



(DINING GUIDE)

Beyond the Menu / Restaurants / Food Spotlights



Seared scallops with sweet corn miso

UCHI 202 • LULU B'S 207 • POUR 210 • EMERALD CITY PRESS 214



Sea bass with nectarines, tomatoes and peppers

Look How Uchi's Grown

THE HOUSE THAT COLE BUILT TURNS 5

BY GREG LEVIN
PHOTOGRAPHY BY STACY SODOLAK

Five years ago, a restaurant with a funny little name opened in a funky little house on South Lamar, serving highly innovative modern Japanese cuisine in tapas-sized portions. The very idea of such a restaurant in Austin had some predicting failure—after all, Texans are more accustomed to buffets and bountiful platters of brisket than they are to small plates of stylized sushi and sashimi.

Of those who questioned the successful future of such a unique restaurant, one man stood out: the restaurant's chef/owner, Tyson Cole. "I knew we were taking a risk with this place," says Cole, "and when I saw that I had a staff of about 14 people to pay and was only feeding a few people a night the first couple of weeks after opening, I definitely had my doubts."

Let me spoil the drama: The restaurant, Uchi, survived. And then some. Uchi is regularly cited as one of the best restaurants in the country, and Cole has become a full-blown celebrity chef. Even after five years, his dining room is packed nightly with a guest list that could easily pass as a who's who of Austin's most famed residents and visitors. "It's been an adventure, to say the least," says Cole.

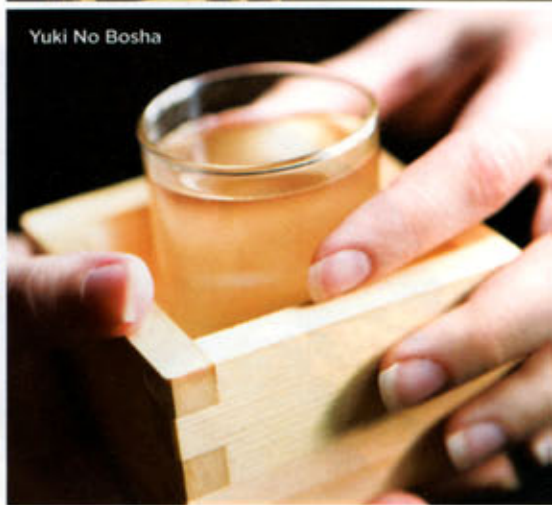
Amazing indeed. In Uchi's early days, Cole and his cohorts ignored the empty seats and kept preparing dishes that were as beautiful as they were fresh and delectable—combinations that many diners had never even thought of, let alone tasted. Word started to spread of the young chef who pushed the limits of what Japanese food could be, and the previously unchallenged staff of 18 soon had to get out of the habit of being sent home early from a slow shift.

Regardless, Cole struggled to compete with established restaurants for additional high-caliber staff to meet the increased dining demand at Uchi (which means "house" in Japanese). That changed in 2005. As did everything else.

Cole was named one of 10 "Best New Chefs" that year by *Food & Wine* magazine, a highly coveted accolade reserved for those who push culinary boundaries in America. "I knew good things were going to come from the award," Cole recalls, "and I was happy because I knew it meant that Uchi wasn't going to have to close, but I didn't realize just how much



Sea bream yubiki



Yuki No Boshu

it was going to affect the restaurant in terms of how many people were going to want to come work for me."

In fact, Cole emphatically attributes much of Uchi's recent success to his chef de cuisine, Paul Qui. "As executive chef, I oversee and approve everything, but I'm not involved in the actual preparation of the food anymore," Cole explains. "As far as the creation and the recipes go, these days it's all Paul. He comes up with everything."

Cole also gives big props to the customers who have gathered before him at the sushi bar through the years, offering feedback that helped him hone his skills. In fact, his partner, Daryl Kunik, was a customer who shared his vision for Uchi, and together, he says, "we made it happen."

And Austin is so very grateful for that. The moment you arrive at Uchi, you feel like you have been invited to a dinner party at very cool friend's very crowded house. Guests spill out of the dimly lit restaurant into the small Zen courtyard,

drinks and complimentary "tasters" in hand. When you are greeted by the gracious host team and informed of the up to two-hour wait, do not—I repeat—do not retreat back to your car to search for an alternative eatery. The wait at Uchi is all part of the experience, so sit down (if you can) at or near the bar or outside, sip something slowly and own the anticipation. There is plenty to distract you while you wait; this is a definite see-and-be-seen scene, thus there is no shortage of "beautiful people" to ogle and, occasionally, roll your eyes at.

Of course, the real fun begins when you're seated. I recommend you try... well, just about everything. Start with a couple of "tastings" selections, broken down into categories of "cool" and "hot." On the cool side, don't miss the Uchiviche, Cole's remarkable rendition of ceviche featuring beautifully sliced and stacked salmon and striped bass set against vine-ripened tomatoes, yellow bell peppers and yellow raisins, all bathed in a mixture of Thai chile peppers,

garlic, cilantro and ponzu sauce.

Other "cool" creations you can't ignore include a carpaccio made of the daily selection from the Tsukiji fish market in Japan (flown in fresh daily) with tangerine oil and san bai zu (Japanese sweet vinaigrette), as well as the maguro (raw tuna) sashimi and goat cheese with cracked pepper, Fuji apple and pumpkin seed oil. If you're feeling bold, try the indescribable Uchi Shot. Be careful, though. It contains a trio of alleged aphrodisiacs: quail egg yolk and sea urchin submerged in champagne. "It used to include an oyster as well, but we decided that was a bit too much," laughs Cole.

On the "hot" side, step away from the raw fish for a minute and try the Hot Rock, wagyu beef that you sear yourself on a scorching hot Japanese river rock before dipping in ponzu sauce. Or stick to the sea and order the scallop Hot Rock, seared the same way and served with orange oil and san bai zu.

Both raw and cooked fish dishes, as well as lamb, rabbit and foie gras, are

Hazelnut dacquoise



featured each evening. But Uchi's nightly specials represent Cole's penchant for exploration. If you like scallops and are lucky enough to dine on a night when the hotate yuzu is being offered, order it and rejoice. Be warned, however; the play of expertly seared diver scallops with the sweet of apricots and the spice of chiles might make everything you eat for the remainder of your life seem anticlimactic.

For those less excited by exploration, there are plenty of traditional, though no less fresh and delicious, options on the menu: sushi rolls, nigiri (raw fish over a delicate mound of wasabi-tinged rice), straight-up sashimi, tempura, yakimono (grilled fish, meat and/or veggies), miso soup and edamame. If you choose the roll route, try the Zero Sen, tightly wrapped yellowtail, avocado, crispy shallots, golden roe, cilantro and yuzu kosho (zest of yuzu—a Japanese citrus fruit—combined with finely chopped garlic, chile peppers and salt).

Dessert at Uchi is not an afterthought. Cole and his crew demonstrate the same sophistication with sweets as they do with the aforementioned cuisine. Dessert options

change regularly, including several creative sorbet concoctions. One that is truly different is the hazelnut dacquoise, a complex plate featuring Valrhona bitter chocolate ice cream served alongside a thin and crispy hazelnut meringue filled with a sweet and salty chocolate mousse, all sitting on a cocoa nib puree.

Or maybe skip the creative confections and sample something special in a glass. Uchi has a fine selection of dessert wines, as well as a vast array of cold sake options. For those into the latter, I recommend the Yuki No Boshu, a very accessible yet sophisticated sake highlighted by fruity blossoms and a tinge of ginger. Just don't overdo it with the alcohol. You don't want to run the risk of having ethanol erase any memories of the evening's remarkable combinations of flavor, color and texture. Not to mention the overall experience.

"To see how the restaurant has evolved since finding the space and opening the doors has been amazing," says Cole. I think I speak for the rest of Austin when I say I can't wait to see what's in store for the next five years. ●

» CRITIC'S PICKS

DRINK: Yuki No Boshu, a crowd favorite among numerous cold sake choices.

APETIZER: Uchiviche—this is *not* your Tio Ramon's ceviche.

ENTRÉE: Actually, everything at Uchi is tapas-size but if I had to choose one to super-size, it would be the hotate yuzu, spicy seared scallops, apricot, chiles and magic.

DESSERT: Hazelnut dacquoise—you might not understand it, but you'll love it.

» THE FACTS

CUISINE: Contemporary Japanese

CAPACITY: 98

AMBIANCE: Vibrantly refurbished South Austin house

DÉCOR: Top-notch—attentive and knowledgeable wait-staff; über-cool but highly approachable and friendly bartenders

SERVICE: Attentive

CHEFS: Executive Chef Tyson Cole; Chef de Cuisine Paul Qui; Executive Sous/Pastry Chef Phillip Speer; Head Sushi Chef Masazumi Salo; Sous Chef Casey Wilcox

PRICES: Tapas-sized dishes range from \$2.50 to \$26; most dishes \$15-\$22

RESERVATIONS: Limited before 7 p.m.; afterward, walk-ins only

CREDIT CARDS: All major

HOURS: Sunday through Thursday, 5:30 to 10 p.m.; Friday and Saturday, 5:30 to 11 p.m.; bar opens at 5 p.m. daily

DRESS: Trendy casual

NOISE LEVEL: Moderate to loud—lots of oohs and ahhs, even some applause

HANDICAPPED ACCESS: Yes

PARKING: Some parking in restaurant lot, plus complimentary valet parking

ADDRESS: 801 South Lamar

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