

THE ESSENTIALS

UPPING YOUR CHICAGO RESTAURANT CRED ONE BITE AT A TIME



**Sushi Master
Yoko at Ginza**
LENNY GILMORE/REDEYE

By Michael Nagrant

FOR REDEYE

At some point in the past decade, sushi joints have become like dry cleaners: There seems to be one on every corner and you go to the closest one that doesn't screw things up too bad. This is sort of crazy when you consider that raw fish and poor dry cleaning both have the potential to kill you (Google "Liberace dry cleaning").

But 23 years ago when chef/owner Akira Yokoyama (he goes by "Yoko") opened up Ginza, the sushi counter on the first floor of the Tokyo Hotel, you were lucky to find a Japanese spot downtown that wasn't Benihana.

In those days, Yoko catered mostly to Japanese businessmen looking for a taste of home and a few adventurous advertising execs. These days, add in a sprinkle of intrepid foodies, and the crowd still is about the same.

During lunch, Yoko spars in Japanese with longtime patrons who can actually read the specials board. Some of the dishes are occasionally translated to English. If not, just belly up to the sushi bar and ask Yoko what it says. I like the fluffy deep-fried savory doughnuts stuffed with scallion and octopus, known as takoyaki (\$8.95).

Although it's tough to ignore the soulful, sweet and briny tea-like udon broth with its thick chewy noodles and half-moon curls of crisp and spiky tempura shrimp (\$8.50), it's sort of a disservice to order from the

GINZA RESTAURANT

19 E. Ohio St. 312-222-0600

Looks like: A bowling lane, with its narrow real estate and honey-hued wood-lined walls

Smells like: Sweet vinegar-tanged rice and pork-laden ramen broth

Sounds like: Expats and businessmen exchanging rapid-fire Japanese with the sushi chefs

cooked food menu when Yoko (he's the older gentleman with the white paper hat) is working the counter; if his younger proteges are slicing sashimi, then go ahead and stick to the udon.

Yokoyama may not be legendary as Iron Chef Masaharu Morimoto or as demanding as Jiro Ono (watch "Jiro Dreams of Sushi" on Netflix), but he is fastidious. He infuses his own rice vinegar and his knife cuts are precise. He does not serve caterpillar, dragon or Godzilla-shaped maki. His tuna nigiri are translucent pink slices of fatty tuna lying on a raft of rice that's firm and plump with a lilting perfume of tangy, briny seawater (\$10 for two pieces). One bite and you'll think, well, who needs lobster, truffles or foie gras? And if you don't, one thing we'll probably agree on is that it's sure better than picking up your dry cleaning.

MICHAEL NAGRANT IS A REDEYE SPECIAL CONTRIBUTOR.