

French-Japanese fusion in Chicago

story by Rosalind Cummings-Yeates

✕ The Windy City delivers on steaks and hearty Midwestern fare such as ribs, pork chops and chicken, served up everywhere from greasy spoons to the Gold Coast. Italian, Thai and Nuevo Latino restaurants sit on every other street corner. ✕ But when it comes to fine Japanese dining, Chi-town just doesn't come to mind. That was before Japonais opened its sleek doors in 2003.

Perched on the edge of the Chicago River in the trendy West Loop area, Japonais exudes European style melded with a Japanese sensibility. From the copper-wrapped revolving door at the entrance, to the cascading limestone waterfall that greets guests inside, the restaurant boasts elegance on every level. Divided into two dining rooms—the classic Red Room and the more relaxed Green Room—the industrial space was designed by noted architect Jeffrey Beers, who created the Raffles City complex in Singapore, Fragrant Hill Hotel outside of Beijing and Rum Jungle Restaurant and Club at Mandalay Bay Resort in Las Vegas.

The Red Room is to the left of the entrance, swathed in rich tones of red and gold, with red patent leather chairs and white tablecloths. On a raised platform with Japanese-inspired copper lanterns hanging above it, the Red Room houses the gleaming sushi bar, which sets the stage for the preparation of the restaurant's most popular offering.

The focal point for the more casual Green Room is a huge golden velvet ottoman with a striking Asian floral arrangement rising from its center. A 15-foot fireplace dominates one wall while lower seating and hand-painted wall paper line the other walls.

"We do French-influenced Japanese recipes. The food is Japanese but the presentation is European," says executive chef Gene Kato. The restaurant's three-page menu presents dishes that bridge the gap between Asia and Europe. "We wanted to bring the best of both worlds. We wanted a great sushi menu with things you wouldn't expect. You can have the best raw fish and you can have the best steak as well. It's not a menu you get tired of."

Trained in traditional French techniques as well as Japanese cooking, Kato crafted a menu (written in English and French) that serves a variety of tastes while staying true to Japonais' French/Japanese focus. Popular appetizers include a sublime miso soup with wakame, scallions and tofu; Ka-Momo, a flavorful smoked duck salad with Asian greens and honey yuzu dressing; and Kato's quirky nod to his Tokyo birth place and North Carolina upbringing—Tokyo Drums, a tasty take on buffalo wings with teriyaki seasoning and roasted scallion dipping sauce.

The extensive sushi menu includes pristine nigiri and sashimi, as well as expertly prepared salmon, chicken and Kobe beef prime rib. Chef/partner Jun Ichikawa oversees the sushi selection, which is highlighted by colorful

presentations. The sushi ranges from tuna, fish roe and eel to ika (squid) and uni (sea urchin). The chef's special maki mono features tempura soft-shell crab topped with hirame and octopus topped with spicy tuna. For the meek-hearted, there is a variety of vegetable sushi, with ingredients such as avocado, asparagus and shiitake mushrooms.

Entrées span the conventional filet mignon, salmon and "surf and turf," to the unconventional "seven samurais," a feast of lobster, scallop, king crab, tuna, octopus, salmon and botan ebi tartars served with Japanese togarashi crackers. Another favorite is "the rock," New York strip steak cooked on a hot rock at your table. The star attraction however, is the fancifully named "Le Quack Japonais," a clever take on Peking duck that offers a whole, maple-leaf-smoked duck with hoisin sauce, mango chutney and mushu wraps. "The duck takes four days to prepare," explains Kato. "The first day it's dried, the second day it's marinated. The third, it's marinated again and on the fourth day it's smoked and put in the oven. We use 20 cases of duck a week, with seven birds per case."

Kato says customers get their money's worth. "People should realize that we use the freshest ingredients, we have fish flown in daily from Japan. We use the best possible quality that you can get."

That quality extends to Japonais' lounge and riverwalk café. "We have four distinct areas and it's like coming to a different place everyday," says Sandy Park, director of operations. Descending down the staircase into the dimly lit lounge and bar area, guests see a polished maple bar lined with lime vinyl and mahogany bar stools. Low tangerine-colored sofas fill the rest of the space.

On any given weekend, the lounge is crammed with hip 20- and 30-somethings. The women sport sparkly halter tops or tiny black dresses and guys come in khakis or suits. Couples snuggle on the sectionals or sip the bar's signature drink, "the floating orchid," a gin and vermouth concoction topped with an edible fuchsia orchid. Others order from the sake and appetizer menu or listen to the pumping techno, hip hop and dance hits. No one dances because there's no room nor inclination. This is a "see and be seen" spot. On mild nights, revelers crowd into the riverwalk café, an outdoor patio adjoining the lounge and accented with white sheers, rattan furniture and a stunning view of the Chicago River. ■



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what Japonais Restaurant, known for its elegance in architecture and fusion of French and Japanese cuisines. Entrees run from \$19 to \$

hours The restaurant is open seven days a week, lunch is served Monday through Friday. Reservations recommended.

tip Although the lounge attracts a youngish crowd, the Japonais clientele ranges from 25-55. The dress code "is whatever the occasion calls for," says operations director Sandy Park.

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Top: "Le Quack Japonais". Left: Sushi. Middle: the Red Room (top) and Green Room (bottom). Above: "The Floating Orchid" (top), Executive Chef Gene Kato and Chef/Partner Jun Ichikawa (bottom).