

Yakitori Delights

New Japanese Spot in Gramercy Beckons With Tasty Appetizers, Ambience and Drinks

The popularity of the newly opened Butai (115 E. 18th St., between Park Avenue South and Irving Place, 212-387-8885) is deserved, but not due solely to the artfully tended Japanese comestibles — the best of its kind sampled so far.

Butai's individual approach to dining, for example, is serving all fare in appetizer-sized portions. Another distinctive characteristic is the broad array of good original cocktails, ranging from green-tea martinis to wasabi margaritas to Butai's wild orchid.

Most Butai buffs wish to keep the place secret. It has an ambience fit for social drinking amidst sophisticated and comfortable surroundings. Its most romantic and lush arena can be found off the landing atop Butai's white marble staircase, which draws young trendies and media hipsters, much like a private club.

What's more, it is sanctioned by executive chef Seiji Hanahashi, who offers mouth-watering Japanese-style tapas, including formidable sushi and sashimi, or as the house labels it, "innovatingly robata Japanese cuisine."

Dinner ably interweaves cooked Japanese food with the freshest and most sensitively handled sushi and sashimi. And that, likewise, characterizes the thoroughness bestowed upon the understated earth-tone décor brought about with sundry shades of rich browns, gray and reds.



Sleek Sushi: Gramercy hideaway a fave

The main-floor houses mahogany high-top tables, an extensive butter-colored bar, a private dining room and, of course, the robata and sushi bar, all contained neatly under soft warm lighting.

The appetizers are so appealing and satisfying that one can easily



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consume enough for a full-fledged meal. Signature dishes include the Butai roll, built of crisp lettuce, cucumber and crab stick dusted with tempura flakes; sushi canapé, a composite of spicy salmon, eel, jalapeño yellowtail, tuna tataki and smoked salmon with cream cheese on crunchy cucumber rolls; and tsukune, juicy chicken meatballs flavored with yakitori sauce.

Decent but less interesting are New Zealand lamb chops. Other choices are zen-sai, separate servings of cold, sliced duck lightly embellished with mustard; tender peppered tuna; and crispy fluke, a brittle and bland misfire.

Other dishes of prominence also include a large, soothingly tasty lobster-salad roll smoothly wrapped in a soybean sheet, and jidori ten — grilled chicken breast cooked in natural juices — its skin crisped with complex flavors. Among this grouping, avoid the tough and wilted gyu-tan (beef tongue). Trust me.

The most exceptional and well-designed skewered choices are asparagus wrapped in translucent slices of bacon and the kuro-buta pork sausage, the ultimate in flavor. Scallion duck fizzles out, demonstrating how chewy, tough and tasteless a mishandled dish can be.

Fried soft-shell crab with grated daikon sauce warrants attention. This extraordinarily textured treat is so savory, its broth alone should be spooned up greedily.

Two appropriate endings might include yaki onigiri — rice balls grilled to a crunchy, but melt-in-the-mouth consistency — and chafwan-mushi, a gently steamed egg custard filled with nuggets of shrimp, chicken, fish cake, shiitakes, mitsuba and ginkgo nuts. We found it a tad watery, but it just may be an acquired taste. ■

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