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Children Love the Hand-Carved Wooden Boats at Sushi-Zen

HAVING TROUBLE GETTING THE KIDS TO TRY SUSHI? Check out Sushi-Zen, an engaging Japanese eatery that's become the darling of its North Arlington neighborhood. You don't have to be a third-grader to get a kick out of the witty hand-carved wooden fishing boats that arrive groaning with sushi—the Hamburger Express concept gone Asian. Even the most recalcitrant child will want to grab a California roll off this boat.

Let's you think the place is too gimmicky, it's not. When was the last time you came across Japanese mountain potatoes? Alongside the usual teriyakis, tempuras, and sukiyakis, Sushi-Zen offers a handful of not-often-seen dishes. The decor also goes beyond run-of-the-mill, starting with the zippy red Sushi-Zen sign. Artfully placed objects fill the front window: a hand-made lantern, smooth stones, Raku pottery, driftwood. Inside, rice-paper-and-birch sconces and shoji screens pick up the meditative theme. There are also flashes of color: blue banners around the sushi bar, oxblood napkins, and gilt-framed Japanese prints.

SUSHI-ZEN



Osuimono, a mild, clear broth with wisps of seared mushroom, scallion, and whitefish, makes a nice change from the usual miso, though the latter is especially fragrant here. Soup and salad come with most entrees, and chances are you'll even take to the iceberg because of the addictive rice-vinegar, ginger, and mayonnaise dressing. (Regulars pour the remains on rice.) Other appetizers run from the familiar-crunchy spinach with shaved bonito and soy sauce—to the more obscure, like mountain potato and raw tuna. The cubed tuna is exquisite, but for most Westerners the mountain potato will take getting used to. Wasabi helps. Less challenging is a quivering egg custard with shrimp essence and mushrooms. Shredded cucumber with pinky-size sweet butterflied shrimp and fried bean curd in gingered broth are delicious. Salted soybeans, a popular Japanese snack, are the sleeper on the menu. They're not only appealingly nutty but fun to eat: You suck the beans out of pods.



PHOTOGRAPH BY SEVA RASKIN

The very fresh sushi at Sushi-Zen includes a number of unusual items such as Arctic-surf clams and rolls with pickled burdock and plums leaves.

Grilled main courses like teriyaki and negimaki, scallops wrapped with beef or chicken, are better bets than the clumsily battered and greasy tempuras and katsus. Thin slices of pork teriyaki are glazed mahogany. The shrimp version is every bit as pleasing. Orange roughly, salmon, beef, and chicken are also expertly done, but why stick with the same old routine? Another winner from the grill is the shogayaki, succulent pork with ginger sauce.

Stews and soups are also worth exploring. Seafood sukiyaki is a sumptuous gathering of carrots, cellophane noodles, tofu, scallions, and cabbage in a sauce with just a smidgen of sweetness. Soba noodles with shrimp tempura in steaming broth are Japanese comfort food—for some reason the tempura works in this dish. Sushi-Zen has another trick up its sleeve for kids: rice balls wrapped in seaweed with a surprise at center—preserved plums, grilled salmon, or wonderful salty, fried shaved bonito.

And there's the sushi. Boats run small, medium, or large—depending on how many pieces you want. The large boat feeds four or five with four rolls plus about 36 pieces of sushi. If you'd rather have sushi and sashimi a la carte, that's possible, too. Tuna and eel really

shine, though all the fish is very fresh. Regulars go for offbeat picks like the sea urchin, Arctic surf clam, and rolls with pickled burdock and plum leaves. Sushi-Zen also offers beautiful hand rolls, those cone-shaped packages filled with salmon, roe, and scallions. Fans of chirashi, raw fish on top of sushi rice, have a couple of options.

On a slow weeknight there's a steady stream of take-out customers. A Japanese woman with hair to her knees stops in for steamed mussels. A giggly Vietnamese threesome orders enough food for ten. On weekends the place hums. There are more toddlers, more kids, and more sushi boats. The owners greet new arrivals by name or at least with smiles of recognition. Most folks drifting in have been here before. Over at the sushi bar, a Steven Spielberg lookalike tries to talk his son and daughter into plum sherbet or green-tea ice cream. They'd rather go to CVS for candy. The bare sushi boat before them tells the story. They kept their part of the bargain. Now it's Dad's turn.

• **Sushi-Zen**, 2457 N. Harrison St., Arlington; 703-534-6000. Open Monday through Saturday for lunch and daily for dinner.

—CYNTHIA HACINLI