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Weekend by Skip Sheffield

'The new kid makes good:' Bluefin Sushi Thai

Published Friday, August 12, 2005 1:00 am
by Kenny Spahn

Sushi & Thai restaurants are sure becoming popular nowadays. In fact, they're practically sprouting up like Starbucks. And while most are pretty good, they do tend to be rather similar and non-distinct. But the new Bluefin Sushi Thai Grill might just prove to be a standout among the generic crowd. Peter Khaunchai, along with his wife Mandy and chef Yozo Natsui, recently opened Bluefin on Yamato Road & Congress (in the former Aquasol site), and they seem to have found a winning formula. The affable Peter plays happy host, while Mandy prepares the

Thai food in the open exhibition kitchen, where Yozo also creates his Japanese specialties. Meanwhile, the sushi chefs do their thing at sushi bar.

The relatively small environs seem to match the restaurant's personality: Comfortable, cozy, and personable. The cool "industrial chic" setting, complete with brushed aluminum accents, flowing metallic curtains, and high-tech fiber optic lighting, is a refreshing departure from the usual "lanterns and dragons" kitsch we've all come to expect.

The extensive menu can be somewhat daunting at first, but more easily negotiated once distilled into its three separate components: Japanese, Sushi, and Thai. For starters, the signature Lobster Bomb is the bomb indeed, with sizeable chunks of lobster tempura, avocado, and asparagus, beautifully presented back in the shell, then finished with a "Tiger" sauce drizzle. In addition to the multitude of Sushi offerings, there's dozens of Japanese Appetizers (\$2-\$11), from Tofu to Tataki. Sunomono is a refreshing marinated seafood salad (think, Japanese Ceviche). Thai appetizers (\$5-\$10) are equally enticing, like Tom Kha Gai, the classic heartwarming chicken soup with mushrooms, lime juice, galangal, and coconut milk. We also loved the cold, refreshing Summer Roll, comprising shrimp, crisp veggies, rice noodles, and vibrant seasonings enwrapped in fresh rice papers.

One page can barely do justice to the entire menu, but suffice it to say, there's something here for everyone. Most items can be prepared with your choice of meat, seafood, tofu, or just vegetables, so vegetarians should be quite happy. (Dinners run \$10-\$27; Lunch: \$8-\$15). Sure, you can stay with your standard stir-fries, Pad Thai; noodle bowls, or teriyakis. But might I suggest you instead venture into the House Specialties, including daily specials. Or for a real treat, Mandy and Yozu may even go off the menu completely, and prepare their own home-style recipes. The signature "World of Seafood" is a glorious Thai entrée, featuring fresh seafood and veggies steamed in aluminum foil, opened tableside and presented as a beautiful "basket." Our favorite dish, however, came from the Japanese side, with Yozo's special Miso Sea Bass, a gorgeous diamond of Sea Bass, marinated in a special Miso sauce. The Miso imbues a wonderful sweet dimension, which caramelizes to a unique crust (like a fine steak) when grilled. Presented hot off the grill and topped with fresh scallions, it's quite unique, and absolutely, melt-in-your-mouth delicious.

The limited wine list can use some help, but it does include a few tasty Asian beers; and the sake we tried was crisp, well balanced, and delightful (and even served in a traditional Japanese little wooden box!). Our only real disappointment was the dessert – a rather bland, over-frozen Green Tea Ice



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Cream. Next time, we'll try one of the homemade Desserts creations, which looked pretty good!

With all the development on Yamato Road, Bluefin should be well-positioned to fill a much-needed void, in an area which has (until now) been notorious for its paucity of decent restaurants. Yeah, we have real good vibes about Bluefin...

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Bluefin Sushi Thai Grill is located at 861 Yamato Rd (at Congress Ave.). Open daily for lunch and dinner. Call (561) 981-8869. n

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