

eat & drink

LENNY GILMORE/REDEYE PHOTOS



Naoki Nakashima

ON A ROLL

We found sushi heaven in Lincoln Park, and it's called Naoki



Madai with charred shimeji mushroom & plum syrup

By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE

I have reached peak taco status. The same goes for steak, pad thai and pulled pork. Even if all of the restaurants that specialize in these foods closed tomorrow, I'd still be golden. I've been to the mountaintop and back—and back up again. You may think this is sacrilegious, and I understand. In case you're wondering, there's no such thing as peak fried chicken or pizza status. The same goes for really good sushi.

If I lived elsewhere, I might feel differently. But I live in Chicago, which, while no longer a strictly meat and potatoes town, is often focused on satisfying pork fetishes. Despite the fact that you can have a 50-inch flat-screen TV delivered to your apartment in about an hour via Amazon Prime Now or secure pristine lobster via FedEx, Chicago has only recently started to serve great seafood.

Raw fish is another matter entirely. In Chicago, Jiro doesn't dream of sushi; rather, Pauly fantasizes about Italian beef. Like taquerias and noodle joints, there seems to be a sushi spot on every corner, but they're mostly serving slabs of poorly cut second-rate fish draped over mushy molehills of soggy rice.

That's where Naoki in Lincoln Park comes in for a save.

Don't call him an overnight sensation

In 1991, having spent five years working in a noodle shop and as a fishmonger in Fukuoka, Japan, Naoki Nakashima traveled to California at the ripe age of 21 and secured a job as a dishwasher at a sushi restaurant called Bando Ya, where he met his mentor Masa-san. Masa-san later left that restaurant and opened his own place. Nakashima followed and worked under him for four years, learning how to make perfect rice and cut fish with excellence and detail. "I cut cucumbers for a long time. I wasn't allowed to touch the tuna," Nakashima laughed. "It was too expensive."

Nakashima left Masa-san and opened restaurants in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and Hong Kong, eventually ending up in Chicago at NoMI. After three years, he joined Lettuce Entertain You, where he designed sushi programs for various restaurants including Shaw's Crab House and Tokio Pub in Schaumburg. After 13 years, Lettuce recently offered him the opportunity to open his own namesake restaurant, Naoki.

RATINGS KEY **** DEAD UPON ARRIVAL **** PROCEED WITH CAUTION **** GIVE IT SOME TIME
 **** TAKE IT OR LEAVE IT **** OFF TO A GOOD START **** HEATING UP **** ALREADY HOT



Lobster ohzara



King crab temaki



Mob-tastic entrance meets Zen-like space

Naoki is located inside Intro, another Lettuce property, in an old private dining room tucked behind the kitchen. In order to access the space, you have to walk through the kitchen, passing fancy wine fridges and an aquarium, where you'll come face-to-face with live lobsters you may eat during your meal. It all felt very mafioso, like I was preparing to whack someone over a plate of meatballs.

But Naoki's dining room isn't stuffed with red leather booths and checkered tablecloths. Instead, it features dark leather semicircle banquettes, handsome blond wood paneling and columns inlaid with glass, one of which has a diorama of jellyfish in suspended animation. The dining room is hushed, and sushi cooks work like surgeons, silently toasting seaweed, scooping rice and flaying fish behind a wide backlit bar. The silence is punctuated by boisterous and gracious hails of "thank yous" and "goodbyes" and a few bows from the chefs when patrons finish their meals and leave.

So much depends on good rice and eggs

Two marks of a great sushi chef are the quality of their rice and the texture of their tamago or omelet. Nakashima's rice—whether it's underpinning nigiri or coating the walls of a maki roll—features distinct toothy grains seasoned with sugar, salt and the faint whiff of kombu or seaweed. His tamago isn't the desiccated, over-sweetened lump found at corner sushi shacks, but instead has a soufflé-like lightness and briny finish imparted by a touch of shrimp paste. Both components are the basis of a fine maki roll enrobed with silky truffle-scented unagi and triangular

scrimps of cucumber (\$16). My only issue is that the eel's outer flesh was a touch too soft and could have used a longer toasting to offer a crispier contrast to the interior. But this is really my only complaint of the night. Another maki roll with salmon and spicy shrimp (\$15) bursts with a sun-drenched lemony finish.

Sashimi of the future

Nakashima's real prowess is on full display in a section of the menu called Naoki-style sashimi, which features a handful of lithe cuts of fish flavored with various sauces and garnishes. These composed plates are not your typical sashimi. They meld a sushi master's fish-cutting precision with a four-star chef's acumen for flavor and balance.

Five pale-pink planks of madai snapper (\$16) featuring flecks of pearlescent bits of skin are arranged in a star pattern with a nest of translucent shaved radish curls in the center. Each piece of fish is garnished with micro-sized shimeji mushrooms (they look like studio apartments for young urban Smurfs). There's also a drizzle of pickled plum syrup, which imparts a grand finale of sweetness, salt and fruit in each bite.

Another sashimi display features hamachi (\$24) dabbled with a Sriracha-like Peruvian red pepper puree, tiny scallion ribbons and crisp, fiery rounds of Serrano chili. The spice is offset by a ponzu sauce bursting with vinegar and orange blossom.

All of Nakashima's plates are perfectly seasoned and require little accoutrement, but if you need it, the tableside soy sauce is smoky and delicately salty, not overwhelming like that bottle of Kikkoman sitting in the back of your fridge.

Hot for lobster

Unlike many sushi chefs who only stick to preparing raw fish, Nakashima is also in charge of appetizers and hot plates at Naoki.

There's an edamame "guac" dip on offer (\$6.75), which I ordered reluctantly with flashbacks of so many Mexican restaurants making the stuff tableside and charging me \$12 for the privilege. But no one works a basalt mortar and pestle here. Flanked by rice crisps, the finished plate arrives painted with a minty green puree flecked with black sesame seeds and a few whole edamame beans. Edamame offers a milder and creamier base than avocado for guacamole. Nakashima's version is fiery, limey and pungent with garlic. I may never eat Mexican guac again.

A truffle chawanmushi (\$6.50) is the offspring of a creme brulee and truffle-spiked ramen. Dense egg custard swims in dashi broth perfumed with truffle funk that's so comforting and savory it's like Japan's version of chicken soup for the soul.

But the capper of the evening is a whole lobster (\$28.95)—the same one I met on the way in—split, roasted in spicy togarashi butter and served with more of that incredible ponzu I experienced with the Naoki-style sashimi. The lobster meat is so delicate that it eats more like riced and buttered potato than the flabby flesh you'll find elsewhere.

Bottom line

Nakashima is one of Chicago's best sushi chefs. His new namesake sushi joint is serving some of the best sushi in the city, and it should not be missed.

MICHAEL NAGRANT IS A REDEYE CONTRIBUTOR. REPORTERS VISIT RESTAURANTS UNANNOUNCED, AND MEALS ARE PAID FOR BY REDEYE.

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