

Food & Drink



Mark Matson photos FOR AMERICAN STATESMAN

Tyson Cole, above right, says teamwork helps keep the menu fresh. Clockwise from above left are: yellowtail belly, pistachio oil with candied garlic; Meyer lemon curd, seared Spanish Jack and juniper; and octopus with marcona almonds.

COLE'S UCHI REMAINS AS CREATIVE AS EVER

THE MAIN COURSE / BY DALE RICE

Uchi could be judged by its needlefish (terrific) or its Japanese black snapper (fantastic), two of the stars of a recent meal at one of Austin's best and most popular restaurants.

But another way to assess this Austin sushi restaurant is by its candied garlic, which played a small supporting role that evening in the amuse bouche.

UCHI

801 S. Lamar Blvd.; 916-4808

Hours: 5:30 to 10 p.m. Sundays-Thursdays, 5:30 to 11 p.m. Fridays-Saturdays

Credit cards: Visa, MasterCard, American Express

Wheelchair access: Yes

which brought together a sashimi of yellowtail belly, pistachio oil and the garlic.

To make this unusual element, garlic cloves were cut on the bias to make the slices as long as possible, cooked gently in simple syrup for an hour, dried and then deep-fried for a moment. The result was a sliver of garlic candy that enhanced the dish by adding sweetness and crunch to the yellowtail.

That garlic also exemplifies the lengths to which Uchi chef-owner Tyson Cole will go to supply his guests with imaginative and artful dishes. This is a restaurant that keeps getting better by never resting on its laurels, as plentiful — and deserved — as they may be.

Ultimately, though, the chef's skill

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with a knife is as critical as any other ingredient in a sushi restaurant, and Cole is a master.

His talent was demonstrated aptly in the needlefish. Small and delicate, it requires extraordinary technique to remove the skin and debone it. The sashimi was served with the rest of the body of the needlefish — a Japanese tradition in sashimi — beautifully displayed as a sort of flying dragon. It was served with a citrus vinaigrette that was presented in an oyster shell on a bed of salt in a wooden bowl.

Cole paired the madai sashimi of Japanese black snapper with ruby red grapefruit, another example of the way in which he frequently combines the Japanese aesthetic with Texas products. This particular fish also underscores a chef's willingness to use an expensive ingredient, even if he has to cover the cost of it in other dishes.

This snapper — Cole's favorite fish — comes with a high cost. With a notoriously large head, its yield for sashimi is only about half of the total weight of the fish. He charges \$18 for the dish, perhaps 40 percent less than what he should, because he feels he can't charge an exorbitant price and still have large numbers of diners share his joy in something he loves.

There's another dish, however, that few of Cole's customers choose regardless of price: octopus sashimi (\$9), which he combined with okra, yellow peppers and marcona almonds.

"It has such a stigma," he says. "When people hear octopus, they don't think of food; they think of cartoons. But the taste is so delicious."

To overcome octopus' bad rap of being rubbery, Cole cooks it three times (in contrast to the majority of raw items at the sushi bar). First, it's parboiled. Then it's braised in sake and mirrin for about two hours. Finally, when someone orders it, each piece is torch-seared just before serving.

Cole also warmed the aji (\$7), Japa-

in which citrus has become a central ingredient at Uchi, and it represents the spirit of experimentation at the restaurant. "I've been fooling around with that Meyer lemon puree for a while," Cole says. "We're playing a lot with citrus. Our food has evolved in the past few years to emphasize clean, crisp, refreshing flavors."

Then, the chef begins praising his staff, citing many by name, for the way they contribute to the individual dishes and to the overall success of the restaurant. "Everything in this restaurant is all about food," he says. "The staff talks about food and comes up with ideas. We try to focus on things that make sense."

His role in this? "I'm the screener. I'm the filter," he says. "I make decisions on what makes it to the menu."

In the process, the food at Uchi has evolved beyond Cole's "comprehension of what I ever thought it could be when we opened."

In addition to marvelous entrees from the kitchen — hanger steak with basil, heirloom tomatoes and pickled shishito peppers (\$24), and skate wing with morels, cauliflower bisque and roasted apples (\$23) — under the guidance of sous chef Paul Qui, Uchi also brings exquisite desserts to the table. They're the work of Philip Speer, one of the strongest pastry chefs in the city.

Speer plays with multiple elements and artistic presentations that are practically a mirror image of what Cole is doing with sushi. The two examples at this meal — peanut butter semifreddo with apple-miso sorbet (\$8) and mascarpone panna cotta with a sherried pear and candied walnuts (\$9) — were among the most creative and deftly executed that I've had in the past year.

It's that sense of surprise and adventure — from first bite to last at Uchi — that makes this restaurant such an intriguing place. It remains one of the very best dining experiences in Central Texas.

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