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THE BIG IDEA

The region's finest restaurants have plenty to teach us about interior design. Here, we take a closer look at the newly expanded Uni, where Ken Oringer and Tony Messina offer a unique take on Japanese cuisine.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY NINA GALLANT

Uplighting behind the banquettes is a theatrical flourish increasingly found in residential design.

Thick columns in the darkest gray separate the bar from the dining room.

The backlit bar, a major focal point, is a not-so-subtle reminder to order another cocktail.

Three-tiered pendant lights soften the look.



Very practical pedestal tables reduce the visual clutter of furniture legs.

To create a unified look, the floors were stained a warm, rich tone that matches the tables and chairs.

Midcentury Hans Wegner "Wishbone" chairs offer a delicate contrast to the interior's heavier notes.

UNI

An excerpt of the review by CORBY KUMMER, published in Boston magazine, July 2016.

SOMETIMES WE ALL NEED TO DISTANCE ourselves from the familiar. That's what Ken Oringer and Tony Messina have done at Uni 2.0., where very little resembles (or even aspires to resemble) the typical contemplative sushi experience. This is two

unapologetic chefs having freewheeling fun riffing off what they know and have learned: the techniques and ingredients of Japan, but also of Spain, Italy, and even France.

I was always put off by Uni's previous

iteration, a cramped, 23-seat matchbook of a restaurant located just a few steps down from Clio. So when Clio closed in a gust of publicity, I was indifferent to the potential of a vastly expanded Uni, which would be taking over all 98 seats of the combined space.

Fortunately, Oringer and Messina don't want to impress diners with fanatical purity, fabulous technique, or super-rare fish you can get only from Tsukiji, the famous Tokyo fish market—though all of that is on display. They want you to be open and ready for a good time.

Why would I be surprised? Toro, Oringer's South End tapas bar, is perpetually crowded and raucous. The menu sticks closely to the strictures of tapas and *pintxos*, and I fell in love with it from the minute it opened for its pitch-perfect renditions of Barcelona's *plancha*-grilled seafood-and-ham combinations. Coppa, the South End trattoria Oringer opened with the talented Jamie Bissonnette, is just as popular. Its offal, salumi, and pastas also hew closely to the restaurant's Roman-themed model.

Uni, on the other hand, uses the familiar building blocks of Japanese cuisine—dashi, dried mushrooms, and *yuzu* juice, which Messina, the executive chef and partner, uses to brighten many dishes on the menu—but the chefs don't stop there. How about a little bacon or prosciutto for some added *umami*? Or crème fraîche for some heft and creaminess when tofu and Kewpie mayo aren't quite lush enough?

The menu at Uni is sprawling, and it certainly has misses, but at \$8 to \$16 for many plates, it invites experimentation.

One you'll finish in a single greedy gulp is the smoked *uni* spoon (\$16)—very lightly smoked sea urchin served with raw quail egg and a dollop of osetra caviar. The commingling of smoke, brine, and grassy quail yolk can make converts out of even the most adamant *uni* haters, Messina told me. I happen to prefer the franker marine flavor of the *uni* nigiri (\$11), with its tiny square of prosciutto and finishing splash of sweet *vin cotto*. Both are adroit introductions to the East-West tapestry the chefs weave throughout the menu. So is the grilled asparagus with Camembert-tofu emulsion (\$10)—the asparagus grilled over scalding coals and coated with a mixture of cheese, tofu, and cream. The brightening accent of minty *shiso* leaf shows how the chefs use such a wide range of elements to push something

simple into another stratosphere.

Smoked *hamachi* tartare (\$16) is another exemplar of subtlety, the cold smoke of the fish brightened by *yuzu* juice and a marvelously creamy binder of *labne* and olive oil. The smoked *uni* spoon, like Thomas Keller's salmon cornets at the French Laundry, might be the house signature, but the tartare nestled inside a little fluted nori cup is my nomination to replace it.

The chefs play with the strongest flavors in the hot plates. You'll need to brace your taste buds for the fiery Chinese chilies and startlingly hot cumin on the Yunnan eggplant salad (\$8), though the almond *romesco* deftly plays up the already creamy slices of eggplant. Shishito peppers (\$8) are a more temperate alternative, with a light glaze of sweet *kabayaki* sauce, sesame seeds, and smoked sea salt. Best of the hot entrées was grilled *hamachi kama* (\$20), a succulent piece of yellowtail collar marinated in ginger, soy, and mirin, then burnished with a Korean-style chili vinaigrette. Along with more classic nigiri and makimono, such as an *unagi* roll with crunchy bits of fried tempura (\$16), this was classic Japanese fusion—or classic-ish.

But it's the instances when Messina and Oringer veered further astray—salmon skin with mustard greens (\$8)—that led me back for the fourth, and even fifth, time. One example: the sashimi of Spanish sea bass paired with a North African mix of preserved lemon, chopped sultanas, and two jade-green herb sauces, gremolata and *chermoula* (\$16). Another was the sea bream sashimi (\$16) with currants and Moroccan *ras el hanout*.

See what I mean about not wanting to stop? You'll probably want to dodge some of the fire (e.g., the eggplant salad) and the longtime Uni standard of *tako* (a barely warmed raw octopus sashimi with barrel-aged tamari, \$16), which actually made me decide on a temporary cephalopod moratorium. But dessert will make up for it, like the must-have *kouign-amann* held over from Clio and a Klondike bar with a magic chocolate shell around coconut ice cream (both \$8).

Uni, then, is an adventure. It bears the marks of exhilarated chefs busting loose—and that exhilaration is infectious.

Critic Corby Kummer is an editor at the Atlantic and the author of *The Joy of Coffee* and *The Pleasures of Slow Food*.