

o ya
 9 East Street (Leather District)
 Boston
 Phone: 617-654-9900

Bar: Beer & Wine
 Price: \$50 - \$99
 Parking: Available
 Credit: Accepted
 Handicap: Accessible

Grade: A



Masters:
 Tim and Nancy Cushman
 opened o ya in the Leather
 District. (Photo by Stuart Cahill)

o ya makes sashimi out of competition By Mat Schaffer Friday, May 4, 2007
o ya, a contemporary Japanese restaurant in the Leather District, bursts onto the Boston dining scene like a glorious rising sun

Chef and owner Tim Cushman is former corporate chef for Chicago-based Lettuce Entertain You Enterprises. Cushman consulted for clients as diverse as Richard Walker's Pancake House in Schaumburg, Ill., and Maggiano's Little Italy. I don't know how, when and where he mastered Japanese cuisine - but master it, he has. Cushman and wife Nancy opened o ya in early March in an old firehouse down the block from South Station. With its brick and cedar walls, concrete and pebble floors and ichibana flower arrangements, the industrial teahouse ambience is cozy yet cool. Be forewarned - there are only 40 seats and they don't take reservations.

As for the fare, Cushman combines boutique ingredients from across the globe with a Japanese aesthetic, a la Nobu, Oishii and Uni. His food is creative, delicious - and expensive. Dinner is a sequence of small plates meant to be shared. Each is designed to first thrill your eyes, then your palate. This is not your father's sushi counter. Not with nigiri such as "Peruvian style" chutoro tataki (\$18) - seared fatty tuna belly, pressed onto rice and decorated with spicy pureed panca chilies and a dollop of cilantro pesto. Or torched hamachi (\$9) topped with piquant banana pepper mousse.

Warm eel (\$9) painted in syrupy kabayaki sauce is gently camphoric, thanks to snipped Kyoto sansho, Japanese prickly ash leaves. Zesty yuzu (Japanese citron)-scented white soy, flying fish roe and wasabi balance the natural sugars of beet juice-marinated scarlet sea scallop (\$8). Spicy-tart yuzo-kosho aioli becomes a delectable foil for the pristine brininess of fried Kumamoto oyster (\$11) and foamed squid ink. And then there's the inspired marriage of foie gras and 8-year-old Hanahata Kijoshu sake (\$18). Cushman presents the chocolate- and balsamic-glazed liver atop inch-high cylinders of rice with a garnish of pulpy raisin-cocoa jam. The rich, Raisinette flavors are uncannily mirrored by the sherrylike aged wine.

While some dishes border on too-precious, only a curmudgeonly critic would complain. He eagerly devoured the fried shrimp heads - artfully arranged on a folded sheet of origami paper - that accompany raw Maine ama ebi sweet shrimp (\$15) in citrusy ponzu. Cushman jauntily piles tarragon-mayonnaisey Maine Peekytoe crab Louis (\$15) and avocado onto crispy crab chips. And sprinkles crumbled salty-sweet sesame brittle over a platter of grilled sashimi of chanterelle and shiitake mushrooms (\$15).

Maine sea urchin (\$18) is inventively served on velvety sea urchin mousse with cubes of salty dashi gelee and fragrant crushed tonka beans. Speaking of invention, don't pass up chilled daikon dumplings (\$11) - creamy, miso and nut-stuffed radish pockets, surrounded by edible blossoms and a dappling of pine nut mayonnaise. Meat and poultry are artisanally bred and ultrapricy. Tea-brined and fried kurobuta pork ribs (\$14) glazed with hot sesame oil and honey are messy, but marvelous. A bamboo skewer of poulet rouge (heritage) chicken yakitori (\$16) is excellent with pureed celeriac, shaved Burgundy black truffles and homemade soy. O ya uses only Kobe-style wagyu beef. An 8-ounce strip loin with fries costs \$149.99 - that's \$18.75 an ounce. I opted instead for treats such as tamago omelet (\$15) rolled around robiola cheese in a pool of black truffle-studded dashi and shrimp tempura (\$18) in smoky bacon-truffle emulsion. Chilled capellini noodles (\$21) are divine tossed with charred lobster sashimi and sake-wasabi dressing.

Nancy Cushman is o ya's resident sake expert. She can recommend relatively affordable bottles of effervescent Poochi Poochi sparkling sake (300 ml/\$35), clean, fruity Kikumasamune Junmai Ginjo (720 ml/\$48) or unfiltered, floral Tenranzen "Sake Romance" Nigori (300ml/\$21).

Desserts are as terrific as what precedes them. We loved custardy soy milk blanc mange (\$10) drizzled with Thai iced tea and coconut milk-softened Thai basil seeds. Tres leches-soaked Boston creme pie (\$12) with Venezuelan chocolate and sesame seeds is a deconstructed bittersweet confection.

Some kinks still need to be worked out. Servers are delinquent on basics such as when to clear dirty plates and mop up spills. And courses are overly rushed and arrive one upon the other. But don't let that keep you from dropping by. "o ya" is a Japanese expression of pleasant surprise, not unlike "gee whiz!" The phrase doesn't nearly approach how fabulous this new restaurant is.