

OCWEEKLY

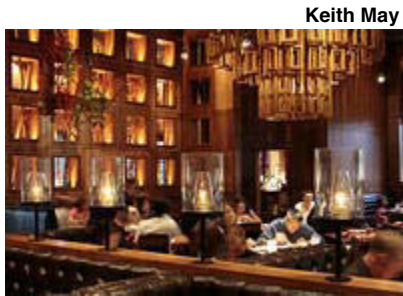
TOKYO TABLE POPS THE CULINARY CHERRY OF IRVINE'S DIAMOND JAMBOREE SHOPPING CENTER

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Getting Shishito-Faced

Tokyo Table pops the culinary cherry of Irvine's Diamond Jamboree Shopping Center



Keith May

Nipponese nights

This past decade has seen some exciting times for Irvine food lovers. A few years ago, Persians took over a Wild Oats, transformed it into Wholesome Choice, and introduced us to

sangak flatbread. Later, Yogurtland began its successful franchise with a flagship store here. It now boasts outlets as far west as Honolulu and as far east as the Big Apple. But nothing has changed the Irvine dining scene the way the new Diamond Jamboree Shopping Center has or in the way it has—literally overnight.

So far, the center has seven new places to eat, with at least 10 more planned. A Korean fried-chicken joint, a Taiwanese bakery, a tofu-soup restaurant and even a boba shop all opened within days of one another. It's the Asian-food-geek equivalent of all the Star Wars, Star Trek and Lord of the Rings films premiering on the same weekend at the same theater.

The biggest blockbuster of them all is Tokyo Table, the first restaurant to debut and, by far, the most successful. Come on a weeknight, and there will be a wait list. Come on a weekend without a reservation, and you'll be turned away.

Simply put, Irvine has seen nothing like it ever. It's a bar, late-night hangout and all-purpose Japanese restaurant operating with a menu so voluminous it rivals the Penny Saver. Everything sizzles with ambition—and none more so than their list of ishiyaki. These are dishes that owe their name to their stone-ware bowls and plates, heated hot enough to brand.

Most consist of rice topped with Japanese curry, Korean kimchi or even Szechuan-style tofu in a spicy bean sauce. The best topping is the unagi, in which broiled eel gets mixed tableside into a mound of rice. As you eat, what remains in the bowl turns crispy from the residual heat. But if you want a true ishiyaki experience—complete with the threat of second-degree burns—order the garlic tuna. It's the only one that makes use of a sputtering-hot stone plate on which you sear a slice of tuna before quenching it in a cold bowl of ponzu.

Tokyo Table's other signature item is the homemade tofu, the polar opposite to the theatrics of the ishiyaki. The dish is presented plainly as a whitish clump on a wicker basket. Zen-like in simplicity, it's served with a side of sea salt, shredded nori and a bowl of dashi broth. You eat it with a spoon as if it were pudding.

You also have the option of having the tofu fried and served as agedashi, but trust me, have it raw first. (If you want agedashi, take their eggplant version instead.) Tooth-tender spears of it will soak in the same soy broth, but even more aptly.

Next on the list and worth ordering are the garlic shishitos—tiny, shriveled, thin-skinned peppers that are like jalapeños without the burn. Both are part of their "Quick Starters." The appetizers are in a section by themselves, subdivided into hot and cold. There's also a sampler platter, but steer clear of it. Ours featured a vaguely Vietnamese summer roll, a few undercooked pieces of chicken karage and a snappy cucumber salad, but the rest was worthless filler of edamame and fries straight out of a McDonald's Happy Meal. Picking out your appetizers à la carte is best.

In particular, the spicy tuna on crispy rice is good for a raucous crunch, and the yuzu hamachi carpaccio is as elegant as sliced raw fish gets. And however silly it may sound, the sushi pizza—bits of scallops, salmon and crab meat baked onto bite-sized sushi rice squares set atop seaweed—will be better than you expect. It's one of the highlights on the hot side of the menu. The other is the mochi cheese gratin, a daring Italian/Japanese mash-up of mozzarella cheese baked with mochi nuggets. The two ingredients fuse together so well into goeey, chewy, stretchy webs, you can't tell where one begins and the other ends.

Other entrées that attempted the same type of Italian-Japanese fusion were less successful. Our miso-marinated salmon lacquered in pesto was a convoluted mess on the plate and the palate. Nothing, however, was more disappointing than the ramen. On our visit, the broth was unforgivably flat, and it reeked of bamboo shoots. But in this, Diamond Jamboree promises salvation. Opening soon near Tokyo Table: an honest-to-goodness ramenya straight out of Japan.

Tokyo Table, 2710 Alton Pkwy., Irvine, (949) 263-0000; www.tokyotable.com. Open daily, 11 a.m.-midnight. Dinner for two, \$20-\$60, food only. Full bar.