**Review: Raku** (11/19/2023) – 4 minute read

With a stark contrast to its simple and unassuming exterior, Raku serves dishes that explode and burst with flavour. This duality, along with the modern and minimalistic interior, created a satisfying and mellow experience. On Saturday, November 18th, I made my way to downtown Toronto, through the TTC and crackhead-filled streets, to visit Raku, a restaurant serving authentic Japanese udon. As two, we ordered four dishes: Ebiten Udon, Kamonan Udon, Vegetable Gyozas, and Yaki Nasu. 2006

We started with two appetizers, the Yaki Nasu and the Gyozas. Above is the Yaki Nasu, a deep-fried eggplant topped with spicy miso pork and a quail egg. The eggplant itself was larger than expected and was given to us in one big piece, around the size of my palm. Although I wouldn’t say I like eggplant that much, this dish had strong and definite flavours. The pork was plentiful and flavourful, with hints of miso throughout. That, in combination with the smooth and silky texture of the eggplant, made each bite appetizing. This dish gets a FREATS rating of 8/10, which is honestly really good considering that I’ve never really enjoyed eggplant. I’m sure if you like eggplant, this dish would be rated much higher. 2006

Those are the vegetable gyozas, which I’m pretty sure contained cabbage, leek, shiitake mushrooms, and a few other ingredients. Paired with a sauce made from soy sauce, sesame oil, and other aromatics, these gyoza were excellent. The filling had a distinct umami taste, and all the flavours of the vegetables worked exceptionally well with each other. The sauce, while simple, elevated the dish with a mildly sweet flavour. The gyoza themselves had a nice crust on the bottom and a soft top to encase the precious filling inside. However, I think the top could’ve been firmer as it felt a little mushy or squishy to touch and feel. All in all, this dish receives a FREATS rating of 8.4/10. 2006

All of Raku’s udon comes in a fish-based broth made from dried kelp and several different types of smoked fish, such as round herring, sardine, and mackerel. Additionally, they come with a plentiful helping of green onion, which adds a fresh aspect to their bowls. 2006

The udon was the star of the show, without a doubt. I ordered the Kamonan Udon, which came with duck breast and Tokyo negi onions, which look like green onions on steroids. As is often the problem with fish broths, they simply taste too “fishy,” and that taste overpowers the rest of the dish. However, Raku does an impressive job refining and processing those flavours to create a wonderful broth that is light yet intense at the same time. Their udon was thick and chewy, and I’ve come to learn that they’re made from wheat and are actually shipped straight from Japan. These noodles maintained their chew while absorbing flavours from the soup and were so fun to slurp up. I thought they would be firmer on the outside, as they were a bit more slippery than I expected. The duck breast was cooked well; however, it didn’t shine by itself as the flavours within the broth overshadowed it. The Tokyo negi onions were crisp, succulent, and with the green onions, provided a freshness necessary to the broth. This udon was exceptional and acquires a FREATS rating of 9.2/10. 2006

Although I didn’t take a picture of the interior, I feel I have to comment on it (I got the photo from Google). With a subdued, woodsy interior, it radiates peace and calmness. There aren’t any windows; however, the overhead lighting provides a warm and welcoming ambience even without natural lighting. The service was spectacular, as is in most Japanese restaurants, and the servers were attentive, friendly, and accommodating – constantly filling up water without me asking. The only thing to keep in mind is that Raku often has a long wait time, so be sure to come earlier than expected. We arrived at around 2:30 and were seated at 3:00, which was swift compared to the last time we tried to go during dinner, where we were told the wait time was 2 hours. Overall, the environment gets a FREATS rating of 9.2/10. 2006

With a FREATS rating of 8.7/10, Raku is a spot that I recommend to everyone. Their portion sizes are decently large, the food comes quickly, and the atmosphere provides a sanctuary in the unexpected spot of Queen Street West and Spadina. If you’re ever downtown and craving some noodles that aren’t ramen, walk over to Raku’s accessible location at 456 Queen Street West and indulge in some traditional Japanese dishes. You can check out their menu beforehand on their website in case you’re indecisive, as they do have a lot of options apart from their hot udon as well. 2006

Thanks so much for reading, and I hope you guys visit Raku one day to enjoy their food! 2006