

Cafe Japengo

The Aventine, 3960 University Center Lane, La Jolla; (858) 450-3355.

Lunch: 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m., Monday-Friday

Bento boxes: \$20 to \$25.

Roppongi

875 Prospect St., La Jolla; (858) 551-5252.

Lunch: 11:30 a.m. to 3 p.m., daily.

Bento boxes: \$12.95 to \$16.95.

SQUARE MEALS

Asian restaurants think inside the bento box for lunch

By **Maria C. Hunt**
FOOD WRITER

If you think the word "lunch" means something meaty sandwiched between two slices of bread, then perhaps it's time to upgrade to the bento box.

In Japan, bento is a boxed lunch meant to be eaten anywhere. In kind of the same way paella refers to both the pan and the seafood dish inside, a bento is both the box and the food it contains.

Bento boxes aren't uncommon at

little places along Convoy Street that offer \$7 lunch deals. But they go upscale at Roppongi and Cafe Japengo, La Jolla restaurants that specialize in Asian fusion cuisine.

The cool thing about their boxes is that if you're in a hurry, you don't have to scan a long menu filled with complicated names to figure out what you want for lunch. The chef puts it all together for you in the bento box.

Sugar-spiced prawns are part of the Tengu bento box, one of four versions offered at Cafe Japengo in The Aventine. *Earnie Crafton / Union-Tribune photos*



The bento boxes at Cafe Japengo, upscale versions of traditional Japanese boxed lunches, are good options for people who don't have time to peruse the long menu.

At Cafe Japengo, the bento boxes, priced from \$20 to \$25, offer an abundance of food that's as beautiful as it is satisfying. No matter which of the four selections you order, the meal starts with a pile of steamed edamame and a fragrant, comforting bowl of miso soup flecked with scallions and tofu. But I wouldn't advise filling up on either of these; there's a lot of food on the way.

The Vegetarian box offers a stack of grilled peppers, mushrooms and zucchini in a spicy green sauce; a pile of cold soba noodles dressed in sesame oil and a hint of peanut; and a rice cake in a sweet soy sauce balanced by lightly bitter broccoli. And I loved the creamy-centered avocado sushi roll with curried dipping sauce.

The Japengo Signature box is another good choice. Among the delights were a shrimp napoleon layered with avocado and grapefruit; sweet and spicy barbecued salmon on mango salsa; and tender duck breast char-su over noodles.

There's also a Sushi box filled with yellowtail, ahi tuna, sweet shrimp and two half-rolls; and a Tengu box that balances light sashimi with sugar-spiced shrimp and a fried California roll, if you like that sort of thing.

I sat at the bar, where head bartender Kryz Jones kept me entertained talking about great wines. I was in and out of the restaurant in 45 minutes.

Just like its cross-town rival, Roppongi has dreamed up four styles of bento boxes to suit different tastes. Their boxes, comprised of smaller versions of dishes on the menu, offer a quick lunch option. The vegetarian box is \$12.95; the rest run \$16.95.

The Niku meat-eaters' box features flank steak slices mixed with macaroni salad; a hoisin-glazed pork chop; and a peanut-glazed chicken sate skewer on a bed of crispy fried potato strands. White rice and a seaweed salad round out the meal.

The Sakana seafood sampler is built around a large piece of broiled eel coated with a sweet glaze. It was tasty but too rich for me after a few bites. So I stuck to the ahi poke on a wonton chip, a tempura shrimp, cucumber and seaweed salads and pieces of California roll.