

UNIVERSITY CITY GOLDEN TRIANGLE NEWS

8

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DINING & ENTERTAINMENT

Café Japengo continues to top list

By NANETTE MARTIN
UC/Golden Triangle News

Lots of locals didn't need to read the results of a recent poll conducted by *Ranch & Coast* magazine, naming Café Japengo the place to go for best sushi. What was not noted was the regular menu, which has undergone a major sea change since Executive Chef James Montejano took over, changing 90 percent of the dishes formerly featured at this now 16-year-old institution. Pacific Rim cuisine has given way to Asian and French fusion under his tenure, although a couple of Amiko Gubbins' creations — like braised short ribs — remain, just as some of Montejano's inventions, like Hawaiian barbecue salmon, are still featured at Pampelmousse, one of the places where he worked before landing at Café Japengo.

Armed with all the above information, it behooved me to conduct a sampling of both menus. As many folks would say, "It's a tough job but someone has to do it," and fortunately, I am that someone. I began with a perusal of the sushi selection, and it wasn't a tough call. Among my favorite things are octopus, uni and ahi, so Montejano sent out a platter containing all three, the latter creatively wrapped around minced and seasoned scallops, listed as stuffed tomato. A great start to what turned out to be an incredible meal.

Atop the list of favorites for me is lobster, done simply or creatively, and fortunately there is a "lobster lobster" listed on the starter list, consisting of a bisque made with coconut milk in a



PHOTOS BY NANETTE MARTIN

Café Japengo Executive Chef James Montejano (above, left) and General Manager Greg Bada. Chef Jerry Warner (below), one of Japengo's 16-year veterans.



yummy (and yummy) sweet potato base; a broiled lobster dynamite (and dynamite it was); and a sweet, delicious salad topped with watercress.

One more choice was tuna tartare and, as it turned out, no one makes it better, accented as it is with mango and apple and sided with a stack of chips made from purple potatoes, taro root and sweet potato. The tuna itself consisted of crystalline cubes of perfectly seasoned ahi, topped with golden tobiko and bedded on a delightful seaweed salad.

Each of these dishes are so beautifully presented they deserved a place to be displayed, like a work of art. Between visual enjoyment and savoring, then swallowing each sample, I thought I had died and gone to heaven.

But there were still a few surprises to come. Admittedly I am not a fan of fish, and sea bass is one I have seldom ordered, preferring the shell variety, but Montejano sent out a portion of miso Chilean sea bass, done with vegetables and shrimp tortellini floating in an Asian truffle broth. Perhaps it was because the bass had marinated for 24 hours in a lime, lemon grass, ginger-flavored mixture, but when it reached the table it became, with the first tender

bite, an addition to my limited list of "most favorite foods."

Yet another dish beckoned: the Vietnamese crispy pork, which is shaved and cooked in a wok, served over rice noodles with asparagus and subtly seasoned with hoisin sauce, making it a contender for my special list.

There was a luscious-sounding dessert list, featuring things like pan-fried bread pudding and banana chocolate decadence, but as always, my preference is for the main menu, preferring to have more tastes of that rather than the sweets.

What I haven't yet mentioned is the abundant wine list, featuring at least 60 from all over the world, and a mouth-watering selection of martinis. Happy hour is Monday through Friday, from 5 to 7 p.m., when besides special drink prices a selection of rolls — California, Philadelphia and cucumber — are offered at reduced prices, plus a few more items. But get there on the dot or the bar and patio may be filled. Another indicator of this restaurant's caliber is that five chefs and bartenders have been at Café Japengo since day one, 16 years ago.

For reservations call Café Japengo, 8960 University Center Lane at the Aventine, (858) 450-3355. ■