

SUSHI DELIGHT

Japanese restaurant in Leawood does it right

By LAUREN CHAPIN
The Kansas City Star

In the midst of the bustle and hubbub of southern Johnson County's commercial epicenter, Town Center Plaza and Hawthorne Plaza, restaurateur Tom Johnson has created an oasis. Behind brushed glass doors, Sushi House – open since June – is serving lovely, traditional Japanese dishes including sushi.

Sushi House chef David Loo, who moved here from Chicago, has successfully delivered on the three tenets of Japanese cuisine: harmony of flavors, beauty of presentation and freshness of ingredients.

Johnson spent 10 years with Culinary Concepts, a subsidiary of Hallmark Cards, six of those years as managing director. The American Restaurant, a white-linen destination, is one of the properties he oversaw.

Johnson brought his fine dining training to his new venture. His attention to detail shows in the fine-quality, splinter-free disposable chopsticks, the tea cups textured like fine-grade sandpaper, and the flavorful green tea in them.

Local designer Gould Evans Goodman helped him create a restaurant as calming as any you'll find in the metropolitan area. The walls are covered in warm-toned Russian river birch, mod light fixtures gently brighten the room and traditional Japanese music trills modestly in the background.

Fortunately all this elegance works in tandem with Loo's food. The head sushi chef, Loo is assisted in the kitchen by his wife, Karen Ming. Loo trained in Long Island, N.Y.; his wife picked up skills while watching him. They are a talented pair.

After several weeks of heavy dining (Italian-American, French and home-grown Midwestern), it was a pleasure to eat food with such clean, pure and familiar flavors.

The ebi sunomono (\$6.25) epitomizes this deft use of flavors and textures. Peeled and sliced cucumbers are "pickled" in a sweet rice wine vinegar and topped with three peeled and splayed shrimp. Toasted sesame seeds add nutty warmth, the fresh lemon slices a summery touch.

The seaweed salad (\$4.25) has a compelling combination of flavors (sweet vinegar and toasted sesame seed oil) and textures (sinewy hiyashi wakame seaweed, supple cucumbers and crunchy sesame seeds).

Do try the hamachi kama (\$10), a whole yellowtail tuna cheek. Considered a delicacy in Japan, it's not often seen here. The bone-in cheek is lightly salted and broiled and served with housemade ponzu sauce. The fine-textured white fish is lovely and is suitable as a light lunch, paired with a salad and miso soup.

According to Johnson, the sushi-



Photos by DAVID EULITT/THE KANSAS CITY STAR
The Sushi House serves traditional Japanese dishes. The Sushi House has three private dining rooms.

grade fish used for Loo's sushi and sashimi arrives from the East Coast and Japan, by way of Chicago, three times a week on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays.

Johnson recently lowered the price on most sushi by 10 percent. Freight costs dropped, he said, and those savings are being passed on to customers.

I tried several kinds of nigirizushi (sushi), sashimi and makimono (hand-rolls). Each piece was perfectly shaped and brushed with just a teasy kiss of wasabi. The sticky rice, ably seasoned with sweetened rice wine vinegar, held

together, even when dipped in the wasabi-flecked soy sauce.

Makimono rolls are cut into five to eight pieces and range in price from \$5 for a six-piece California roll to \$11 for an eight-piece rainbow roll, topped with tuna, salmon, shrimp, sea bass and flounder.

I particularly enjoyed the spicy tuna roll (\$6), the salmon skin roll made with broiled salmon skin (\$5), the unagi sushi (sweetened eel, \$3 for one piece) and the spicy hotagegai (scallop, \$2.50 for one).

Johnson explained that his fish source



The dragon roll at the Sushi House.

charges a bit more for his sushi-grade fish than other vendors, but he thinks the higher quality product is worth the cost. This customer agrees.

Those squeamish about eating raw fish will find an abundance of cooked dishes on the menu. One dining companion tried the KC strip steak (\$16). The chopstick-tender beef was perfectly cooked and proficiently ladled with a bright – not cloying – housemade teriyaki sauce.

There are three bento box entrees (\$16, \$18, \$19), all served in traditional multi-compartment, lacquerware boxes. Each includes a bowl of rich miso soup, several pieces of lightly battered shrimp and vegetable tempura, and a California roll. Diners then choose either chicken, salmon or steak teriyaki.

I tried the nabeyaki udon (\$11) one wet, dreary night. The fragrant noodle soup is served tableside in an oversized, sizzling iron pot. Fat, al dente wheat-based udon noodles, kamaboko (pink and white fish cake), a whole poached egg, fresh spinach, a shrimp tempura and a earthy-flavored whole shiitake mushroom simmered in a rich, woody broth that had just a hint of sweetness. I will crave this dish this winter.

Japanese meals typically end with fruit and not a sweet dessert. Sushi House, however, serves azuki (red bean) and green tea ice creams (\$3) and these weird, frozen confections called mochi. For \$3 per order, customers can choose from coffee, mango or strawberry ice cream nuggets, wrapped in rice flour wrappers. The golf-ball sized treats, two per order, are skewered with a toothpick.

Forget the toothpick and use your fingers. The uncooked wrapper is stretchy, like gum, and becomes goeey as it warms, like raw pasta dough. We all loved them, especially the coffee mochi.

Sushi is trendy these days, and at least a half-dozen sushi restaurants have opened in the metropolitan area this year, with mixed results. More should emulate the standard set by Johnson's Sushi House.

ABOUT THE WINE LIST

Sushi House's wine list is one of the shortest around, with just 11 selections, including Roderer Estate and Veuve Cliquot champagnes. The bases are covered with a Bonny Doon dry Riesling (\$6.25/glass, \$25/bottle), a B.V. Coastal Pinot Noir (\$6.50, \$27) and a Wild Horse Merlot (\$8.25, \$34).

Better yet, try the newly instituted sake flight (\$6.75). It's a great deal – and

great fun. The staff pours six sakes into pretty clay or glass sake cups set atop a labeled flight sheet for note-taking. The Hakutsuru is served room temperature, the rest are chilled. I thought the Hakusan was timid and watery; I loved the floral Hakutsuru.

Three Japanese beers are available, too – Asahi, Kirin and Kirin Lager. All are reasonably priced at \$3.25.

Sushi House

5041 W. 117th, Leawood, (913) 663-3333

Food: ★★★ ½

Service: ★★★

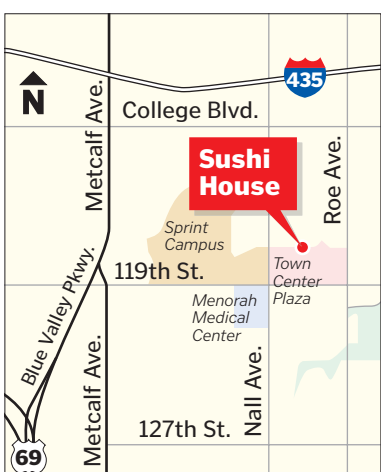
Atmosphere: ★★★ ½

- **Hours:** Lunch 11 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Monday through Thursday. Dinner 5 to 9:30 p.m. Monday through Thursday, 5 to 10 p.m. Friday, noon to 10 p.m. Saturday, noon to 8 p.m. Sunday.
- **Entree range:** \$9 to \$23
- **Credit cards:** All major cards
- **Children:** Lots of kids like sushi
- **Wine list:** It's short. Several Japanese beers and premium sakes

- **Vegetarian choices:** Seaweed salad, deep-fried tofu with tempura sauce, vegetable roll makimono
- **Parking:** Scads in the lot
- **Takeout:** Call ahead
- **Handicap accessible:** Yes
- **Reservations:** Suggested
- **Web site:** Under construction
- **Smoking policy:** No-smoking restaurant
- **Noise level:** Sophisticated

THE STAR RATINGS

- ★★★★ Excellent
- ★★★ Very good
- ★★ Good
- ★ Fair
- ▲ Unacceptable



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