

Among trendy sushi spots, Kamon still traditional

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No newfangled sushi-and-saketini bar, Kamon has been serving well-made, traditional Japanese fare in Buffalo Grove for a dozen years. Sayaka Fukuyama, who owns the restaurant with her husband, Hidemizu, the chef, said they chose their shopping-center location because of its proximity to the Northwest suburbs' large Japanese businesses. It's still successfully serving that audience, if the crowd of salarymen dining there on a recent weeknight is any gauge.

A friendly place where the staff calls out the customary "irashimase!" ("welcome!") as you enter, Kamon boasts two spacious and brightly lit dining rooms (smoking and nonsmoking) separated by a large central sushi bar. A big bamboo parasol, shoji screens and a dragon-topped samurai's helmet jazz up the attractive space with its light wood furnishings.

Once you're seated, someone will bring hot cloth towels for cleaning your hands, a comforting amenity many new-style sushi spots tend to skip, and complimentary dishes of cooked, chilled edamame (soybeans) to squeeze out of their pods for a salty prequel to dinner.

Despite its big bar and the word "sushi" blazoned on the outside sign, Kamon's lengthy menu makes its sushi almost beside the point. Though go ahead and order some, if you like — it's fresh and carefully made, the nigiri in single bites of seafood married to balls of rice, the maki tightly rolled.

Besides nigiri and maki sushi, you can get chirashi, with pieces of fish and vegetables arranged over a bed of rice, and oshi-sushi, Osaka-style molded sushi. Several sushi and sashimi combinations are available, served in a wooden boat, as well as nigiri by the piece.

Don't look for weird concoctions with wacky names, though — pristine but routine fish and shellfish selections fill the sushi bar's case and the owners stick to the tried-and-true, letting the fish speak for itself. The "Mexican" maki, a shrimp tempura roll with a spicy sauce, and the "French" maki, tempura and mayonnaise, are about as crazy as it gets.

They do offer my favorite nonseafood roll, one of my yardsticks for the authenticity of sushi bars: ume-shiso maki, a tart mixture of ume (pickled plum paste) and shiso (beefsteak-plant or perilla leaf), rolled up in vinegared rice and seaweed. There's also a roll filled with funky natto (fermented soybeans), an acquired taste. The most complex roll, a traditional fat futomaki, encloses dried gourd, mushrooms, omelet, fishcake, and several other bits and pieces in seaweed-wrapped kaleidoscopic disks of textures and flavors.

Yet, if you look at what the Japanese patrons order, most choose several selections from Kamon's extensive appetizer list, with soup or noodles. Be sure to check out the card pinned up over the sushi bar, where you might find some unusual seasonal specials, like grilled horse mackerel, matsutake dobin mushi (soup made from rare mushrooms) and deep-fried miniature river crabs, each smaller than a quarter and meant to be eaten whole.

The starter list runs heavy on seafood, with many preparations of squid, tuna and shellfish among other items. Ankimo, foie gras-like monkfish liver, is on the list but was unavailable

when we visited. An order of sabashio, salt-grilled mackerel, yields two rustic slabs of fish, moist and richly flavorful, with crackly, golden skin.

Other appetizers include chawan mushi, a steamed seafood egg custard; assorted dumplings; and various tempura-battered or panko-crust, deep-fried options. The deep-fried scallops, two skewers of pairs of fat sea scallops coated in crumbs, have a satisfying combination of textures and flavors with golden, crunchy crust, toothsome interior and a little punch of onion shoved between.

Among the vegetable choices on the list, goma ae (boiled, chilled spinach under sesame paste), is fine but nothing special. In another option, small shiitake mushrooms sauteed in butter offer savory, earthy bursts of flavor.

Beyond these small plates, Kamon serves a variety of noodle dishes, with fat udon served hot or chilled, thin buckwheat soba.

The yakisoba, stir-fried egg noodles, gets plenty of flavor from bits of mellow pork, broccoli florets, leaves of cabbage, Japanese Worcestershire sauce, aonori seaweed flakes and tart pickled ginger. My noodles, though, came out a bit limp.

Complete dinners — with soup, salad, rice, tea and dessert — come in options like sukiyaki made from sirloin, deep-fried beef cutlet, and beef teriyaki, tender slices of sirloin, grilled medium rare and coated with sweet-salty sauce. This section of the menu, which also offers teriyaki-tempura combination dinners, presents the safest choices for the "no swimming food" camp.

Fish lovers can try donburi, rice bowls topped with grilled fillets of tuna, yellowtail or teriyaki sea eel.

Kamon serves a variety of alcoholic beverages including several shochus (distilled liquor) and sakes. Saketinis don't figure on the menu, but the chilled sakes are served in lovely cut crystal cups.

Fresh fruit or ice cream, in red bean or green tea flavors, comprise the only desserts.

Kamon Japanese Restaurant

129 N. Arlington Heights Road, Buffalo Grove, (847) 537-7550, www.sushi-kamon.com

Cuisine: Traditional Japanese cuisine and sushi

Setting: Bright, spacious dining rooms in a strip mall

Price range: Appetizers \$3.50 to \$15.95; soups and noodles \$1.50 to \$10.50; entrees/combination dinners \$9.95 to \$21.95; dessert \$1.50 to \$2

Hours: Dinner: 5 to 10 p.m. Mondays through Saturdays; lunch: 11:30 a.m. to 2 p.m. Mondays through Fridays

Accepts: Major credit cards; reservations

Also: Service bar; free parking; smoking in designated section

• Restaurant reviews are based on one anonymous visit. Our aim is to describe the overall dining experience while guiding the reader toward the menu's strengths. The Daily Herald does not publish reviews of restaurants it cannot recommend.