

*The Fearless Critic: Austin Restaurant Guide, 2006*

Uchi: A seductive retreat that takes your palate for a world-class Japanese Joyride

By Jane Cohen

Food: 9.7/10

Experience: 9.4/10

“Uchi” is the Japanese word for house, an apt name for a restaurant that both bows to the Japanese custom of locating sushi bars in refurbished homes and follows what is also a local tradition: avoiding high-priced downtown real estate in favor of homelier settings on the mixed-use edges of town. But that strategy ends at the door. Enter to find a warmly colored cocoon that strikes the two notes, played together, for which this restaurant stands: a cleverly suave, upscale design and a cleverly suave, upscale Japanese and Japanese-Latin-inspired fusion cuisine. This formula has been rewarded in spades, with executive chef Tyson Cole being named as one of Food & Wine’s “Best New Chefs in America.”

Without a doubt, much of the food here deserves high praise. The promises of fusion cuisine can be hard to realize, as the marriages of ingredients, like marriages between people have to blend excitement with orderliness; richness with simplicity; and ambition with modesty. Mr. Cole carries off this project with remarkable talent. His delicate sense of balance shines through the sashimi salad, the yellowtail sashimi with diced chiles, and the sake-steamed mussels in kaffir lime-miso broth. But Uchi regulars will point to a wide diversity of favorites—a strong sign that Mr. Cole is on the right trail.

Just as impressive is his menu of sushi and sashimi, with much of the fish flown in daily from Japan (if a flight is cancelled, you may not be able to order toro on a particular evening). Full-flavored anago (sea eel), sensuous uni (sea urchin), impossibly fresh Japanese black bass, buttery salmon and yellowtail—there’s plenty of wonder, an excess of pleasure, and nary a blip in regard to the food.

Nobody’s perfect, and not everything about Uchi sings on key. Appetizers generally outclass most of the mains. Acoustic deficiencies, which designers haven’t worked hard to mediate, force you to shout at your dinner date. Waits often exceed reasonable patience. And the prices they’re able to charge should be in a business-school case study of restaurant success. There is no question that it’s success well-deserved; we hope that this winning team will address the acoustics on the next round of improvements.