

**Title:**

WaSa's fresh take on sushi

**Word Count:**

803

**Summary:**

The restaurant brings 'new generation' flavors to Irvine, Newport Beach

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Dining, Restaurant, Irvine, Newport Beach, Orange County

**Article Body:**

It's 7:30 on a Tuesday night, and 20 people are waiting to get into WaSa Sushi and Japanese Restaurant.

Good sign.

They're chatting happily outside in the winter chill of a shopping center parking lot in Irvine, Orange County, Calif. No grouching about the wait, just lots of chatter about the dining experience that awaits.

Another good sign.

Businessman Bronnie Lee and chef James Hamamori have a hit with their 'new generation' sushi houses in Irvine and Newport Beach. They're places that stand out in Orange County's crowded sushi world. (The pair are also behind restaurants with the WaSa name in Rancho Santa Margarita and Laguna Niguel).

For fans, it's the novelty of what Hamamori's doing with sushi and other Japanese fare that defines the appeal. And for some detractors who sampled the food with me, it's the novelty of what he's doing with sushi and other Japanese fare.

That novelty comes to life with the 'WaSa Treasures,' a list of 16 plates that take two-piece sushi servings and fuse them with sharp, saucy flavors. That is melded with a tradition-stocked sushi bar and a host of intriguing cold and hot appetizers and dinner entrees.

That Tuesday night, I grabbed four of the treasures at carry-out and hustled them home. I loved all four -- ahi tuna in wasabi sour cream, smoked salmon with

ginger sauce, seared yellowtail with jalapeño and seared jumbo scallop with tangy miso. The sauces were light, just touching on the essence of the raw fish, a zesty punch to my palate. I never even opened my little take-out portion of wasabi and soy sauce.

My wife, who is no fan of sauces on any food, turned thumbs down. She just objected to the sauces, on principle.

The same thing happened when I took three colleagues to lunch two weeks later. One is a relative sushi newcomer, one an aficionado, the third a devotee. I'm somewhere in the middle of that spectrum.

We sat at the bamboo sushi bar and settled into the cool room, which is painted in pastels and decorated in a hip, West L.A. style.

``Nice room,'' said the aficionado, who is a designer. When our first course arrived, she hummed ``nice presentation,'' in approval.

``Wow,'' the newcomer said, after biting into the seared yellowtail with jalapeño. The other two nodded in agreement, their mouths full. More full-mouthed murmurs of approval for the ahi tuna with wasabi sour cream.

``This is fantastic, a great place for people who are a little unsure of sushi,'' the newcomer gushed.

And that set the devotee on a mission to see if the traditional sushi menu could stand up to her exacting standards.

She tried the salmon skin roll (baked salmon skin, cucumber, radish, bonito flakes, \$3.75), pronouncing it ``not bad'' while the others bit in and exclaimed, ``Oh, yeah!''

The lobster roll (steamed lobster, smelt egg, avocado, asparagus and mayo wrapped in soy paper) was too bland for her taste.

We took a side trip to the spicy tuna tartar when we spied a waitress carrying an order to another table.

The mound of raw tuna is piled into a tower, topped with avocado and a spicy sauce, all set on a banana leaf.

It was gorgeous, and we admired it on the plate for a full beat before we dove in.

``I'm not sharing this,' ' the newcomer blurted out, though he had no choice. The aficionado and the devotee agreed: It was the best.

After a few more exotic wanderings, the devotee wrapped up with kaki -- an oyster shooter -- and said that it, too, was not bad -- a compliment.

We all agreed that WaSa was a lively, fun place and that the sushi and other offerings ranged from interesting at worst to fantastic at best.

That's what Lee was shooting for when he opened the first WaSa in the Irvine Market Place shopping center in 2001. He'd spent more than a decade as an accountant. But he also put himself through California State University, Long Beach, working in his cousin's restaurant. Then, he spent two years moonlighting as a minimum-wage sushi apprentice, including time working for Hamamori at O Sushi in Brea.

Hamamori worked his way up and through the Los Angeles sushi scene before Lee lured him to Irvine, then Newport Beach.

``There was just nothing like what we do going on in Orange County,' ' said Lee, an Irvine resident. ``We brought the West L.A. style to O.C. -- the sauces, the presentation, the whole visual side.'

After opening a small, traditional-sized sushi bar in Irvine, they added a tonier take in the Newport Bluffs shopping center in 2003. More upscale presentation, and prices.

But it's the sauces and the style that they're most proud of.

``We're adding another layer of flavor,' ' Lee said.

It's just what WaSa's fans love.