

*The Fearless Critic: Austin Restaurant Guide, 2008*

***Uchi:***

**Incredibly, the fish and fusion at the best restaurant in town are still getting better**

By Robin Goldstein

Food: 9.8/10

One late afternoon, before dinner service began, we noticed one of Uchi's sushi chefs behind the bar, hunched over a big bowl of sake-marinated ikura (salmon roe). His brow was tight with concentration as he wielded a pair of moribashi--long, slender chopsticks--to pick through the little orange spheres, one by one. Ideal ikura are so taut that they'll bounce off the floor, and this chef was discarding the deflated eggs, keeping only the bounciest. It is one of the most tedious tasks we've ever seen performed in a restaurant's kitchen--but here, it's just another of the day's chores. It is this sort of psychotic obsession with detail that sets Uchi apart. For in spite of the restaurant's increasing renown, the two-hour waits, the national-magazine kiss-ups, and Japan-trained chef Tyson Cole's rise to stardom--he recently battled the inimitable Masaharu Morimoto on Iron Chef--the kitchen is as devoted to the little things as ever. For the magic of sushi lies in a virtuous cycle of tortured minutiae, a rhythm that begins at dawn with the gleam in a fish's eye at the market, and ends with the gentle pressure of transcendent flesh--cut from an exact place at an exact angle--against rice whose sugar and vinegar are so delicately balanced that they seem to vanish and reemerge as something different, something greater. Dining in this warmly colored South Lamar house, set in suave reds and blacks, can be a high-maintenance experience. The room is ridiculously loud, your treatment at the hostess station might be brusque, and waits are often intolerably long; they're mitigated, though, by the well-polished sake bar and a lovely outdoor rock-and-flowing-water garden, in which you can sip while you wait. But these distractions melt away once you're in the hands of the knowledgeable waitstaff, whose giddy enthusiasm will guide you (and you should let them guide you) to the fish, much of which is flown in daily from Japan: sensuous toro (fatty tuna), impossibly fresh madai (Japanese black bass) and yellowtail, and sex-sweet uni (sea urchin). Uchi's fusion mains are developing more refined character every year; twice-cooked kurobuta pork belly with green apple is a profound sweet-savory mainstay, but daily specials--soft foie gras cake with comice pear, coffee, milk, and parsnip, and maple, for instance, or beautifully charred sardines with blood orange, cilantro, coriander, fennel, and Fresno peppers--are often better still. The wine program has been revamped, too, and in spite of high markups, it's now a beautifully realized list. It has been exciting, over the past couple of years, to watch this extraordinary restaurant not just maintain, but mature.