

FOOD DRINK | REVIEW



**BOWLED OVER** From top: Housemade chilled tofu with caviar; lamb from the robata grill.

## Raising the Bar

**Chef Gene Kato hits his stride at Sumi Robata Bar.**

| By Michael Nigrant | Photography by Anthony Tahlier |

I usually poke fun at people who subsist on tofu. And yet, here I am, scraping the bottom of a blue-and-white porcelain bowl of the stuff at Sumi Robata Bar in River North.

Minutes earlier, the dish arrived featuring a quivering custardlike dollop of housemade tofu dotted with tiny orange orbs of salmon roe, a scatter of diminutive mushrooms, a nest of crispy ginger and ribbons of scallion.

The tofu is so creamy, like a slightly melted pint of Häagen-Dazs, and nothing like the wobbly bricks you find at the grocery store. It's like eating a cloud—mesmerizing, simple and satisfying. I wolf it down.

That's how it is with everything at Sumi. But it's

not what I expected. Chef-owner Gene Kato made his bones at pulsing Japonais, the sceney sushi joint with the waterfall, intricate wavy woodcut ceiling and roaring copper and slate fireplace.

Sumi, with its honeyed woods, clear glass pendants and live-edged wood bar top (instead of cutting a flat edge, the carpenter preserves the natural curve of the tree the wood was harvested from) is mute, clean and Zen. It's the antithesis of the lively Japonais.

Outfitted with white walls, white fabric-lined chairs and stools, it feels like a hospital operating room. But, there are no scalpels here, just skewers and the flicker of orange cinders from the charcoal grill. Behind a wall of glass Kato is surgically precise, tending

### Sumi Robata Bar

702 N. Wells St.,  
312.988.7864

Lunch Mon.-Fri. 11:30AM-2:30PM; dinner Mon.-Wed. 5-11PM, Thu.-Sat. 5PM-midnight

Appetizers \$4-\$26  
Robata \$3-\$16  
Desserts \$5-\$6

#### What to Eat

Tofu, Jidori *karage*, beef *tsukune* slider, *donatsu* (chocolate doughnut with green tea mousse)

#### Downstairs Drinking

While Sumi offers terrific bottled cocktails, nothing is as good as the drink selection downstairs at Sumi's sister spot, Charcoal Bar. There bartender Matthew Lipsky hand-chisels huge round ice spheres from a solid block of ice.

#### Birds of a Feather

All of the robata items are great, but the chicken tail at Sumi is the most flavorful.

#### What's in a Name?

"Sumi" is inspired by the type of nearly smoke-free compressed binchotan charcoal the restaurant uses to grill its robata items.



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gingerly to rare hunks of meat, planks of seafood and curls of pepper.

There's little smoke but plenty of caramelization. Wagyu rib-eye is crispy-skinned and tender-fleshed. Shishito peppers are blistered golden in spots and glint with the crystalline shimmer of tiny flakes of sea salt. Shards of smoke-kissed king crab mingle with spicy mayo, and are encrusted with tempura shallots. Carbon-streaked chicken thighs glisten in their own juices. The beef *tukune* "slider," a spicy kebab drizzled with tangy miso mustard and wrapped in a housemade bao bun, is what might happen if the Japanese reinvented the hot dog. Most of the robata items I sample, save for a slightly overcooked chicken gizzard, are the best in town.

On that alone, Sumi could thrive. But Kato's composed plates (like the tofu) offered as "cold" and "hot" small plate appetizers are even better.

I read that Kato was an admirer of French super-chef Joël Robuchon, and I can see a Robuchon-like delicacy in Kato's soft-poached egg swimming in a soulful broth of soy-dashi. I also observe a Robuchon-like thoughtfulness in the sea bass steamed in its own little packet over eggplant. The restaurant unwraps the aromatic package tableside. The bass flakes when prodded with a fork. The natural juices of the fish and the Japanese eggplant mingle with soy and butter, creating a rich, silky and slightly bitter sauce. I love it so much I pick up the bag and slurp the remainders like I'm shotgunning a beer.

There's nothing delicate about Kato's Jidori *karaage*, aka fried chicken. And that's just fine, because when it comes to crispy birds, the more aggressive the flavor the better. And here, the crust shatters (it's dipped in cornstarch before frying for extra crunch) with every bite, and the flesh is juicy to the bone.



The whole thing makes quite a mess. But messes like these disappear quickly when Jessica Kato, Gene's wife and co-owner, is around. She's constantly surveying the room, anticipating anything that might go wrong. She moves fried chicken crumbs off the table with one hand while pouring a new infusion of *sencha genmaicha*, a green tea blended with toasted brown rice that has a roasted nutlike quality, with the other. Speaking of tea, Sumi's comes with a side dish featuring florettes of refined and brown sugar, and a tiny, perfect, yuzu curd-stuffed madeleine pastry.

That madeleine is a harbinger of the incredible desserts on offer—including a doughnut stuffed with warm chocolate served with a dipping sauce of airy green tea-infused mousse. There's also a study in blood orange featuring sorbet, gelee and cream.

A day after I dined at Sumi I came down with a terrible sickness (totally unrelated to my meal). I spent three days either shivering with chills or boiling with fever. This gave way to a fierce head cold. I'd lost the ability to smell or taste well for almost three weeks. At some point I was convinced Sumi would be the last meal I'd experience with all my senses. My ability to smell has since come back, but if it hadn't, Sumi would have been a heck of a way to go out. ■



**HANDS ON**  
Clockwise from top left: Chef-owner Gene Kato plating a ginger salad; the serene dining room and robata bar at Sumi; Jidori *karaage*, crispy fried chicken with shishito pepper paste.