JONATHAN GOLD

RESTAURANT CRITIC

The first time you come to naka, a kaiseki restaurant a bit north of shady studios in the Pico area of Los Angeles, you will inevitably upend right by the place, a low, sunburned building in a strip of dry cleaners and tarmacked readers surrounded by a raised sea barrier in 95 degrees of gray. There is no sign, no valet parking, no hint that you are entering a restaurant instead of a high-nooned back office.

When you find your way through the front door, you will be greeted by — reservations are mandatory — and led through the sparse, elegantly dining room to a serene private room or possibly a nook that looks like the sleeping area in an expensive Manhattan studio apartment. On your table will be another zen garden, an arrangement of gray pebbles and a single, sea-washed stone. You are not, it goes without saying, at Kaiseki.

If the cultural gulfgraph has been the model for what seems like new restaurants out of three in Los Angeles, it is the idea of Japanese kaiseki — exquisite meals of many small courses designed to express the mood of the season and place — that has lately been shifting the amplitude of the world's best chefs, up and including Ferran Adrià. The eponym egg, soft-boiled at low temperature and long periods of time, an art originally perfected in the volcanic hot springs of Japanese country teas called yunomi, is as close as there is to an emblematic dish of global haute cuisine at the moment.

Michael Cimarusti's tasting menu at Providence echoes the rhythms and flavors of kaiseki more closely than they do anything you'd find in France. Sometimes it seems as if David Myers shut down Kaise, in order to study kaiseki cuisine. Unnecessarily, while often thought of as a sushi restaurant, basically serves kaiseki meals with an extended sushi course toward the end. It is hard to find a serious kitchen in town now whose menu does not change each week according to the farmers market, whose menu does not include the occasional wrap of raw fish or stack of ponzu in the course of a tasting menu, whose chef does not adjust his or her plating to reflect the cycles of nature.

Ripe for kaiseki

So, it is almost startling to realize that inaka may be the first dedicated kaiseki restaurant in Los Angeles, at least the first outside the Japanese expatriate community and that the sheer level of cooking in this modest bungalow eclipses what you find in grand dining rooms whose chefs appear in national magazines. Consider diver scallops grilled in their shells, a line of pufferfish and their own eel soup, a fillet of cribbly seared sea trout arranged around roasted cherry tomatoes and a lab grape filled with red onion and fennel; flaxseed preserved in puffed rice, a lake of gold leaf and a pyramid the chef picked from his backyard garden that morning. The chef is Niki Nakayama, a slight, graceful woman who worked at Morimoto before she attended culinary school in Pasadena and cooked at a country-owned ryokan known for its kaiseki meals before returning to California to make at Akane, a Midtown sushi bar known for its team of female chefs. Before opening inaka, she established the organic garden in her backyard from which the restaurant gets many of its vegetables and herbs. It is occasionally difficult to ascertain whether the most impressive bit of a dish is the orderly slab of Japanese halibut or the thimble-sized crimsonish used as garnish, whose texture has been transformed into something almost luxurious through a thousand tiny slices of her hands.

Blended influences

Nakayama uses lots of Western touches. You may see Monterey Bay abalone simmered in a clear broth, or toasted with spaghetti, pickled celery and sun-dried tomatoes. But there is stillness to her cooking, a sense that the Aoki chefs, baby faced and aspirational, are out to make a chiefly statement but because it is the day they go to get better. Where someone like Nobu Matsuhisa will repeat his stamp on every dish (you never take a bite at Nobu you don't realize it is him), Nakayama steps out of the way of ingredients, even in conjunctions as seemingly mundane as a foie-tartare with sea urchin, American caviar and purple corn kernels of reduced shallot. Nakayama does cook with way more blowtorch than any contemporary chef ever should. As good as it tastes, the garden is barely handled nearly to extinction.

But it is the farming-base pompano fillets served with sautéed peppers and chips of their deep-fried bones — you take them into lettuce leaves and dunk them into deep-sour vinaigrette — that most resemble Hong Kong-style fondue with crispy vegetables, recalling flavors of Sicilian asado cooking and being eaten like Korean scree, but still seem purely Japanese.

For the month of June, Nakayama is also running a foraging-tasting menu, probably because of the brilliance of California's July 4 ban, it is sudden, desperate, in season and also because she fires up the river anyway, beams and slaved over toasts, poached and flavoring salad, grilled and served with. It is a daily something how easily she integrated the liver into almost every course of the menu, as an egg custard with truffles, crumbled over sesame-dressed shrimp, poached in dashi with abalone, seared and made into salad, and laid over soup "mushroom" without becoming obsessive or overindulgent. A dish of seasoned egg salad infused with melting slices of beefy grissini, drops of jelled yuzu juice and halved figs that had been caramelized with a blowtorch was unexpectedly splendid, recalling the famous fee-free-grissini dish of Dan Bajone chef Martin Berasategui, but becoming something wholly new.

This is probably the place to point out that dinners at inaka are expensive. The unit of consumption is either the nine-course $88 chef's tasting menu or the 16-course $195 modern kaiseki menu, which inevitably includes an extensive sushi course, several courses of sushi and a Wagyu beef course in addition to the sort of dishes we're mostly been discussing here. The wine and sake pairings, well chosen by sommelier Jeffrey Reeves, run $25 to $85 per person on top of that. Is it worth it? One person I took ended up taking her husband back to the restaurant, three evenings later. When you're up for an A-line ticket, sometimes only a $-ticket ride will do.

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Niki Nakayama grows some ingredients in her own garden at her Arcadia home.