

Brett Anderson on Sushi's Great White Hope

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Look at all these different colors of the flesh!

The decision to have a meal at Uchi, the Japanese restaurant in Austin, Texas, is often arrived at skeptically, at least for diners who have never tried it.

"Why bother with raw fish in the land of enchiladas and queso?" is how the Austin-based writer Paula Disbrowe put it, echoing a sentiment so commonly expressed about the restaurant it's a wonder the business ever got off the ground, much less thrived to the point where waiting an hour for a table is basically a given, even if you go at 6:30 on an uncharacteristically cold night. "I just couldn't believe that I would experience sushi bliss in Austin," Disbrowe recalled. "It seemed more dangerous than eating at a cheap East Village sushi spot on a Sunday night."

When Liz Lambert, whose Hotel San Jose and Hotel Saint Cecilia are two of Austin's most fashionable properties, brings friends from New York or Los Angeles to Uchi, "they act like we still serve the frozen shit, or fish from the Gulf, like planes don't exist." Lynn Yeldell has had similar experiences. The film colleagues from Hollywood she brought to Uchi were reluctant diners at best—and, like seemingly everyone who visits the place, enthusiastic converts by the time they left.

Yeldell was sitting with her partner, Alisa Weldon, along the short edge of Uchi's L-shaped sushi bar, recalling past dinners while sharing a series of plates from the restaurant's daily changing list of specials. On this night, these included trapezoidal segments of aji from Tokyo's Tsukiji fish market, the largest in the world, pressed against sushi rice with black sesame and miniature crosshatches of scallion. A more elaborate production brought thin slices of raw flounder subjected to a trio of ingredients—smoked sea salt, yuzu zest, candied quinoa—applied so sparingly they barely distracted the eye from the texture of the flesh. Each bite, however, was like tasting the fish in surround sound.

Uchi's dining room could be mistaken for the living quarters of a particularly expressive member of Austin's thriving tech-entrepreneur community: hard lines and wood surfaces set against floral-print wallpaper the shade of a watermelon-persimmon smoothie.

Five chefs worked in concert behind the sushi bar most of the night, forming a kind of balletic assembly line. They passed plates between them, adding elements until the dishes were complete. Periodically, one chef appeared to intercept an order before it was handed off to a waiter. He inspected plates in the manner a nearly blind man reads a small-print dictionary, bringing his head so close it appeared his eyelashes might brush the food.

That is Tyson Cole. Given the ethnic makeup of Uchi's kitchen staff, which is predominantly Asian, and the artful, sure-handed accomplishment of the food, an unknowing customer would not likely guess

Cole to be Uchi's owner and executive chef. And it gets trickier. If, like me, you overheard him speaking fluent-sounding Japanese with his staff prior to catching a glimpse of him, you would be surprised to discover he is actually a white Sarasota, Florida, native and Texan transplant who, in his thirty-nine years, has spent a grand total of eighteen days in Japan.

In fact, the more one learns about Cole, the harder it is to fathom what is clear after repeat visits to Uchi: He has created one of the country's great Japanese restaurants in a landlocked city two time zones removed from the eastern border of the Pacific Rim. Japanese make up two-tenths of one percent of Austin's total population—the second-lowest percentage (native Hawaiian being the first) of any ethnic group tracked by the U.S. Census Bureau in Austin.

And to Cole's mind, the improbability of his restaurant's existence—never mind its success—only enhances the ineffable pleasure people take in dining there.

"People don't really know what to expect," Cole says of Uchi. "It's a sushi restaurant, a Japanese restaurant, but also an Austin restaurant. Until they get there and really see and feel it and touch it and eat it, they don't really know."

Cole's road to becoming one of Japanese cuisine's Great White Hopes began in the early '90s, on a day when his slumber was interrupted by his girlfriend's offer of a deal: Get a job or get out. He ended up washing dishes at an Austin sushi restaurant called Kyoto, and his introduction to the house fare wasn't exactly Proustian.

"I thought it was fucking disgusting. I hated it," Cole recalled over a lunch of empanadas and chimichurri at an Argentine café in Austin. "I'm American. I grew up with mac and cheese."

If Cole is a sympathetic observer of the skepticism-erasing phenomenon that is Uchi, it could have something to do with the fact that his own indoctrination did not reveal him to be a quick study. In his first couple of years at Kyoto, he rose from dishwasher to daytime and then nighttime waiter—and barely touched the food. For a while, he worked with a fellow non-Asian waiter who spoke Japanese. "I just thought it was stupid," he says. "I was like, 'Stop trying to fake it. You're not fucking Japanese.'"

In conversation, Cole, who is slight and goateed, betrays the saddle-leather temperament of a steak-and-potatoes Texan—which is how he described his father—but prolonged exposure to the alternative culture inside Kyoto clearly awakened something else within him. His cynicism was initially punctured by his Japanese coworkers, with whom he found himself spending most of his free time, usually drinking beer and watching Japanese cooking shows.

"Being surrounded by those types of people, and the way that they lived and the way that they did things, I had never experienced anything like that," he explains. "Everything was so black-and-white, proper and structured, beyond all of the bullshit minutiae you have to deal with in America. It wasn't like taking a trip to Japan and being like what's-his-name in Shogun. It was more like, *Here I am in this restaurant working with Japanese people and having to conform to their ways—and liking it.* It was about the people, a lot of it. But then the food kind of passed it."

Cole's friends ultimately got him hooked on sushi's gateway drugs. "Like any other American, I'd only eat the rolls," he says. This led to a period of tuna addiction—"I ate a lot of tekkamaki"—which piqued his curiosity enough to forgo the rice and explore sashimi. The burning-bush meal came later when, at the age of twenty-two, one of Cole's Japanese chef friends took him to Nippon, a sushi place in Houston, where he ate raw flounder with ponzu sauce.



"It was momentous, mentally," he recalls. "It didn't taste like fish. It tasted like something I'd never had."

Looking back on it, Cole realizes he was particularly taken by the ponzu's vinegar and citrus, but before he would go on to understand those elements well enough to deconstruct them in his food at Uchi, he would need to talk his way into the kitchen. Informing his Kyoto colleagues of his desire to make sushi wasn't enough.

"You're white. You can't make sushi," is how Cole recalled the response. "So I was like, 'Okay. Fuck you. I quit.'"

Thus began a wave of firings and re-hirings—he was once dismissed for giving free dessert to Denzel Washington—that textured Cole's decade-long rise from apprentice to sushi savant. He began in the kitchen, making rice and rolls outside public view. When he finally got behind the sushi line, he says, diners would occasionally "refuse for me to make their sushi because I wasn't Asian or Japanese."

Cole's whiteness remained a barrier for entry to new jobs and a source of customer suspicion. Even after having taught himself to speak serviceable Japanese, he says, he was turned down for a job at Musashino, which he'd identified as Austin's top sushi restaurant, by its chef-owner Takehiko Fuse. It was 1995, and Cole remembers being told speaking Japanese wasn't enough. He needed to know how to read and write it as well.

Fuse eventually relented and hired Cole, whose skills sharpened dramatically in his six years at Musashino. While he was surrounded by more talented colleagues, Cole says, few of them were as interested as he was in turning the job into a career. "Someone from Japan that would want to live in Texas? Most of them were musicians," he explains. "They didn't want to be chefs per se. But I wanted to be as good as I possibly could. I was always the first one there, the last one to leave."

During the end of Cole's tenure at Musashino, Fuse took him on a trip to Japan, but Cole's closest exposure with the Japanese kitchen's rigid discipline came inside the restaurant that still sits in an unmarked space below a Chinese buffet off a stretch of Austin highway. He rose to become Musashino's top lieutenant, which is when, as he puts it, "I really started developing my own style."

Certain customers learned to visit Musashino on nights they knew Cole to be on duty. "They wanted to be challenged," he says, "and they wanted to learn about [Japanese food] as much as I did." To keep up with demand, Cole shopped for ingredients that would never meet the approval of the ultra-traditional Fuse. He combined bluefin tuna sashimi with goat cheese and Fuji apples, now a signature dish on Uchi's menu.

"I was being forced to be creative," Cole says. "I wanted more colors. I wanted more toys. I wanted more things to add."

Uchi's late-afternoon, predinner staff meeting is held along a string of pushed-together tables in the restaurant's dining room. Relative to the controlled chaos of dinner service, the room is startlingly quiet as chefs bring out dishes to the floor staff for explanation and tasting. The ensuing conversation at times takes on the tone of upper-level grad students pondering Jane Austen.

A waitress broke the silence after a plate of Wagyu beef short ribs took center stage. "I thought there was going to be more lemon," she said.

"I don't get the salt at all," offered a colleague.

While the beef was marinated in a mixture that included sake kasu—the yeast deposits left behind after sake ferments—the dish is what Cole calls an "Uchi-fication" of a Thai staple, created in collaboration with his Thailand-born chefs. The dish was slightly modified from the night prior, when the beef came sliced thin through the bone; grilled medium rare but still, considering the cut, remarkably tender; resonant of citrus but also sansho, a Japanese cousin of the Szechuan pepper; and with an invisible dusting of toasted rice, which electrified certain bites with a crackly texture while reining in some of the beef's fat-marbled richness.

"We really make a point to bring everyone's experiences and skills into the picture," Cole says, referring to the short ribs. "I'm the one who edits it."

Masa Saio, Uchi's head sushi chef, brought out a plate of hiramasa—you may know it as amberjack—sashimi, one of the evening's three featured raw fish from Tsukiji. Saio, who is Japanese, has been at the restaurant since the day it opened in 2003, when Cole made a point to have plenty of Asian chefs on his staff, in part for appearances' sake. "It needed to look authentic," he explains.

Cole conferred with Saio in Japanese as his staff plucked at the hiramasa with chopsticks. He then turned his attention to Paul Qui, the restaurant's Filipino chef de cuisine, who will move over to Cole's new restaurant, Uchiko, when it opens in the summer. Unlike the flagship, Uchiko will accept reservations but otherwise conform to Cole's prevailing sensibility.

Which is what, exactly? Even before he'd ever tasted Japanese food, the one-time painter remembers being visually mesmerized by it: "Look at all those different colors of the flesh!" Today, Cole can speak at length about the femininity of Japanese—and, by extension, his—cooking, a characteristic that makes his food the antonym of the barbecue and Tex-Mex for which Austin is justifiably famous. Before he settled on Uchi, the chef spent hours writing names on paper, hoping to hit on a visually sensual grouping of letters.

"I kept coming back to s's and u's and o's, because of the curves," he says. "I thought they were really feminine."

Uchi is also Japanese for "house," and to Cole one of the main attractions of the restaurant's space is that it used to be one. "It doesn't feel too Japanese," he says. "I didn't want it to be clichéd. We wanted it to be an Austin restaurant, and Austin is accessible. You can go into any restaurant any time, day or night, in shorts, sandals, T-shirt, whatever."

A few hours after the staff meeting, diners waiting for a table spilled out Uchi's front door. Cole says veterans of the long table waits have developed a drinking game involving the animals lurking in the branches of the wallpaper.

Earlier in the day, the kitchen received a shipment of Australian finger limes. "The pulp is like caviar," says Yoshi Okai, one of Uchi's sushi chefs, and he's right, provided you can imagine caviar discharging a piercingly tart fruit juice when it explodes in your mouth. During dinner, he gently placed a small mound of the pale-green orbs on the surface of pieces of John Dory nigiri. The only other ingredient was a tuft of peppery radish sprouts, which Okai cut from a miniature potted garden of herbs and microgreens with his swordlike sushi knife. The accent ingredients' sour-vegetal bite focused the fish's sweetness like a white screen does the contours of a shadow.

A similar play of flavors unfolded more expansively in a dish based on a South American technique for making ceviche. Slices of yellowtail tuna belly sat at the edge of a pool of a gazpacho-like sauce made of cucumber, jalapeños, citrus, and juiced fennel bulb. A thick line of wasabi was embedded with golden brook-trout roe, the only non-green element save for the fish, which was dabbed with a paste of garlic, salt, lime zest, and Thai chilies Cole calls "Uchi chimichurri."

Each bite seemed to reveal an ingredient that altered the dish's direction. In the end, it tasted like justification for bringing yellowtail ashore.

"You can say, 'Oh, that dish isn't Japanese,'" Cole would explain later. "But the thinking behind it and the aesthetic of it is Japanese. The presentation is Japanese. And some of the flavor profiles remind you of Japanese food. That's my responsibility"

Photograph by Barry Stone. Tyson Cole (Executive Chef and Owner) at Uchi, February 2010.

Issue: [Southern Food 2010 \(articles/issues/8/\)](#)

Section: [Features \(/articles/sections/features/\)](/articles/sections/features/)

