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Uchi: Turning sushi into art

By GREG MORAGO Copyright 2011 Houston Chronicle

Feb. 15, 2011, 4:33PM



MARK MIKS

The Pitchfork Roll is a signature dish at Uchi.

Before eating at Uchi I'm advised to expect the unexpected. And so it goes, from the décor to the service to the food (that is at once slightly familiar yet wholly unusual), Uchi upends all preconceptions of sushi and Japanese restaurant dining.

An example of Uchi turning sushi on its head dances in our mouths: cured maplewood-smoked yellowtail combined with crisp Asian pear, fried yucca chips, rich Marcona almonds, yellow raisins and candied garlic. The umami is out in full force in dish after dish as notions of traditional sushi are swept away like a rice paper house in a Hokkaido gust.

Uchi delights in the unexpected. It's precisely what chef Tyson Cole wanted from the first day in May 2003 when he opened the unconventional sushi restaurant in a small bungalow (*Uchi* means house) that was the site of a French restaurant. He wanted to surprise diners with his deliciously idiosyncratic immersion in Japanese food and culture.

Those surprises — a daily volley of culinary wows that spell nightly two-hour waits for a table - resulted in Cole's being named one of Food & Wine's top 10 chefs in America and brought national attention to the tiny restaurant deep in the heart of Texas.

And now a new surprise (and one that will thrill foodies far beyond Austin city limits): a cookbook.

Uchi: The Cookbook, authored by Cole and food and travel writer Jessica Dupuy, is, like the restaurant, a visual extravaganza invested with the unique Uchi aesthetic. Dupuy has helped Cole tell his story in his own voice. And as a chef's tale, it's a doozy: an aimless Austin slacker, told by his girlfriend to get a job or move out, applies to a variety of jobs and takes the first one that calls back - dishwasher at a local Japanese restaurant. With no restaurant experience, that eager dishwasher moves to cook to waiter and eventually to sushi chef. A jump to a better sushi restaurant results in greater technical expertise and eventually a full immersion in Japanese culture and language. As the Anglo English-speaker behind the sushi bar, Cole is an oddity but also a welcome presence for customers who could finally converse with the person creating their sushi. He develops a loyal following which leads to an offer to open his own restaurant to do sushi his own way. Uchi is born, and it doesn't take long for the Uchi legend to grow. Uchi leads to a sister restaurant, Uchiko, which opens in 2010 and promptly is listed by GQ magazine as one of the

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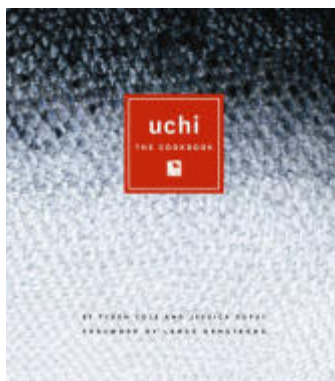
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SUSHI 101

Tyson Cole said that the average person doesn't know what to do with Japanese cuisine, especially sushi. The accepted practices of a typical sushi house don't fly at Uchi. Cole felt compelled to list his concerns and peeves in *Uchi: The Cookbook*:

- **Soy Sauce:** Don't put sushi in soy sauce. If you even use soy sauce, you should wipe only a small amount of it on the fish, not the rice. Try to use as little as possible.
- **Wasabi:** You're not supposed to make a paste with wasabi and soy. Wasabi knocks out the flavor of the fish.
- **Pickled ginger:** It's a palate cleanser, not meant to eat with your sushi. Do not eat it with fish.
- **Ordering:** Don't order your sushi all at once. Sushi is meant to eat in one bite and at the time it is made. You don't want sushi sitting for long on your plate (which makes the big boats of sushi a bad idea).
- **Chopsticks:** You don't need them as much as you think you do. Sushi originally was intended to eat with hands. Chopsticks are for sashimi.
- **One bite:** Nigiri (sushi rice with a slice of fish on top) is supposed to be a single bite. If you have to bite it in two then your nigiri is too big. If it does require two bites, do not set the second bite down on the plate.
- **Avoid spicy tuna roll:** It's a way for American sushi chefs to get rid of their older tuna.
- **Sushi rice:** It's supposed to be warm and soft. It's not supposed to be sticky, hard or crunchy.

10 best restaurants in the country. Earlier this month, Texas Monthly's Pat Sharpe names Uchiko it the best new restaurant in the state.

That's quite an accomplishment for the guy who started out scrubbing wasabi paste and yakitori glaze off plates.

As Cole continues to put out what many consider the most astonishing food in Texas, he's refining plans for an Uchi in Houston which is scheduled to go in the former Felix space on lower Westheimer this summer. Houston foodies already are salivating over the idea of a local Uchi, which Cole said is going to follow the Uchi model but incorporate elements of both Uchi and Uchiko.

Until then, they'll have to settle for trips to Austin (not unusual, Cole says, as Uchi usually has three or four tables a night of drive-in Houston diners). Or, they could try their hand at one of the recipes in the cookbook which, on the face of it, seems more like an aspirational exercise.

But while Cole concedes that Uchi's dishes are complex, he said some of the cookbook's recipes are easy to do. The secret is not in pristine seafood (although that is an essential given); it's in Uchi's vast array of components that marry with seafood.

Called *yakumi* (which means "to accentuate" or "to stress") the library of components outlined in the book work as flavor accessories to fish and shellfish. The components included in the recipes are candied bacon, cashew beer butter, compressed watermelon, cauliflower puree, fried egg puree, candied garlic, tomato water, kumquat confit, nectarine butter, miso sauce, Meyer lemon and thyme vinaigrette, kimchee emulsion, pear mostarda, shiitake "bacon," uni butter and yuzu paste. Tumbled with the best fish, these yakumi components are what provide the intense color of the Uchi canvas. In Cole's hands, Uchi sushi is extraordinarily clean, light, delicate - even feminine.

"My food is inherently feminine because Japanese food is so light in nature and so focused on the integrity of ingredients. It's not overwrought. It's almost like a ballet of sorts to me," he said. "The process is very feminine. It's alluring. It's such an organic way of eating - it's bite by bite."

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Cole readily admits he's a perfectionist. Always has been. He was the kid with the obsessively organized Lego set. But it's that sweating-the-details self scrutiny which makes him an ideal sushi chef, he says. "The work ethic is the most important part of it to me - it's the drive and desire to do things perfectly," he said. "It's being at that level of being so in love with the idea of what you're doing that is a big part of a good sushi chef. I realized really quick I was made to do this."

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TUNA AND GOAT CHEESE SASHIMI

Courtesy *Uchi: The Cookbook*

¼ large Fuji apple, skin on

3 ounces big eye tuna



REBECCA FONDREN

Tuna and Goat Cheese Sashimi

1 ounce san bai zu (recipe follows)
 Kosher salt and fresh cracked black pepper to taste
 1½ ounces soft chevre goat cheese
 2 teaspoons pumpkin seed oil
 1 ounce red shiso micro greens

Slice Fuji apple into 8 thin wedges. Slice tuna into bite-size pieces and mix with apple in a chilled stainless steel bowl with cold san bai zu, salt and pepper.

Plate seasoned and dressed tuna and apples on a chilled plate or in a chilled bowl and sprinkle with goat cheese.

Add pumpkin seed oil to plate and garnish with micro red shiso.

Finish with another pinch of kosher salt to taste.

SAN BAI ZU

2 ounces water
 ¼ ounce sugar
 1 pinch hon dashi (Japanese fish soup stock that can be found at most Asian food markets)
 ¼ ounce soy sauce
 2¼ ounces rice wine vinegar

Heat water and sugar to just below boiling point and then remove from heat.

Add hon dashi and mix well to dissolve. Next, add soy and rice wine vinegar. Mix well and refrigerate for later use.

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