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# DINING

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## Hana shines, Sushi Ken so-so

**Howard Seftel**  
Republic dining critic  
Dec. 11, 2007 11:49 AM

To the best of my knowledge, the Valley's first restaurant guide came out in 1977: *100 Best Restaurants* by John and Joan Bogert.

Three of the hundred were Japanese. Geographically challenged locals learned that their dishes would be "presented and served in the Oriental manner."

But only one of these restaurants - Sukiyaki, on Indian School Road - dared to offer sushi. Apparently, this exotic import was so unfamiliar in this meat-and-potatoes town that the Bogerts needed to explain that it was "raw fish and rice."



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Sukiyaki wasn't exactly a stickler for "Oriental" authenticity. First of all, there was no sushi bar seating, only tables. Second, you could eat your sushi with a fork. And third, acknowledging customers' "cautious American palates," the menu furnished default options like "Happy hamburger" and "Imperial steak."

A lot has happened in 30 years. In 2007, sushi is as American as bagels, tacos and apple pie. Sushi restaurants have spread to every corner of the Valley. Even your white-bread neighborhood supermarket carries it. These days, we not only know that sushi is rice and raw fish, we also know that unagi is eel, toro is tuna and tako is octopus without looking at the menu translation.

Popularity has come at a price. The modern sushi restaurant has been evolving, or more precisely, devolving, into a giddy entertainment center. Instead of raw fish and rice, the focus is on thumping music, sake bombing and "sushi" put together with ingredients such as goat cheese, pine nuts and sundried tomatoes. It's almost enough to make you yearn for a Happy hamburger.

So I went searching for the real thing at Hana and Sushi Ken, two promisingly untrendy Japanese restaurants that opened earlier this year in out-of-the-way neighborhoods. I planted myself at the sushi bar and waved away the menu. No tempura. No noodles. No teriyaki. No katsu. Just man and raw fish with rice.

### Hana Japanese Eatery

Last summer, soon after it opened, I stopped in at Hana for a light lunch. The place was obviously still working out the kinks - the air-conditioning was fighting a losing battle against the 112-degree heat, and the discombobulated staff handled its duties with less than Prussian efficiency. But lunch was wonderful: a salad of tuna, salmon, octopus and whitefish on fresh greens snappily dressed with sesame

oil, soy and lemon; and two kinds of sushi, striped bass and toro, sliced fresh off a massive whole tuna. "I've got to come back here," I thought.

Now that I've come back, I don't want to leave. No question, Hana is among the premier sushi parlors in town.

The credit goes to proprietors Kazuto Kishino and hard-working sushi master Koji Hashimoto. The fish couldn't look more dazzling - along with shimmering whole tuna, I also saw whole halibut and striped bass. Everything tastes remarkably fresh, clean and briny sweet.

Had I not been professionally obligated to make my way through the sushi list, I might have just had Koji-san carve up the striped bass (\$5) and halibut (\$5) right to the bones. The halibut was lusciously delicate, while the striped bass got a brilliant boost from a bit of lemon and chile.

But I could understand how other diners might want to focus on sushi such as the buttery scallops (\$5), the tender octopus (\$5), the handsome snow crab (\$5), the crunchy smelt roe (\$4.50) and gorgeous uni (sea urchin, market price). The only sushi that seemed comparatively ordinary was a daily-special kampachi (\$8), a farmed relative of yellowtail that didn't have as much taste or texture going for it as the other offerings.

But geoduck fans (pronounced "gooey-duck") will want to know when Hana gets a shipment of this giant clam. The meat is a little bit crunchy, a little bit chewy and ocean sweet. It's not cheap, but you get an honest sashimi bang for your 16 bucks.

Makizushi (seaweed-wrapped rolls) were not part of my original sushi plan, but the Hana roll (\$11) made me glad I had flexible principles. It's superb, filled with crab, pickled lotus root and shrimp that tasted like shrimp.

Too bad Hana doesn't serve fresh wasabi - fish this good deserves better than the usual green horseradish gunk. But if he sees you're serious, Koji-san may quietly break out a packet of home-country wasabi mix.

Neat and tidy, Hana doesn't have much atmosphere, unless you consider a television tuned to the Food Network atmosphere. It doesn't have a beer license, either (although you can BYOB). But who can argue with the decision to plough capital into fish rather than décor and alcohol? The sushi here creates all the atmosphere sushi lovers need.

### Sushi Ken

Attention, Japanese restaurant owners! Wondering where to locate your business? Think Ahwatukee - people here are starving for Japanese food.

How else can you explain the crowds at Sushi Ken? At 8:45 on a recent midweek night, customers were still lined up at the entrance, waiting for a table.

It's a telling point. That's because while the tables were full - Sushi Ken has an extensive non-sushi menu - there were plenty of spots at the sushi bar.

The restaurant is run by the former proprietors of popular Sushi Ten in Tucson. It's a big, boxy place that would be charmless if not for the table buzz from the mostly Asian clientele. The best touch: the clock over the sushi bar, whose hands point to sushi instead of numbers.

The sushi here is entirely satisfactory but falls short of memorable. Take the specials: one evening's toro (\$8.50), good, but not as compellingly rich as it could be; and halibut (\$5.50), striped bass (\$4.50) and geoduck (\$7.50), also good, but lacking the bracing briny accents that distinguished these species at Hana. Only the uni (\$6.50) tasted as if it had just been hauled out of the sea.

Two sushi-list options stand out: mackerel (\$4) and scallop (\$4), set apart by their silky textures. Otherwise, most everything here tastes pretty much like it does at every other decent Valley sushi spot: sweet shrimp (\$6), snow crab (\$5.50), salmon roe (\$4) and octopus (\$3.50). Meanwhile, a low-impact eel sauce turns unagi (\$5) into a bit of a disappointment.

I strayed from the raw-fish-with-rice theme with the deka deluxe roll (\$15), which sounded way more intriguing than the 34 other usual-suspects rolls. Wrapped in soy paper, the ingredients ranged through spicy tuna, snow crab, unagi, soft shell crab, avocado, cucumber and shrimp tempura, including two deep-fried shrimp heads. Somehow, though, the parts never quite meshed into a mesmerizing whole.

The sushi at Sushi Ken won't knock anybody out. Instead, it hits you with a series of solid jabs. It's certainly OK. But next time I come back I'll see what the people at the tables are ordering.

Reach Seftel at [howard.seftel@arizonarepublic.com](mailto:howard.seftel@arizonarepublic.com), or 602-444-8533.



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### Hana Japanese Eatery

**When:** Lunch, 11 a.m. to 2:30 p.m., Tuesday through Friday; Dinner, 5 to 9 p.m., Tuesday through Thursday, Sunday, 5 to 10 p.m., Friday and Saturday.

**Where:** 5524 N. Seventh Ave., Phoenix.

**Phone:** 602-973-1238

**Rating:** \*\*\*\*

**Price:** \$\$

### Sushi Ken

**When:** Lunch, 11 a.m. to 2:30 p.m., Tuesday through Sunday; Dinner, 5 to 10 p.m., Tuesday through Sunday.

**Where:** 4206 E. Chandler Blvd., Phoenix.

**Phone:** 480-706-7060

**Rating:** \*\*\*

**Price:** \$\$

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