



Sashimi at Momotaro

GRAB YOUR CHOPSTICKS

The Boka Group tries Japanese fare at new West Loop restaurant Momotaro

By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE

Restaurateurs Rob Katz and Kevin Boehm of The Boka Restaurant Group have quite the collection of successful restaurants, from the crispy pig-faced glory of Girl & the Goat to the bustling raw bar at GT Fish & Oyster. But even before they opened their very first spot, Boka in 2003, they've been dreaming of opening a Japanese restaurant.

Planning a restaurant for that long can be both a blessing and a curse. The devil (or akuma, as they say in Japanese) is in the details. After recruiting two chefs to bring their vision to life—Mark Hellyar to handle the hot dishes and Jeff Ramsey for sushi—Momotaro opened last week in the West Loop. I stopped in to see how this dream of more than a decade in the making shaped up.

Board room or dining room?

The dining room reminded me of a boardroom at Sterling Cooper Draper Pryce, the fictional advertising agency on "Mad Men." The sushi bar, trimmed with teak-style panels and emerald green subway tile, is a beautiful centerpiece. At the bar, a spirits menu written on interchangeable slabs channels a vintage airline departures/arrivals board. According to Boehm, the inspiration for the decor comes from Japanese post-war office design (similar to mid-century modernism, hence the Don Draper-esque

feel) and the Japanese salaryman, a middle-management worker who toils by day and blows off steam at night. I saw that inspiration when my bill was delivered in a miniature yellow inter-departmental mail envelope that was hand-stamped with Japanese kanji. The menus are bound in what looks like a retro stenographer's notebook with the Momotaro logo, a black and silver corona. It felt like a collectible artifact, something I wanted to steal for my office desk (I didn't).

Service is almost perfect

Friendly, polished service leans toward fine-dining—expect your napkin to be neatly refolded when you leave the table—but then stops short at points. Servers would swing by my table to sweep away errant bits of food, but they'd also still leave behind a few clumpy grains of sushi rice. My server was one of the nicest and most knowledgeable guys I've encountered dining out this year, but the food runners dropped off a prepared fish when my date was away in the restroom. I stared at it sheepishly, wondering if I should wait to eat until she got back.

I couldn't wait for it to get cold, so I dove into the bowl of flaky filets of madai snapper (\$20) braised in shoyu (a soy sauce made from wheat and soy bean) with earthy-tasting shitake mushroom caps and a sprinkle of lily pad-shaped nasturtium leaves. The nasturtium was spicy and pungent and added a mustard-like spice to the sweet and salty broth. The contrast of delicate textures and sharp flavors reminded me of fine dishes I've had at the Michelin-starred Lzo. Luckily my date returned quickly; if she hadn't, I might have eaten the whole thing.

Killer grillin'

The madai came from the "autumn" section, one chapter in the novel-like menu that includes 80-plus dishes organized into sections such as "snacks," "cold," "hot," "from the coals," "hibachi," "from the sushi bar," "nigiri/sashimi" and "makimono." Ordering a dish from every section of the menu is almost too much food for two people. If you're not visiting with a large group and have to make some choices, I'd focus on the rotating seasonal items (that's "autumn," currently) and on the "from the coals" section, a selection of meat, vegetable and seafood grilled to order or over super-blazing Japanese-style charcoal. Momotaro serves up some of the best Japanese-grilled robata in town. I especially loved the firm briny diver scallop (\$12) coated in a bright citrus ponzu butter tossed with fat, salty orange bubbles of salmon roe, micro-slicers of seabeen and custard-like hunks of uni (sea urchin) that tasted a bit like foie gras. There was actual foie gras rolled inside the washugyu (\$12), tiny caramelized roulades of skirt steak skewered alongside crispy shishito peppers. Though the foie gras flavors were a bit overpowered by the beef, I loved the fact that a humble cut like skirt steak—often cooked to a chewy, bland consistency—was juicy and tasted like a fine rib-eye.

Snack attack

The "hot" section of the menu also features some real gems, including agedashi tofu (\$12), or organic tofu made in-house from local organic soy milk. The tofu, which has a dense creamy curd similar to mozzarella, was fried to order and served over a sweet and salty



The bar at Momotaro



Momotaro
820 W. Lake St.
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Off to a good start



Momotaro tomato tartare

BEHIND THE NAME

"The first thing we ate in our initial tasting with chef [Mark] Hellyar was [called] the Momotaro tartare," co-owner Rob Katz said, referring to an appetizer made from Maui onion, shiso and a sweet Japanese tomato called Momotaro. "We were amazed by the Momotaro tomato's character and richness, and couldn't believe it was a vegan dish. It was this dish that inspired the [restaurant's] name."

dashi broth. The dish was garnished with a tiny hill of undulating smoky bonito flakes and a sprinkle of grated watermelon radish that tasted like an icy, spicy sorbet. Unagi don (\$14)—barbecued eel-topped rice infused with squash, mushroom and spicy Japanese sansho pepper—was like fried rice of the gods. I'm still thinking about those cubes of

unagi, feathery and sweet like fresh crabmeat.

The sushi situation

The perfectly cooked rice grains in the bowl of unagi don made for an act that was tough to follow: Good sushi rice is fluffy and flavored with a slight rice vinegar tang; each grain is distinct and separate. One batch

of sushi rice that came with the tenshi ebi (angel prawn nigiri, \$7), was sticky, dense and relatively flavorless. The angel prawn perched on that middling rice was chewy, thick and had an unsettling crunch. Ramsey said he roasts the heads of the prawn with the shell on, chops them up and puts them in between the prawn meat and the rice to add texture, but I felt like I was choking down a beetle.

Another order of nigiri, the tarabagani (fresh Alaskan king crab, \$8), featured soggy compressed flesh, not the buttery firm meat I anticipated. Even worse, the rice on the crab nigiri was flimsy and broke away as soon as I lifted the crab with my chopsticks. Ramsey earned a Michelin star while working at the Mandarin Oriental hotel in Tokyo, so I wondered what was up and asked him about rice preparation in a later interview. From the special pressure cooker he bought to prevent the rice from coming out too sticky and the pre-opening rice-cooking trials he told me about, it sounds like he's committing to getting things right. For me, though, the rice was just inconsistent.

That being said, Ramsey's toro tartare (\$25), a tiny puck of ruby red tuna bits packed with sweet red onion, garnished with a ginger blossom and served alongside smears of fizzy fermented wasabi sauce, was one of the best and most beautiful looking things I've eaten this year. I would give up beef tartare, a dish I really love, forever if I could somehow secure a lifetime supply of that toro.

Sweets remix

In order to cut costs, a lot of restaurants have a single pastry chef. Some have none at all and the dinner staff also creates the desserts. At Momotaro, a staff of four oversees the sweets. This investment is paying off. I especially dug the namelaka (\$11), chocolate sponge cake featuring green tea ice cream and ripe cherries served with a shot of piping hot fudge on the side. I was less in love with the waka momo (\$11), baby green peaches served on a bed of whipped tofu with almond pralines. I loved the cloud-like texture of the tofu, but the rare green peaches from Japan were too subtle. I expected a big, ripe fruit bomb, especially since my server raved about their flavor, but all I got was a weak waft of peachiness.

Bottom line

Even with a few details to iron out, Momotaro is already one of Chicago's very best Japanese restaurants, with grilled and hot dishes that are top-notch. The sushi service could use a touch more consistency, but, much of the fish, some of which is being shipped overnight from Japan, is impeccable.

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