

FOOD DRINK | REVIEW



GOING FISHIN' Clockwise from left: The main dining room at Roka Akor; diced sashimi chirashi with salmon roe; the wine room; and pouring shochu

Rockin' Roka

From standout sushi to the nonpareil offerings off its flaming robata grill, there's no doubt that the heat is on at Roka Akor. | By Michael Nigrant | Photography by Anthony Tablier |

For half a century, the Japanese steak house in Chicago has been a shrine of entertainment—a place to throw down saketinis and watch chefs build onion ring volcanoes, toss raw eggs with spatulas and throw really sharp knives through the air. One thing it hasn't been, though? A temple of fine gastronomic achievement.

That is until Japanese robata grill and sushi hot spot Roka Akor recently arrived on the scene. Located on Clark Street across from Rick Bayless' Frontera empire, Roka breaks the mold in more ways than one, banishing standard community-style flat-top-grill tables in favor of an elegant wood-inlay sushi bar. With kinetic wall sculptures, softly lit tables and floor-to-ceiling plate-glass windows, the décor is worthy of an *Architectural Digest* cover shot—it's sexy like Joan Holloway, the buxom office manager of Sterling, Cooper, Draper & Pryce in *Mad Men*, while also contemporary and sleek. In fact, Roka is so trendy that, having dined there for

lunch with our two drooling toddlers, my wife refused to come back for dinner until she'd procured a pair of sweet 4-inch heeled stilettos.

Even with my wife rocking those sky-high stunners, I enjoyed the lunch experience more. At night the restaurant's vibe is set by the oh-so-serious black-suited men and black-dress-clad women running the hostess stand. During the day, it's a different feel, thanks to the happy-to-be-lunching diners—specifically the businesspeople who still believe in the three-martini, or rather, three-sake, lunch.

These folks order wave after wave of maki and scads of sashimi. The conventional wisdom of my fellow food critics regarding Roka has been that the pricey sushi is no better than other local joints, and should be avoided in favor of the robata grill fare. I disagree. Roka's sashimi service, which features freshly grated wasabi root and freshly pickled tender **CONTINUED...**



Roka Akor

★★★
456 N. Clark St.,
312.477.7652

What the stars mean:

- ★ fair, some noteworthy qualities
- ★★ good, above average
- ★★★ very good, well above norm
- ★★★★ excellent, among the area's best
- ★★★★★ world-class, extraordinary in every detail

Reviews are based on multiple visits. Ratings reflect the reviewer's overall reaction to food, ambiance and service.

WHAT TO WEAR

Shiny clubwear

WHAT TO ORDER

Wagyu kimchi dumplings, prime grilled filet, prawn and scallop ramen

WHAT TO KNOW

The \$28 four-course lunch special is a great value

WHO GOES

The lean and beautiful

WHAT IT COSTS

Sushi and maki \$6-\$24; appetizers \$4.50-\$22; entrées \$19.50-\$140; desserts \$10



Though I didn't spring for the \$18-an-ounce Australian Grade 10-plus Wagyu, I can't imagine anything better than the prime beef filet with chili ginger sauce I do order. I'm not sure I'll ever crave a traditional steak house steak again.

...CONTINUED white scrimps of ginger—as opposed to the reconstituted green powder and pink preservative laden stuff so common at lesser restaurants—is right up there with the city's best sushi destinations like NoMI Kitchen, Arami, Katsu and Macku.

The Crispy Butterfish roll from the Signature Rolls section of the menu is, as the name suggests, full of bold white fish. The fish's richness is balanced by earthy-tasting stalks of white asparagus and a swizzle of bright yuzu. The maki is rolled tightly with beautifully toasted nori wrappers and plump grains of rice. Tuna sashimi flesh, meanwhile, glistens like a gemstone, and the yellowtail sashimi is served with a soulful, nose-delighting splash of garlic and orange citrus ponzu sauce. The quality of the fish is superb.

Except for the grilled king crab from the dinner menu, which is too salty and overdone, the cooked seafood at Roka is as spectacular as the raw stuff. The prawn and noodle ramen served at lunch features the best noodle I've had in Chicago, bar none. The prawns, creamy and with a touch of brine, are served slightly



A STICK UP From top: Yuzu miso-marinated black cod skewers with mizuna salad; flamed salmon nigiri and hamachi and spicy tuna roll

raw in the center and cooked to a righteous plumpness once mixed into the hot broth.

Roka has a way with stock: Miso, that ubiquitous pedestrian toss-off at most sushi bars, is a mouth-coating explosion of *umami*—a deep, savory flavor prevalent in foods like tomato and soy sauce—full of grassy notes from the *kombu*, a type of seaweed, and smoky *bonito* fish flakes, which imparts a savory sea bacon-like note.

Our server knows he's served a winner, and watches with interest as we slurp away. Clearing our bowls, he asks how things were, but I think he already knows the answer. The question is just an excuse for him to boast about Roka's noodle and broth-making prowess. He has an overt, joyous pride and enthusiasm you rarely find outside of CEOs and Trader Joe's cashiers.

When it's time to switch to meat, he's also helpful, directing us to the tender and fiery Wagyu kimchi dumplings. I love potstickers like Kim Kardashian craves attention, but my wife would only eat them if she were force-fed in a Chinese prison. And yet, with these, we have a chopstick sword battle for the very last one.

So what of this already-famous robata grill, situated right behind the counter seating in the open kitchen? Most of the places in town that claim robata are using gas or lava rocks. Not Roka. They have a true-to-definition robata that burns low-smoking compressed hardwood charcoal known as *binchotan* and mesquite. Roka's *binchotan*-fired steaks are incredible, crispy-skinned, melt-in-your-mouth affairs. Though I didn't spring for the \$18-an-ounce Australian Grade 10-plus pure-bred Wagyu, I can't imagine anything better than the delicate prime beef filet glistening with chili ginger sauce I did order. In fact I'm not sure I'll ever crave a traditional steak house steak again.

My wife and I eat the meat on our dinner outing, where we have a waitress who isn't quite as fastidious as the noodle evangelist we had at lunch. She leaves us waiting for cocktails and with empty wine glasses throughout the night. When a patron with a sharply tapered V-line who looks like he plays defense for the Blackhawks throws down the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*-sized wine and sake list and says, "I can't deal with this!" he looks to her for sake advice. She mumbles something about rice polishing and minerals, but confuses him even more. He tells her to bring a beer.

Like our waitress, dessert is disappointing. Everything seems to be called a "cake," but the mango and vanilla cake is really a bland panna cotta, and the banana cake is more like jiggly, dense bread pudding. You're better off heading across the street to Xoco for one of Rick Bayless' bean-to-cup hot chocolates and a bag of churros. That's a small price to pay, though, to experience a newer, far better take on a Chicago Japanese steak house. ■