

Under the cherry blossoms

Cloak & Petal, a Japanese flair worth experiencing

We knew when popping the first edamame beans into our mouths from a bowl of pods draped in minced garlic and sake butter that this wasn't going to be some ho-hum Japanese dinner. The generously served appetizer was a mouthwatering prelude to some of the freshest (and prettiest) hamachi and sashimi I've encountered outside of star establishments like Azuki Sushi Lounge in Bankers Hill and Sushi Ota in Pacific Beach.

You've also come to the right place if you're a fan of duck.

Cloak & Petal is located in Little Italy, of all places. It's the modern, upscale brainchild of restaurateur Cesar Vallin and business partner Isamu Morikizono, who own Tajima ramen houses around town.

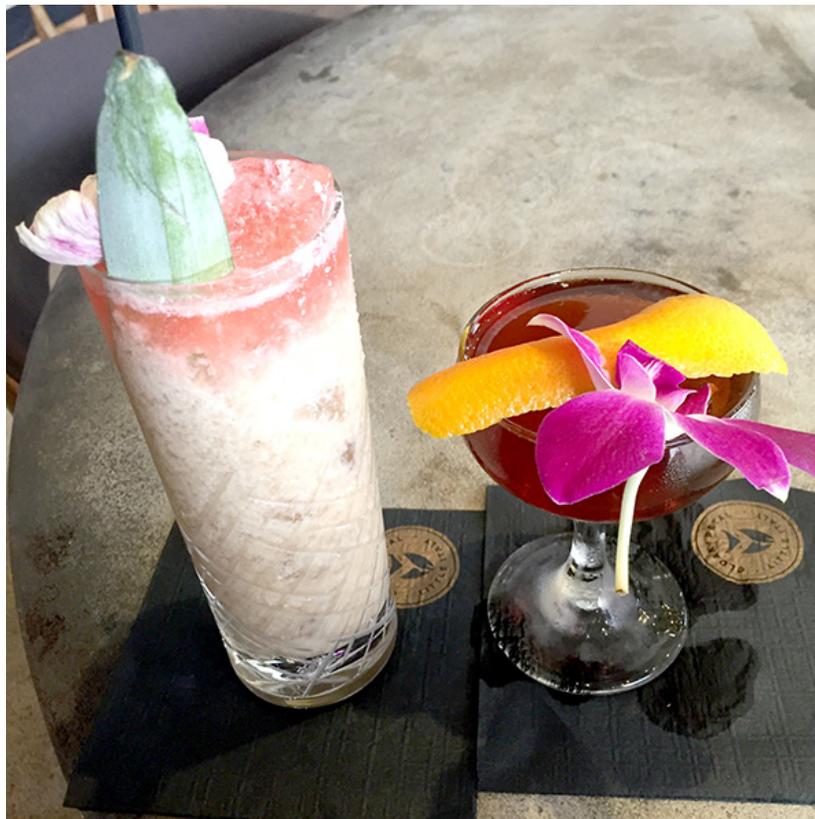


Chef Dominic Valenzuela (*Photo by Frank Sabatini Jr.*)

The 7,500-square-foot space brims with artistic flair, most notably from a stunning canopy of two faux trees exploding in cherry blossoms. Rising from behind the bar, they cast immense warmth to the spacious, industrial atmosphere.

This used to be Entrada, an upscale Mexican restaurant responsible for installing the beautiful artificial trees, which at the time were covered in green leaves.

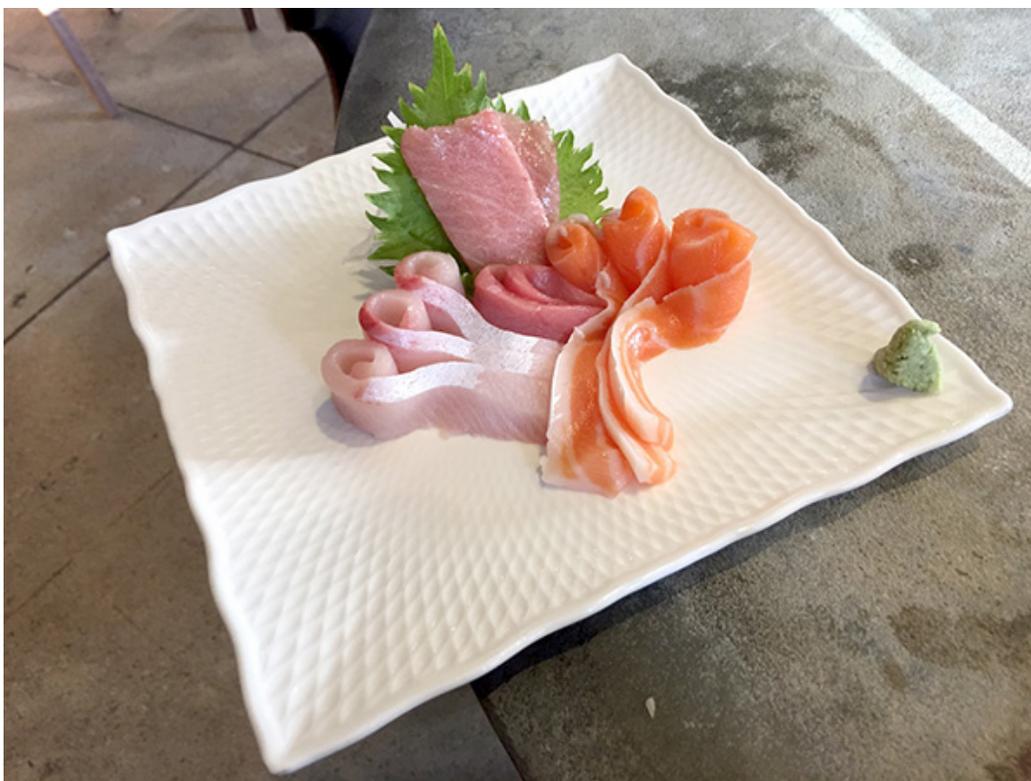
We kicked off our visit with a couple of well-engineered libations: the Manhattan-like “Japanese to English” cocktail made with sesame-infused whiskey; and the “devil’s advocate,” which lured me with its blend of cashew milk and Caribbean rum. Both drinks seemed tailor-made for people like us who typically prefer wine over cocktails. They had the finesse and complexity of fine vino.



(l to r) The “devil’s advocate” and “Japanese to English” cocktails (Photo by Frank Sabatini Jr.)

The “hamachi jalapeno” with ponzu and cilantro was hardly spicy, even when biting into the thin slivers of jalapenos garnishing it. And just as well because the flavor and texture of the yellowtail was wildly lush, like filet mignon, leaving you convinced that raw fish doesn’t get any better than this.

Ditto for the sashimi trio — a frilly presentation of tuna, yellowtail and salmon with some belly slices woven into the scheme. A dollop of wasabi from Japan on the plate proved more “natural tasting,” as best described by my companion. It’s a little sweeter, but with a decent sinus burn.



The sashimi trio (Photo by Frank Sabatini Jr.)

From the broiler, we tried the salmon collar accented with scallions, ginger stems, radishes and ponzu. Served on the rare side, it is this neck section of the fish that not only turns up cheaper, but also provides you with an abundance of healthy omega-3 fat.

Cloak & Petal's executive chef, Dominic Valenzuela, is a graduate of Johnson & Wales University in Denver. He earned his chops working at various sushi houses, including the trailblazing and now-shuttered Cafe Japengo. Indeed, his sushi rolls fall slightly into that envelope-pushing league where you'll find unlikely ingredients such as ground sesame, broccoli, and spicy aioli taking residence with an array of seafood.

We took the surf-and-turf route, choosing a roll boasting thin, tender slices of rare wagyu beef holding together swirls of crab, scallops, asparagus and rice on the inside. A few drizzles of truffle-soy reduction clenched the deal for what is a modern, sumptuous roll with foolproof appeal, provided you're not a stickler for old-school sushi.



Wagyu roll (Photo by Frank Sabatini Jr.)

Most, if not all, consumers who patronize Cloak & Petal probably aren't. The demographic on this weeknight visit — and I'm guessing all others and weekends as well — was mainly millennials on a quest for the latest and greatest restaurants in a neighborhood that has become the hottest destination for new hospitality establishments, after the Gaslamp Quarter.

The concept speaks well to contemporary consumers, whereby you order — in no particular rhythm — an array of small plates while socializing and taking selfies. Though if you're hankering for a full meal, the menu offers duck breast glazed in yuzu marmalade, as well as stew-like seafood houba yaki and pricey Yoshoku steak.



Glazed duck breast in edamame puree

We couldn't resist the former, which yielded an accordion arrangement of thick-sliced Canadian duck breast bedded in a pool of edamame puree and a little beet oil. Served with roasted turnips, it qualifies as the best meal that could ever land on your table for a holiday, should anyone in your household possess the talent for conjuring it up.

Cloak & Petal

1953 India St. (Little Italy)

619-501-5505
cloakandpetal.com

Prices: Otsumami
(starters)
\$5 to \$25
soups: \$5 to \$8
sashimi, nigiri
and sushi rolls:
\$6 to \$25
entrees: \$24 to \$105

Right to the finishing line, the crème brulee served with intense black-sesame cookies, and the super-fluffy Japanese “cotton-style” cheese cake, didn’t disappoint. Neither dessert was fraught with sugar. And both flaunted the same jaunty presentations as everything else that came before them.

Cloak & Petal also offers a succinct happy hour menu from 5 to 6 p.m., Monday through Friday, when large Asahi beers are \$5; hot sake is \$8; and seafood and veggie rolls are \$4 to \$6.

— *Frank Sabatini Jr. is the author of “Secret San Diego” (ECW Press), and*

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