

DINNER WITH SIMON

The chef's chef-d'œuvre

Yoshi Tauchi makes poetry over at Omakase Obscura

The first time I wrote about Yoshi Tauchi's omakase, at a nondescript sushi restaurant he ran with his wife Yukiko, coaxing them to do omakase took some persuasion. Eleven years later, there's no coaxing needed. Omakase takes center stage at Omakase Obscura, which opened last year in Vitae Spirits' tasting room on Charlottesville's Downtown Mall.

As in 2014, my dining companion was my wife, which works well because our lack of dietary restrictions allows what omakase requires: leaving everything to the chef. Omakase loosely means to trust, and Tauchi says that when guests entrust their experience to him, "it is the best way to deliver joy through flavor." Agreed. As enjoyable as the 2014 meal was, Omakase Obscura is at another level.

Sushi starts with sourcing, and Tauchi has connections to the best. The seafood company Tau-

chi once worked for sent him to Charlottesville in 1998 to launch a sushi counter at Foods of All Nations. Three decades and several restaurant stops later, he still sources fish from the company, importing fish twice weekly from Japan.

Yet there's more to sushi than sourcing. So much depends on the chef. "Omakase is like a poem; it requires timing, rhythm and emotional resonance," said Tauchi.

Tauchi's six-course sestina began with a couplet. First, torched slices of madai and kampachi, glazed not with rain-water but ponzu sauce, ponzu jelly and fresh Japanese yuzu to boost aroma. Next, a contrast of textures and flavors: a porcelain spoon of dry-aged tuna, avocado and Tauchi's yuzu-flavored miso vinegar, beside a brittle mon-aka shell filled with European sardines set in ponzu jelly. "A refreshing oceanic bite," said the poet.

Next, a triplet: sablefish, Iwana trout and Hokkaido scallop. The sablefish's Kyoto-style saikyo miso sauce paid homage to the miso-grilled sablefish dish

popular at Japanese-American restaurants. Atop the scallop, meanwhile, were pearls of finger lime known as "fruit caviar," that teased the taste buds with bursts of citrus.

For his makimono verse, Tauchi topped cucumber rolls with chopped dry-aged fatty tuna mixed with scallions and crowned it with California caviar, gold leaf, and freeze-dried flowers. A side of fig tofu dressed in white sesame was offered as a caesura — a gentle pause from fish and rice. "The smooth texture and subtle sweetness act as a palate cleanser, allowing guests a quiet interlude to reflect and reset before continuing," said Tauchi. "It enhances the flow of the meal."

The sashimi stanza was a cinquain of king salmon, kin-medai, katsuo, sea bass and hiramasa, with fresh Japanese wasabi, soy sauce and yuzu. Fresh wasabi is a rare treat, as are wine pairings done as well as those of the restaurant's hospitality and wine director Will Curley, who also runs the Charlottesville Wine Guild. With the sashimi was this year's Gover-

nor's Cup winner, Barbourville Vineyards' 2023 vermentino, and it's as if the Virginia wine from the Italian grape was made for the Japanese dish. Curley credited the wine's multifaceted nature for the pairing. "The salinity of the grape and minerality of the wine elevate the pristine flavors of raw fish, while the ripe, citrusy fruitiness gives a textural contrast to each bite," Curley said.

Do poets have a favorite verse? Tauchi's was his ode to hon-maguro, or bluefin tuna: soy-marinated akami, seared chutoro and otoro nigiri. To err is human, and a common sushi misconception is that fish must be fresh. In fact, time brings rhyme. Like many top sushi chefs, Tauchi dry-ages the tuna to concentrate flavor and firm the texture, enhancing its euphony with rice, soy sauce and wasabi. "Overly fresh fish lacks harmony with the rice," said Tauchi.

Another source of harmony is Tauchi's wife Yukiko, who joins him in the kitchen. Tauchi calls it "a-un no kokyū" — a silent harmony. "Yukiko is my greatest partner and understands my

sushi philosophy deeply," said Tauchi.

The meal ended not with a whimper but a bang. "Each course is a movement, and the entire experience builds toward a final resolution," said Tauchi. A coda of carpaccio combined thin slices of akami, iwana salmon, suzuki and scallop. The seasoning tread softly — yuzu salt, olive oil, black pepper and lemon juice which enhanced the raw fish's flavor, without overpowering it.

I remember fondly the omakase meal Tauchi and his wife prepared in 2014. A decade later, while trust in Tauchi is still warranted, time and experience have elevated his poetry. What once took coaxing now flows freely from a hand inspired by joy and steadied by mastery. The result is an experience unlike any in Charlottesville — Omakase Obscura, the chef's chef-d'œuvre.

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Plants

From A6

silvery-leafed plant, growing up to 20 feet tall and 30 feet wide, are hard to miss along our roadways.

Also like many other invasives, autumn olive possesses intrinsic traits that help it outpace the growth of beneficial plants. Symbiotic bacteria associated with autumn olive's roots make nitrogen available to the plant, allowing it to grow rapidly in soils low in organic matter and nutrients.

Another intrinsic advantage is its ability to produce abundant seed-bearing berries, up to

30 pounds in a single season. The berries are junk food for birds and other animals, which disperse the seeds widely after eating the sugary fruit. Unfortunately, these berries are low in nutrition, lacking the fat birds need for winter migration.

Preventing invasive plants like autumn olive from being sold in the nursery trade is one of the top policy priorities of the agencies and organizations working to keep invasives from running rampant in Virginia. Sadly, more than 40 of the 103 plants on the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation's official invasives list can still be purchased in nurseries, garden centers or online.

Recent policy victories include a new Virginia law that requires retailers of outdoor plants to post "in a conspicuous manner" signage identifying a plant as invasive and encouraging consumers to ask about alternatives. To take effect in 2027, the law covers 39 specific plants, including English ivy, which blankets countless trees in our community, and Japanese barberry, known to invade wooded areas. Dense stands of the spiny plant have been found to harbor the black-legged tick, a carrier of Lyme disease.

Other recently enacted policies prohibit state agencies from planting, selling or

propagating invasive plants; require professional plant installers to provide written notification to property owners if any plants proposed for installation are on the state's invasives plants list; and allow localities to permit the supervised use of herbicides by volunteers on public lands.

For Virginia's coming legislative session, policy priorities include expanding the authority of public service districts to include controlling invasive plants. Current law allows public service districts to be established to manage transportation, water, solid waste and infrastructure, as well as to control dangerous insects

and other pests. Adding invasive plants to this list will assist communities in funding invasive plant management and removal.

Every advance in this battle makes a difference. It will help restore healthy ecosystems; build communities that are better able to withstand drought, floods and wildfires; and make us more resilient in the face of a changing climate.

The Charlottesville Invasive Plant Partnership is a collaboration between local government agencies and nonprofit organizations to inspire awareness and action to protect native species — particularly the tree canopy — from invasive plants.

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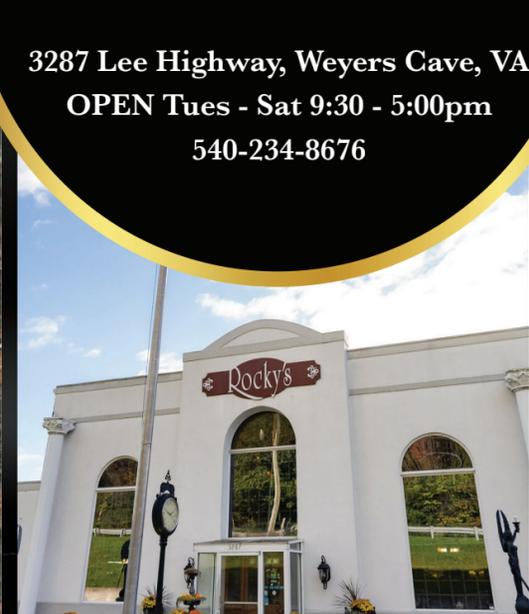


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