# Kushi-Ya, Nottingham: ‘A blissfully good place’ – restaurant review

Tucked away up in the rafters, this hidden gem in Nottingham reaches dizzying heights with its joyous Japanese food

[**Kushi-Ya**](https://kushi-ya.co.uk/)**, 1A Cannon Court, Long Row W, Nottingham NG1 6JE. No lunchtime bookings. Snacks £3.50, plates and skewers £5.50-£14, desserts £5-£7, wines from £24**

It would be easy, for which read lazy, to describe Nottingham’s Kushi-Ya as a hidden gem. Granted, it’s very much tucked away. The first time I visited the site was virtually, courtesy of Google Street View. I clicked my way across a main road, past outposts of Maryland Chicken and Mega Munch, and found myself studying the digital vista of a hard-scrabble urban alleyway; the sort that might play host to fumbling couples who can’t quite wait to get indoors after the pubs kick out.

But hidden gems need to be found. The fact that a London-based restaurant reviewer like me hasn’t previously found their way to this blissfully good place celebrating the flavours and methods of Japan’s izakayas doesn’t mean it’s begging to be discovered. Early on a weekday lunchtime it fills quickly with locals who obviously know it’s there. As I ate my way from one totally banging, beautifully conceived, perfectly priced dish to another, two thoughts occurred to me. The first was that I really must thank my Nottingham-based friend, the terrifically witty and clever novelist [Mhairi McFarlane](https://www.theguardian.com/profile/mhairimcfarlane), for the recommendation. (Consider yourself thanked, Mhairi). The second thought was: why, bar a small mention in Olive magazine, had I found nothing else about it in the national press since it opened in 2018?

It started, as so many great food ventures do these days, with a supper club. This one was run by Simon Carlin, then the head chef of Nottingham’s Iberico World Tapas, and Tom Clay from The Railway, a pub at Lowdham, a few miles east of the city. Tickets would sell out quickly. Eventually, they took over this upper-floor space, in the rafters of a listed building, formerly the home of a vegetarian café. (It’s reached by a steep staircase and because the building is listed there is no lift, so it’s not wheelchair accessible.)

There is a little vertical blond-wood panelling and a flash of blue tiling on the side of the bar where there is a counter with extra seats. A couple of mildly austere Japanese jackets are hung on the walls as decoration. Otherwise, it is a clean white space of bare-wood tables, beneath the vaulting beamed roof space. There’s an open kitchen on a raised level, occupied by intense young British men with matching beards.

What comes out of there is a deft collection of wonders. The menu is divided between snacks, small plates and skewers, supplemented by a couple of specials. Most of it is priced at around £6 or £7 a plate, with just one dish reaching the dizzy heights of £14. We’ll get to it. We start with their sweet, sour and crunchy pickled daikon, baby turnips and cucumber. So far so jolly. But now comes the first sign that something intriguing is going on here. Their prawn toast is a sweet inversion. The golden fried bread is the casing for a thick spring roll enclosing a tight bundle of squeakily fresh prawns. There’s a squiggle of umami-rich Japanese mayonnaise and, across that, a generous sprinkle of furikake seasoning, that potent flavour bomb of nori, sesame and bonito. It’s both delicious and funny.

Next come tempura shishito peppers in a lacy batter overcoat, like padrón peppers that have been taught the dance of the seven veils, with a soy-based dipping sauce. From the specials, for a mighty £8.50 we get a beautiful piece of Japanese ceramics filled with sautéed wild mushrooms in a nutty brown butter ponzu sauce. There is a confit egg yolk, the colour of the setting sun, to be mixed in with the mushrooms, and across that handfuls of cress for a micro hit of pepperiness. Now I am in love.

The skewers menu is just as much fun. New potatoes are barbecued until smoky and bursting from their skins, then drenched in a creamy dressing flecked with the green of dried seaweed. They call it a nori ranch. But why stop there? For here come fat dribbles of their thick chilli oil full of toasty notes and power. It is potatoes shown an awful lot of love and affection. Follow that from the specials with thickly glazed duck hearts grilled so they still have bite, then dotted with yellow splodges of nose-tickling mustard. Or have the chicken tsukune, the meat minced and seasoned, and formed on the skewers as pointed ovals, before being grilled and glazed, with another of their egg yolks. Perhaps you want something a little brighter alongside all these dark, caramel and soy glazes? Perhaps you need a slight breather. Welcome to the table, then, a bowl of greens, steamed just so, in a yuzu and ginger dressing engineered to give you a gentle back rub.

Right. Back in we go. Their contribution to the cult of the sando, which is to say outrageous things between thick crustless slabs of the best white bread, plays as a joyous riff on the prawn cocktail. Chopped prawns are formed into a thick patty that has been breaded and fried. That’s slammed into the bread and smeared thickly with a gochujang-boosted marie rose sauce. Yes, of course, there’s shredded lettuce. As well as being delicious, it’s a textural thrill.

Finally, before (almost) admitting defeat, we have a serious hunk of pork shoulder, slow braised and then caramelised in sweet soy. The thickly glazed meat pulls apart. It comes with a ginger and spring onion relish, a bowl of golden tempura scraps and a tiny squeezy bottle of sweet sauce, alongside crisp lettuce leaves to be used as wraps, much like a Korean ssambap. It’s both clever and a huge amount of serious entertainment for £14. The dessert list includes a Tira-miso, a Japanese take on the Italian classic. We have the hyper-sweet frozen black sugar parfait with a thick, golden sesame crisp.

Soften that sugar rush with a sake, or a yuzu margarita or try one of their Japanese whiskies. The beer list goes beyond the usual offering of Asahi. At some point, probably when I was wrapping one of those darling pieces of melting pork shoulder in lettuce, I muttered under my breath that Kushi-Ya was my restaurant of the year. A few days on, and I hold to that. Maybe something will come along in the next couple of months to prove me wrong, but in terms of wit, skill, deliciousness, price and just all-round utter joy I can’t imagine that happening. It isn’t a hidden gem. I just didn’t happen to know it was there. I’m glad I do now.