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FASHION
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ENTERTAINMENT



sweet sixteen

CAFÉ JAPENGO STILL A TOP SUSHI SPOT

BY SARA BROOKS PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROB HOWARD

Sixteen years ago, quality sushi restaurants in San Diego were hard to come by — finding even a simple California Roll on a menu in town was a difficult task. But the opening of Café Japengo in La Jolla's Golden Triangle changed all that. With its location away from the restaurant district of downtown or the popular North County coastal area, it was clear that Café Japengo was bringing something new to the table.

During its more than decade-and-a-half of existence, Café Japengo has set the standard for what an outstanding sushi experience should be like, whether to a novice of the cuisine or a connoisseur. With sushi chefs from all over the world, it is not surprising to find a roll on the menu new to the eyes of even the most seasoned sushi-eater. Head Sushi Chefs Jerry Warner (who just took first place in California's Sushi Master Competition) and James Holder have been awing guests with their creations ever since the doors opened in 1990. Having implemented their own three rules to abide by — consistency, creativity and quality — they have set a standard for all other sushi chefs to strive for. Café Japengo's Tootsie Roll, Stuffed Tomato Roll and Mexican Yellow Tail are just three of the most popular requests.

But it doesn't stop at sushi; Café Japengo has an equally tantalizing and distinctive selection of hot food choices ranging from Flat-iron Steak to Roasted Coconut Chicken. Executive Chef James Montejano brings flair and originality to the menu, preparing dishes with ingredients and spices whose combos are rarely found elsewhere. Two of the more popular items are Café Japengo's signature Miso Chilean Sea Bass and its Ten-Ingredient Fried Rice.

While some restaurants are known more for their dinners or their lunches, Café Japengo is known for excelling in both. By noon during the work week, its booths are filled with some of the biggest movers and shakers in San Diego. The recent addition of Bento Boxes to the

lunch menu has become the top choice for the indecisive diners who want to sample a little bit of everything. With a guaranteed start-to-finish time of less than one hour, it has become the perfect lunching destination for both business and pleasure.

The food is only as rich and eclectic as the environment at Café Japengo. Between the hustle and bustle of diners' conversations, a mellow yet energizing ambience is set by the background music ranging from reggae to jazz. With a traditional Japanese-influenced decor, the furniture and architecture stand out for their unique shapes and designs. Hanging above the bar is a long-nosed mask of Tengu, a 300-year-old Japanese demi-god that functions as a watchdog for those who have imbibed a bit too much. Come Thursday nights, Tengu may come into use for Café Japengo as it still remains one of San Diego's most popular spots to see and be seen while sipping cocktails.

Although Café Japengo also has locations in Las Vegas, Miami and Aruba, it was right here in San Diego where the magic began. Celebrating its "Sweet 16" this month, Café Japengo is reputed for turning first-time sushi diners into full-fledge aficionados.

sushi anyone? ...

WHAT Café Japengo

WHERE 8960 University Center Lane, La Jolla

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