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RESTAURANT REVIEW

Geisha mixes beauty, Le Bernardin

Lively throngs catch buzz surrounding newcomer's cocktail lounge, mod Asian

BY BOB LAPE

COLORFUL, SHARP-EDGED Japanese anime projected on a dining room wall at Geisha has nothing on the crowd that jams this white-hot newcomer seven nights a week. Its name suggests serene seduction, but Geisha has more buzz than a hive of wet hornets.

Most evenings see more than 400 guests trooping serially to Geisha's 125 seats, which are deployed on several entertaining levels. David Rockwell's usual theatrical flair, Japanese division, is in play.

The densely thronged cocktail lounge a few steps below the entrance features a white t-razzo bar inlaid with mother-of-pearl. To reach the three dining rooms, the purely food-focused fans ford a horde of young women and men sipping specialty sakes.

Step down into the sushi-oriented room with its manga movies

and a wall designed of sake bottles amid kimono hangers. The obis themselves decorate two more dining rooms a floor above the tumultuous lounge.

Part of Geisha's allure is the notion that it is both a magnet for the young and good-looking and a tasty slice of Le Bernardin on the cheap. The canny owners of the place, Fabio Granato and Vittorio Assaf, retained Le Bernardin's

famed Eric Ripert to design the menu. He in turn put his longtime sous chef Michael Vernon on the case as kitchen commander, and a hit was born.

Mention must also be made of the superior sushi station headed by Kazuo Yoshida of Brasserie 360 and Jewel Bako.

The result is cuisine of rigorous (French) technique harmonizing ingredients that reflect freshness, lightness and style. The inspiration is primarily Japanese, with an occasional bow to other Asian influences.

Appetizers (\$9.50 to \$16) are as vigorously original as a grilled shrimp "lollipop" marinated in coriander, ginger and scallions and served skewered on sugarcane. Wasabi oil joins ginger and scallion, pumping up tuna tartare served with vegetable crisps. Spanish mackerel tartare gets the coriander, scallion and ginger treatment, plus wasabi-infused tobiko and wasabi citrus vinaigrette.

Fluke ceviche is slivered, marinated in coconut broth and napped in coconut ponzu and lime vinaigrette. Rich green curley broth is the backdrop for tender dumplings stuffed with black tiger shrimp, coriander and roasted pumpkin puree. The kitchen creates a colorful patchwork of tuna and yellowtail hamachi, drizzles it with yuzu vinaigrette and adds a toss of delicate baby coriander sprouts.



CROWDED HOUSE: Geisha chef Michael Vernon (left) and co-owner Fabio Granato usually entertain around 400 visitors a night in the David Rockwell-designed space.

Another notable opener is slivers of hamachi balanced with ruby red grapefruit slices, grapefruit vinaigrette and a dice of avocado and tomato.

Shifting into entrée mode, guests still feel righteously temperate as they fork into barely cooked Atlantic salmon in mirin-miso, or halibut in ginger-beet vinaigrette with warm cabbage and the crunch of a hijiki salad. Asparagus, portobello mushrooms and udon noodles are running mates for roasted lobster, and sliced pork tenderloin is done up with gingered cabbage, umeshu and port sauce.

Chicken breast on a grilled eggplant raft does not make waves with a mild miso tahini sauce.

Beyond ginger crème brûlée and a yuzu napoleon, Geisha desserts (\$7.50) are rather pallid. Chocolate pot de crème is notably unsweet, and frozen green-tea parfait features tea-ceremony-quality tea, but does not excite despite its \$5 supplement.

There are exceptional teas at Geisha, and a modest wine list with some outstanding buys in better bottles.

The restaurant's ambient sound levels often make it difficult to understand the fast-stepping staff, whose own accents are as global as the cuisine and clientele.

BITS & BITES

▼ **High:** Lunch is now served in a never-before-used fourth-floor penthouse at David Emil's modern Latin **Noche**, 1604 Broadway. Eye candy: palm trees and orchids, floor-to-ceiling windows and two outdoor terraces.

▼ **Wide:** The city block-sized square kitchen of **The Waldorf-Astoria** will be the site of six dinners for 30 guests starting May 7. Hotel executive chef John Doherty, who's cooked for more heads of state than any other chef in America, will prepare the four-course sit-downs for \$150 a head.

▼ **Handsome:** **The Cinnamon Club**, a posh Anglo-Indian wing-and-dining attraction in London, is coming to New York. Owner Iqbal Waihab will spice up New York with The Cinnamon Club next year, following a September launch in London of Roast, featuring British cuisine. ■

Geisha
23 E. 61st St.
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★★★½

Cuisine: Mod Asian, sushi
Wines: 35 choices, 7 by the glass; 18 sakes
Dress: No code
Noise Level: Prodigious
Price Range: \$19-\$29
Wine Markup: 20%-125%
Credit Cards: All major
Reservations: None after 6:30 p.m.
Hours: Mon.-Sat., noon-3:30 p.m.; Dinner, seven days, 5:30 p.m.-midnight

★★★★ Outstanding
★★★★ Excellent
★★★ Very good
★ Good