

DEEP IN THE HEART OF  
**SUSHI**



**FOOD ARTIST** WITH SASHIMI AND SUSHI NOW AVAILABLE AT EVERY CORNER DELI, TYSON COLE IS PUTTING A UNIQUE AMERICAN STAMP ON THESE UBIQUITOUS JAPANESE FOODS. KATHERINE GREGOR REPORTS ON THE EASTERN EDUCATION OF A WESTERN CHEF.



Whether they play it as crudo, tartare, seviche, or sashimi, American chefs are hooked on raw fish. Even traditional sushi—now tame, familiar fare to a generation of American diners—is being interpreted anew by Western chefs taking their bearings from the Japanese and then charting a territory of New World preparations. Among the most intrepid trailblazers is Tyson Cole, whose Austin restaurant, Uchi, is pushing West to the next sushi frontier.

In his first restaurant job as a dishwasher at an Austin sushi restaurant, Cole had the nerve to ask the master sushi chefs if he might help them with their work. The Japanese chefs laughed and shooed away the 21 year old Texan, who knew nothing about cooking or even fine food, let alone the artful techniques of traditional sushi preparation.

But Cole refused to give up. The aesthetics and

challenges of preparing sushi—and of the Japanese way—exerted a powerful, if odd, attraction for him. A sometime painter, he became fascinated by sushi as a kind of flesh sculpture created from textures, tastes, and temperatures. “I was always a perfectionist at heart, and I had a strong work ethic,” Cole explains. “It was just a fit.” Eventually, seeing how serious he was, the sushi chefs relented and began to provide Cole with a Japanese apprentice’s education.

His 12 year apprenticeship—primarily served under his sensei, Takehiko Fuse at Musashino in Austin, with forays to Tokyo and New York City—has served Cole well. In 2003, at age 33, Cole became executive chef and co-owner of Uchi, a 92 seat restaurant. Cole’s inspired Japanese-Texan cuisine has earned a devoted regional and national following. At once spare and subtly nuanced, Uchi’s food is arrest-



Left: Kumomoto oyster shooters with sea urchin roe and quail egg yolks stand sentry over speared squares of albacore tuna and yellow watermelon with golden tobiko and Vietnamese fish sauce, an example of Cole's Western wit and Eastern wisdom. Right: Housed in a 1930s bungalow, Uchi translates as home. Photos by Paul Bardagjy.

ing as both visual and culinary art. Critics reach for adjectives like “sublime” and “impeccable” in describing the imaginative dishes, which attract a stylish 20-to-40-something crowd to a converted 1930s bungalow (*uchi* means “home” in Japanese) six nights a week.

An order of tuna with watermelon sashimi exemplifies Cole's aesthetic. In a culinary riff, a red cube of tuna and a red cube of watermelon are paired on a bamboo skewer. The similarities of color and shape play up the contrasts of flavor and texture. A sprinkling of tobiko and a drizzling of Vietnamese fish sauce add surprise and complexity. This food is playful *and* serious. Or take *toro nuta*, in which bluefin toro sashimi is nestled in a large deep bowl, sprinkled with dried cranberries and toasted almonds, then seasoned with red shiso and white soy sauce, an interplay of flavors that stops conversation. “I created this dish for a long-time customer who came in one night and said, ‘Make me something new!’” offers Cole. The experience of interacting directly with his customers at the sushi bar—where he continues on the line three nights a week—has strongly shaped him as a chef.

Frequently, sophisticated Uchi diners compare Cole's redefinition of sushi to that achieved by Nobu Matsuhisa. When his first modest restaurant, Matsuhisa, opened in Beverly Hills in 1987 (followed by Nobu New York City in 1994 and about a dozen restaurants since), fusion sushi—a Japanese-Peruvian mix for Americans—was born. Significantly, Matsuhisa and Cole are the only two sushi chefs ever named to *Food & Wine* magazine's list of America's “Best New Chefs”—Matsuhisa in 1989 and Cole in 2005. With Cole now spinning sushi in new ways, foodies are traveling to Austin to experience the next thing. (Austin, a university/government town populated by over one million people in its greater urban area, has become more food savvy since a proliferation of high-tech industries in the late 1990s altered its demographics.)

The regular menu at Uchi is divided into sushi, sashimi, *makimono* (rolls), *yakimono* (grilled), and tempura offerings, complemented by a small selection of soups, greens, and desserts. The yakitori is prepared over imported Japanese *dinchootan* (hollow, compressed oak)

charcoal, which burns at 1,000°F. The tempura is fried in a giant wok that allows exact temperature control for each serial item, whether Japanese pumpkin or sea eel; rough, black Japanese river stones submerged in the oil help regulate the heat by providing a constant mass that mitigates the temperature drop that occurs with the addition of each batch of battered food. While many of these menu items are familiar to aficionados of Japanese food, Uchi's interpretations stand apart for their twists on classic methods. For example, Cole seasons his sashimi to make the raw fish more amenable to Western palates, heresy to the old-school chefs under whom he trained.

The restaurant's daily sheet features 10 to 15 dishes composed with seasonal and regional ingredients, such as the December cardamom/hoisin glazed Hill Country quail with roasted Maui onions and warm apple butter. These nightly specials and the tasting menu—divided into “cool” and “hot”—represent Cole's most innovative, multicultural fare. He attends carefully to the dance between temperatures. A diner selecting the “hot” Brie tempura *ringo* canapé (lightly fried Brie with apple chutney on sweet potato chips), for example, might be encouraged to follow it with the “cool” *uchiviche* (think sevice—citrus marinated striped bass, salmon, vine ripened tomatoes, orange bell peppers, cilantro, garlic, and Thai chiles).

Even Uchi's most innovative dishes strongly reflect the years Cole spent steeping himself in traditional sushi preparation. In Japan, the nearly slavish role of the apprentice is considered a form of *shugyou*, an ascetic training based on the repetitive practice of prescribed actions. By submitting to *shugyou* austerities, the novice chef learns to combine ascetic devotion with aesthetic pleasure.

“I remember being taught how to cut green onions,” Cole relates by way of example. “My sensei demonstrated how to use the knife: ‘Do it like this, exactly like this.’ So I would go away and slice green onions for weeks. Finally I thought I was as good as him. I asked to show him what I could do. He watched me, and when I was done, he swept all of my work into the trash can. And so I had to begin again.”

Lessons of this kind—in humility as much as in knife technique—occurred over and over. Why didn't Cole quit in exasperation? “It



Salad on top: fresh soybean custard beneath micro chirimén, Fuji apple, and amaranth with tangerine oil. Photo by Frank Curry.

made me so determined to prove that I could be *that good*," he explains, adding with a small smile, "My father was a Marine." (The few. The proud. The sashimi chefs.) So, for 12 years he dedicated himself to learning not only the culinary skills but also the spiritual virtues essential to a Japanese chef's work: honor, pride, dedication, patience.

"As an apprentice, I made rice every day for three years," notes Cole. As he sits talking, his body is micro-bouncing; beneath his serene, unaffected demeanor a driving energy bubbles through. So, three years of making plain white rice. Wasn't that a bit, um, boring? "Oh, it's *so* involved!" Cole responds. He ticks off a loving litany of the variables that affect the quality of cooked rice: the crop, the amount of water used, the temperature of the washing water, how long it rests, the way the vinegar is fused with the rice. Then there's the air pressure, the temperature outdoors, the time of year, the moisture in the air. "Every single grain of rice is sensitive!" he exclaims.

His dedication to the cuisine—and his anxiety over working with exclusively Japanese chefs—was so profound that Cole taught himself Japanese. After listening to sushi-line patter for 10 to 12 hours a day at work, he became "lunatic" about constantly watching Japanese *anime* with English subtitles in his free time. Another informal teacher was the food competition show *Iron Chef* (now on the Food Network, but obtained by Cole in the early 1990s from friends of friends in Japan). His ability to speak fluent Japanese has paid off, to cite one instance, in securing Cole the freshest and best fish from his Japanese suppliers.

A monthlong chef's tour of the Tokyo area with his sensei Fuse added more depth to Cole's Eastern education. Traveling together, they ate in as many as three different kinds of restaurants a night—perhaps a tempura place, then a sushi place, then a barlike *izakaya*—sampling 30 dishes in all. "Japan is not a refrigerator-based society," he notes. "Eating there made me realize how much

attention they pay to selecting fresh food daily and to detail, the subtle differences in materials and ingredients."

Now that he mentors others, Cole labors to pass on to his staff the exacting Japanese standards, techniques, and values he has learned. Appropriately for a restaurant that Cole dubs "playfully global," his chefs are of Japanese, Vietnamese, Irish, Filipino, Indonesian, Taiwanese, Hispanic, and Puerto Rican descent. This is not your Bubba's Texas. Departing from the traditional hierarchies of both Eastern and Western kitchens, Cole encourages all kitchen staff to contribute creative ideas, and he credits the team approach with raising the quality of Uchi's food. "I want to make sure that I'm listening to the people working for me," he says. "The number two and number three guys have great ideas, too."

From a tight, 12-by-14-foot kitchen, three chefs and an expeditor turn out a tremendous volume of food from four stations—yakitori, tempura, sauté, and pantry/dessert. Out in front are two sushi stations, one sashimi station, and two roll stations. Uchi does 350 covers on a good night, about 200 to 250 on average. Because the diverse menu items can be combined in any order to compose a meal, wait-staff must pace diners' orders so as not to overwhelm the kitchen.

In fact, Uchi's service requirements are so demanding that wait-staff undergo a rigorous monthlong training before being allowed on the floor. A very high level of personalized service is critically important to the Uchi dining experience. "Waitstaff need to be able to break down the mystery for people, to teach gently, to ask questions to assess culinary tastes and levels of adventurousness, and then make the right suggestions," says Cole.

Despite the menu's exotic choices, sashimi remains a best seller, in part because of its dramatic presentation. Gracefully arranged on a bed of ice, the sashimi arrives garnished with tall stalks of grasses, flowers, and even orchids, which add more than \$1,000 a month to the florist's bill. Although the average check at Uchi is \$44, its patrons range from University of Texas students who may spend \$15 sharing a couple of rolls and a sake to lavish parties of techie high rollers who drop thousands of dollars. Which is precisely what Cole intended.

Perhaps honoring his own unpretentious roots—"Until I tasted sushi," he admits, "the most sophisticated food I'd ever had was probably a cheese fondue"—Cole designed the menu to appeal to diners with a range of experience with Japanese cuisine. On a recent evening, a dubious 10 year old girl ventured no further than the chicken yakitori skewers and Wagyu beef, entertainingly self-seared at the table on a hot rock, while her sushi-sophisticated grandparents savored the *sake toro* (fresh Atlantic salmon belly, artfully cut) and a special of monkfish liver *torchon* prepared with *ponzu* and *momi-ji-oroshi* (grated daikon and hot red pepper). All palates were pleased.

Never in stasis, Cole is planning a cookbook, a research trip to Osaka and Kyoto, adding an *izakaya* bar at Uchi where he can offer a broader variety of off-menu small plates and teach classes. "You have to drive to be the best you can," he asserts. "It's a short life. So why not continually challenge yourself to learn and break new ground?"

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