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The photograph captures the interior of the Ruka restaurant, showcasing a vibrant and eclectic design. The ceiling is a focal point, featuring a grid of colorful, multi-colored slats in shades of red, blue, yellow, and green. Two large, tiered chandeliers made of numerous thin, golden rods hang from the ceiling, casting a warm, ambient glow. The walls are a mix of textures, including wood paneling and a wall with a large, intricate, golden sculpture of a dragon or mythical creature. In the background, the open kitchen is visible, with staff members working behind a counter. The dining area is filled with wooden tables and chairs, where several patrons are seated, engaged in conversation or dining. The overall atmosphere is one of sophisticated, modern dining with a touch of global or bohemian flair.

GO FOR GOLD

Boston living is as much about excellent dining options as it is about fine homes. Here, we review Ruka, a new fusion restaurant in Downtown Crossing.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JIM BRUECKNER



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP
Gold-toned ambient lighting sets the mood at Ruka, where nods to South American and Asian landscapes mingle throughout the space. A concrete backsplash evokes stone found in the Peruvian mountains, while dragons wrapped around decorative columns pay homage to Chinese and Japanese cultures. Golden acacia wood, sourced from the Philippines, tops the tables and bar.

Radishes and Okinawan sweet potato accompany Ruka's grilled long-bone short rib, topped with *shiso* chimichurri.

Among the highlights of the original art adorning Ruka's walls are Japanese street scenes and Danny Fila's handpainted mural of Machu Picchu (pictured). Brightly colored wool ropes hang overhead, mimicking the traditional fabric looms of the Peruvian countryside.



RUKA

An excerpt of the review by
JOLYON HELTERMAN, published in
Boston magazine, August 2017.

THEATER IS THE NAME OF THE GAME AT Ruka, the Peruvian-Japanese fusion hot spot ensconced like an iridescent Inca-chic temple off the lobby of Downtown Crossing's Godfrey Hotel. A grandiose, on occasion overwrought theatricality that oozes from every gleaming nook and copper-studded cranny.

Enter the dining room, and a vaguely avian chandelier swoops down from its primordial nest on the double-high ceiling. Surrealistic murals conjure visions of Peru. Over at the bar, dragons coil around stone pillars, as Inti, the Incan sun god, peers down, eyes and mouth illuminated in spooky orange tones.

Smoldering fires, gaping gullets: Ruka's recurring themes. "Fuego Wagyu" maki (\$36), filled with *gochujang*-spiked beef and scallions, are wrapped in raw A5, then arranged on a portable spit, where they're lapped by anise-perfumed flames on the way to the table. A "Big Fish" waffle (\$16) disgorges a bolus of prickly pear sorbet, *lucuma* ice cream, caramelized banana, and peanut brittle. Across the way, a metal crocodile-shaped pitcher drools down a pink-tinged elixir brimming with tequila, mezcal, and hibiscus (Sacha Mama, \$95, serves four-ish) from its toothy grin. "If an unsuspecting passerby gets too close," warns the cocktail's 80-word description, "Sacha Mama will devour them whole."

And so it goes. The over-the-top-ness will surprise no one familiar with Ruka's sister restaurant Yvonne's, the hyperactive grand tour of world cuisines just around the corner. Here, the focus is *nikkei*, a mash-up of Peruvian cuisine with Japanese, plus a smattering of *chifa* (Chinese-Peruvian): two hybrids that have evolved organically in Peru since the 19th century, thanks to an influx of expats who adapted the food of their homelands to available ingredients.

When all cylinders hit at Ruka, the results can be splendid. Half the menu showcases raw or citrus-cured seafood in the form of maki rolls, ceviches, and *tiraditos* (sashimi-style *crudo*). It is the restaurant's strong suit. Halibut ceviche (\$15), quick-cured in passion-fruit nectar and *nigori* sake, was strewn across a smoky smear of burnt-bread paste, dotted with Brazil nuts, flower petals, and avocado purée. *Hamachi amarillo* maki (\$17) was a study in textural counterpoint: avocado creaminess versus the springy snap of baby corn; the granular softness of gently vinegared rice swaddled in a cool, velvety blanket of yellowtail.

Even better was seared *hamachi tiradito* (\$17), hit quickly on the *plancha* before getting sliced and nestled in a gazpacho-like sauce made from cucumber, garlic, and *ají amarillo* chili oil. Finished with sweetened diced cucumber and Sichuan-spiced mushrooms, it was better than the best renditions of this uncommon seared-style variant I tried a few years back on a weeklong Lima food crawl.

Over several visits, the cooked side of the menu was weaker as a general rule, but here too were epiphanies. *Anticuchos*

are Peru's answer to *robatayaki* skewers, and Ruka offers versions featuring octopus (\$12), chicken thigh (\$11), mushroom (\$9), and, hands down the best, charry, fat-riddled rib-eye cap (\$19). Yet another contender for menu MVP: pork wontons (\$17) bursting with quinoa-leavened fatty ground pork seasoned with garlic, fermented bean sauce, and *ají amarillo*. Steamed to order, the pillow beauties get drizzled with chili oil redolent of star anise, cumin, and Sichuan peppercorn: *chifa* at its most sublime.

This is the point at which I normally offer a list of dish-level quibbles, though in this case I'm hesitant. Not because I don't have some, but because I get the sense that Ruka's been stuck in triage mode lately. That the company's culinary director, Tom Berry—who oversees Ruka, Yvonne's, and Lolita—knows something's off. The clues: dishes cycling off and on the menu at breakneck speed; a couple of major staff changes. But mostly, I hesitate because I don't think the reason this restaurant hasn't hit its stride since it opened last December has much to do with how badly the jarring acidity of the "pickle salad" clobbers the underseasoned tea-smoked duck (\$75). The recipe and execution problems, I have zero doubt Berry will unravel.

No, I think Ruka faces broader conceptual issues that are keeping it in this holding pattern. It boils down to this: Applying the Yvonne's model to a restaurant like Ruka isn't working so well. They're two different beasts.

Ruka's deeper dive into Peruvian-Asian needs a different blueprint. Unchained grandiosity simply isn't sustainable across a 40-item menu using the same roster of flavors; after a certain threshold, you crave more variety and definitely more levity. Not dry ice and fireworks, but actual, geeked-out fun—*frites* flights leveraging Peru's 4,000-plus potato varieties, perhaps? Otherwise, dishes start to blur together and, worse, can verge on unintentional self-parody à la the stylized mannerism of Kingfish Hall-era Todd English.

Easier said than done, no doubt, but what if—just maybe—the only way to keep Ruka from enduring life as a Peruvian Yvonne's kid sister is to, you know, stop that?

Critic Jolyon Helterman's work has also appeared in *Hemispheres*, *Cook's Illustrated*, and *Coastal Living*.