it to be the original "Asian-Fusion" cuisine. For generations, Trader Vic's stood as the epitome of Pacific charm and a stalwart primer in Asian cooking for the Beverly Hills crowd. Like all other things, however, the artform became more sophisticated as more people became savvier about their fine dining choices. Two chefs with Japanese roots keeping Polynesian-style fine dining current and relevant are Nibuhiro Hamazaki of Ma'kai and Roy Yamashiro, the originator of Roy's "Hawaiian Fusion" cuisine.

In Hawaii, the word **Ma'Kai** translates to "toward the ocean," and thanks to the seven month-old restaurant's prime location at Broadway and Ocean Boulevard in Santa Monica (the old Rebecca's location), the name and the Polynesian theme could not be more fitting. However, if you come expecting something along the lines of a Trader Vic's, you are in for a surprise and an evening that will impress even the most hardcore hipsters.

"This is definitely not your Mom and Dad's Tiki lounge," explains owner Mark Jeanetta. "The décor, created by interior designer Ren Blanco, takes the artistry of Paul

Gauguin and tropical motifs and woods, but spins them into something that is both young and sophisticated. The menu, created by my fellow owner Christian Warren and executive chef Nobuhiro Hamazaki, updates the concept of Polynesian fare—think Polynesian/California fusion—is designed to stir up some conversation rather than distract from it."

While the menu is expansive, and the main courses veer toward more general fine dining fare, the most adventurous offerings are the tapas, which are tailor-made, appearance-wise and flavor-wise, to meld perfectly with the array of tropical cocktails. The bar and tables, flowing with lots of beautiful young people, come alive with such vibrant fare as the New York Steak Wrapped Asparagus, the Eggplant Dengaku, Salmon Tartare and Albacore Tuna Hawaiian Poke, nicely accessorized with orange, red, and yellow-hued libations to refresh and cleanse the palate. The sauce and presentation for the cod appetizer, meanwhile, was quite gorgeous, so it was a bit of a shame that the small fillets were a tiny bit on the fishy side. Another safe bet, however, is the hand rolls, with rice sheets binding the fresh ingredients together, and, of course, the sushi. While the chocolate desserts were okay, what really stood out were superb ginger and coconut sorbets and a passion fruit mousse. Jeanetta mentioned that the desert menu would eventually change every night, and become more adventurous, and if the new recipes are as good as the cocktails, then there will be much to look forward to (libation highlights include the Black Cherry Caprihana, Ginger-infused cosmo, Pina Colada martini and the Raging Bull).

On Topanga Canyon Road in Woodland Hills, **Roy's** (practically an institution in Hawaii, and quickly emerging as the Ruth's Chris of Pan-Asian fine dining) opened its doors with great fanfare, as well as hula dancers, Tiki torches, Island music and a fundraiser for a local charity called the Hathaway House. Most of what was served was expertly executed and hinted as to why Roy's is so easily going global. Particularly well done were the Orange Ginger Charred Grilled Short Ribs with Mango Kaffir Lime Salsa, the Rack of Lamb with a sweet curry and sesame based sauce, exceptional Mochi-dusted Sea Scallops, a pasta topped with Tandoori shrimp, decorative Nigiri sushi, Misoyaki-charred Butterfish, spicy Poke (similar to tuna tartare) and the Baby

Back Ribs (which must have been good as they disappeared very quickly during the evening).

On the opening night, there were a few misses on the otherwise impressive (and comprehensive tasting), such as the surprisingly flavorless macadamia coated cheese and somewhat bland foie gras. Ending the meal on a very sweet note, however, are some nice and appropriately light dessert choices including a chocolate and Kona coffee mousse, fluffy, easy-on-the palate passion fruit cheesecake and a lighter-than-air tropical fruit parfait. And if you just can't get the vacation time to catch the next Aloha Airlines flight out to Maui or Honolulu, you can at least enjoy authentically realized Mai Tai's and Blue Hawaiians, as well as a lovely pineapple infused martini.

On another occasion, a formal dinner, Roy's was still cooking, with excellent appetizer sushi rolls, edamame peppered up in a savory sauce, extraordinary steaks, pork chops, flavorful glazed salmons and a macadamia crusted fish—a signature dish—that really does melt in your mouth.

Also of note, while we're on the subject of Roy Yamaguchi's Hawaiian invasion, you can find a very good Roy's outpost in Palm Springs, and within the next calendar year give or take a few months, find a brand new location near the Staples Center downtown. If the warm Pacific Winds do sweep you in a Windward direction, don't miss the Kauai, Hawaii location. If you are passing through Agoura Hills (in a very green, hilly area that looks a lot like Maui), or live in the West Valley, **Moz Buddha Lounge** attempts to deliver the best of many worlds—albeit with Eastern accents. The ultra-trendy two-year-old restaurant, which in décor strives to

# Oriental Theater



All photos on this spread are from Rika's Restaurant

be a Valley outpost of Koi with its Buddhas and bamboo, is usually already jumping by 5 p.m., with an equal mix of pretty young things and sophisticated older customers filling the bar area and enjoying a lavish mix of passed appetizers ranging from braised spare ribs to Thai Crab cakes, and popular signature cocktails with exotic pomegranate juice as a main ingredient.

For locals, the draws are great live entertainment and a smartly written menu describing ways the chef set out to blend Thai, Japanese, Indian and Chinese cooking. However, it is also important to note that there are just a few items on the menu that will appeal to serious spice-loving palates, with many of the offerings suited for more temperate taste buds. The most creative choices are the appetizers. The spice lover in me really enjoyed the prawns and sautéed calamari (though they also offer a fried variation) in a decadent butter and chili pepper sauce, BBQ Duck Eggrolls with sweet chili sauce and the “spicy” Ahi Tuna Tempura roll (though I recommend requesting soy sauce rather than the tabiko aioli it comes with). The tangy tabiko is better with the Thai crab cakes and tempura items. Also pleasant is Shrimp and Chicken Panang Curry. Again, it’s a little bit on the milder side, as is the Mahi Mahi over coconut litchi sticky rice with tropical fruits. Though it is a very nice, fresh-tasting piece of fish, the kitchen may have played this dish a little too safe for some tastes.

Main courses, though nicely presented, possibly won’t have the fire some spice hounds expect, especially if they have been known to frequent those small, family owned ethnic restaurants in Koreatown or Thai Town. But as Moz Buddha Bar is an upscale place that strives to satisfy all kinds of palates in the rapidly growing West Valley, variations on familiar favorites are there, dressed up accordingly—the Shrimp and Chicken with yakisoba noodles, the Chicken Asian Caesar Salad with cashews, wontons and mild ginger wasabi aioli and Lobster Egg Rolls with Maui onion dip. While the dessert menu did not ring particularly Asian, with choices ranging from exotically flavored cheesecake and crème brûlée to a “Death by Chocolate,” the best choice for big groups was an enormous caramelized banana split sundae in a mammoth 60oz martini glass and a most interesting peanut butter and white chocolate turnover with vanilla bean ice cream. Like it or not, you’ve got to admit there is nothing else like it around. If you love peanut butter, you will certainly go into a zen state.

The service of Moz was pleasant, and our waitress attentive. However, if they want to go the distance in this

fickle biz, they may want to take a few cues from the fifteen year-old **R23** in Little Tokyo, which though upscale, glows with warmth from the people as well as the food. For starters, when the restaurant was booked to capacity, the host had a sweetness about him when breaking the news to us. He bent over backwards to make sure everybody—with or without a reservation—was seated and fed. Very classy. Once we were seated, three waiters cheerfully and attentively stopped by to ensure we were totally taken care of, from the hot towels to the little chocolates that came with our bill. The strong suit of R23 is the quality of the fish itself. This means that they have the confidence not to rely too heavily on gimmicky recipes. There are no fancy, funky rolls—just simple cuts of amazing fish and rolls, along with some truly flavorful daily specials that in most cases are worth their indulgence pricing. However, for me, the basic salmon—which was “oh my GOD!!!” fantastic—was all the indulgence I could ever want (though we did enjoy spicy tuna rolls, scallop rolls, crab and other favorites).

Also in the lounge category is **Rika**, in fashionable Sunset Plaza in West Hollywood, with a requisitely cool, James Bond-y “Diamond Lounge” bar area, a great view of all the upscale doings on this part of the strip and a menu that’s truly dressed to impress, from hot dishes tailor-made for non-Sushi eaters to epic “Sushi on the Road” platters for sushi fressers (the “Hollywood Boulevard” spread includes Spicy Tuna Star; Blue Sea Weed Cinema Roll with Fresh Water Eel, cucumber, smelt egg and avocado; Shrimp Tempura Roll accented with Cucumber, Avocado, Smelt Egg; and the signature Rika Roll with tuna, salmon, yellowtail, crab, smelt egg, cucumber and avocado). There is also “Sushi-American Style” created by Traci Griffith (yes, Melanie’s sister), pretty-to-look at preparations that go beautifully with their lively mix of cocktails. Case in point, the popular “Oh, Melanie Roll,” for the salmon lover, “The Cowboy Roll” for meat-and-potatoes kinds of people with Kobe Beef Tenderloin, gorgonzola, arugula, purple onions and pink peppercorns, and the altogether decadent “Rich and Famous Roll” with lobster tempura with avocado, butter lettuce and salmon roe.

If your dining partner is not enamored of sushi (like my guest, Owen, who nevertheless adored the vibe and the cocktails), but you still want those expressive and unconventional mixes of exotic flavors, never fear. Rika’s trademark mix of European and Asian influences are here. But please, don’t call it “fusion.” According to executive

Chef Hugues Quintard, the menu is “Japanese cuisine accented with French style and technique.” Thanks to this, there were a lot of items that were actually to both our liking, especially with the starter items. We enjoyed sampling the chilled Edamame soup with Lima Beans and Yuzu, Organic Scallops and Wild Mushrooms with Uni and Wasabi Vinaigrette, ultra-rich Lobster Quenelles with Daikon Confit and Braised Leeks in a Light Lobster Sauce Served and their daily special, a tomato tartelette. Under the guidance of the sushi chefs, we enjoyed a mix of what I call “starter sushi” (California and Spicy Tuna Rolls) for Owen with more exotic fare (like Unagi) for me. For our main course, I went for a great variation of one of my fin fish favorites (Grilled Chilean Sea Bass on a Bed of Satoimo Yam Mashed Potato with Yuzu Peel and Bok Choy) while meat-and-potatoes guy Owen selected a savory and satisfying Grilled Prime Beef Tenderloin in a Port Wine Sauce with Sautéed Wild Mushrooms and Spinach, and French Potato Waffle Chips. While Owen’s meat dish was classically continental, my fish dish had clear-cut Asian influences. Though we agreed the Japanese yams were tasty, I would probably combine the light, flaky fish and its subtle sauce with more vegetables as the starch could overwhelm the delicate balance of flavors. Desserts, meanwhile, were simple and satisfying. Owen and I both adored the Pot Au Chocolate, which was a well-executed mousse with an interesting texture. The Apple Tarte was actually an upside-down pie that reminded me of my grandmother’s homemade variation of the theme... perhaps I should mention this simple, wonderful pie—served with interesting vanilla ice cream—when we do our “All



# Oriental Theater



J I N P a t i s s e r i e ' s R e s t a u r a n t

American” restaurant Foodies feature in July! Owen and I enjoyed a pair of truly adventurous libations. Though most of them were inspired by James Bond movies, he went for the truffle-y Chocolate Martini (with Godiva, Bailey’s and Kahlua) while I went for the “You had me @ Hello” blending tropical fruits and a topper of Sprite. However if fun, funky cocktails are not your cup of tea, take advantage of Rika’s prolific wine and sake menu.

Back In Hollywood, we are happy to report that the **Geisha House**—one of the most ballyhooed new sushi-slash-young Hollywood strongholds—actually lives up to its hype. Since its opening in November 2004, with a celebrity-only Victoria’s Secret party serving as the kickoff event, Geisha House has made headlines for the celebrities who have decided to make it their dining and entertainment outpost away from home. The staff will tell you with pride that on average nights, Prince, Ryan Seacrest and Brooke Burke are regulars, and other recently-spotted celebrities include model Molly Simms, Mandy Moore, The Rock and Eva Longoria. This place is legitimately hip, right down to the body conscious wait staff uniforms from red hot L.A. designer label Petro Zillia. Most recently, it played host to the *Constantine* movie premiere post party and recording artist Usher’s Grammy party. Notes Sommelier Kell Wimmer, “At our core, we’re a fun dining experience. But at the same time, we take quality across the board seriously, from our food, to the ambiance and services to the beverages.”

According to General Manager David DeBacco (who made his own name opening up Nobu locations in London, Paris, Milan and New York), executive chef Genichi “Gen” Mizoguchi, descended from a long line of revered Japanese Sushi Chefs. Though there is a stand-alone sushi area, and lots of highly likeable sushi rolls being offered (the Heaven Roll—Chopped toro, spicy tuna and cucumber— and Oshiroi Roll—albacore, yellowtail, cucumber and scallion—are the most requested, and quite satisfactory), it was the hearty-but-healthy (read low on carbs and starch) entrée fare that had us saying “domo” to the uncommonly nice and accommodating staff. When we requested a sampling of the restaurant’s strong suits, our adept waitress Sarah made some superb judgment calls. Our meal began with a simple but satisfying miso soup enlivened with a fresh crab leg, then continued in the right direction with a melt-in-your mouth Maguro Carpaccio. The rock shrimp tempura was a hot item, with every single table in the place seeming to request it. Though we agreed the breading was a bit on the heavy side, the spicing and the sauces were very good and the shrimp inside were plump and juicy. The stars of

this A-list meal were the meats—a Kobe beef filet mignon and Lamb—accented with a simple but flavorful soy/sesame dipping sauce and a silky-textured “Saikyou yaki,” Black Cod with a glaze gently burned on like a crème brûlée. Our meal came to a conclusion with a beautifully showcased chocolate lava cake in a gleaming bronze box. It was a tight, beautifully prepared Hollywood production to say the least.

“The Geisha House is big with celebrities and other discerning diners alike since experience of the place is so multi-faceted and there are so many different ways people can enjoy it, from the private rooms, to a straight on sushi bar experience, to a more lounge-like area to the romantic main dining room,” notes Bar Manager Brian Kimmett. “When you think of it, it is no surprise that this is the place to be in Hollywood now because it is so many things to so many people. This is why we enjoy approaching cocktails with the same kind of creativity our chef and management put into the menu.”

In Pasadena, as evidenced by the success of **Wokcano**, quick bites that are nicely presented and flavorful seem to reign supreme. Around right next door to Wokcano is a new branch of **Hurry Curry of Tokyo**, a great alternative for diners who aren’t into the sushi thing but love a lot of flavor with their meal. The menu is simple and straight-forward. You can choose one of four curries (including a yummy spinach and mushroom vegetarian variation), or experiment with breaded cutlets or their version of pasta. The miso and lobster bisque soups are also comforting and tasty. And if it’s Indian you and your dining buddies are after, the **All India Café** has an outpost a few steps away with their popular curries and specialties from both northern and southern India. And their Lassi yogurt shakes? Dessert in a glass! And speaking of desserts, if you are just looking for your own perfect place for those just desserts, venture over to the always-hip Abbott Kinney area in Venice for some sweet treats at the nationally-famous **JIN Patisserie**, the brainchild of Singapore-native Kristy Choo (who sweetened menus at Singapore’s prestigious Raffles Hotel, Swissôtel as well as several international culinary dessert competitions). Whether you order her delights as part of an afternoon tea or a la carte, her sweets meld together Asian artistry and European culinary traditions, all meant to be enjoyed in a contemporary oriental garden setting.

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