

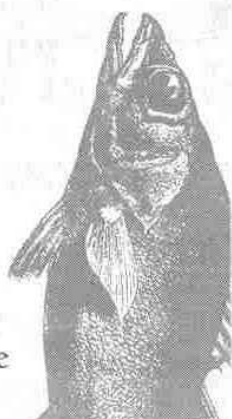
Izmi Sushi Restaurant

Food 🍴🍴🍴

Service 🍴🍴🍴🍴

Atmosphere 🍴🍴🍴🍴

Value 🍴🍴🍴🍴



Michelle Pentz Glave
For The New Mexican

If you think a strip mall is no place for a good restaurant, here is proof that it is. Tucked away in the back corner of St. Michael's Plaza del Sol shopping center (anchored by Smith's Food & Drug Center), Izmi — Japanese for "spring water" — is the perfect little neighborhood eatery waiting to be discovered.

Japanese fare at Izmi, especially the high-quality sushi and the imaginative rolls, is consistently tasty and moderately priced. Service is relaxed and the clientele is a steady stream of regulars, locals and friends of the owner, Hyunsook Lee, and his family (Lee opened the restaurant two years ago).

Tiny, intimate Izmi, softly lit with twinkle lights and rice-paper lanterns hanging from the room's central bamboo-decked sushi bar, is anything but glitzy. Instead the focus is on quiet conversation in a relaxed dining room.

Fresh and well-executed, sushi is the star here. Portrayed in color photos on the specials menu, the chef's rolls look positively succulent. There are eight, including such favorites as the rainbow (a California roll with avocado and crabmeat) and the caterpillar (freshwater eel and avocado).

The substantial paradise roll (\$14) proved outstanding and provocative. Crunchy, with a soft, still-warm center and an attractively swirled green-and-orange top, the paradise combined tempura scallops (sweet and soft), smelt egg and cucumber, coated on top with a creamy salmon, avocado and *masago* (smelt egg) mayonnaise wasabi *tobiko* (flying fish eggs). Although this dish arrived last, we still managed to polish off every bite.

Equally memorable was the evening's special, seasonal bluefin *toro* (\$7.95), two pieces of fatty tuna (over rice rectangles) flown in yesterday that married the citrus tang of fresh fish with melt-on-the-tongue marbles of buttery fat. This delicacy caused a brief scuffle at the soy sauce dish.

An à la carte item, the lip-smacking *unagi* (\$4.25) delivered two long triangular pieces of freshwater eel, tied with seaweed to a minislab of sticky rice. The eel is hot and barbecued to a delicate tenderness enhanced by a honeylike teriyaki glaze and

the whispery crunch of minuscule bones. The refreshingly pure *maguro nigiri* (top grade, \$4), two slices of mild yellowfin tuna, over rice, tasted like biting into a rushing alpine stream.

We added a Kirin Ichiban Sapporo Asahi beer (small, \$3.75), a classic sushi standby, and a glass of 2001 Simi Sauvignon Blanc from Sonoma (\$6). Airy and citrusy with pineapple and peach, this light wine complemented the fish without overpowering it.

We found the steaming bowl of complimentary miso soup, which arrives at your table shortly after you do, tame but fully acceptable. We loved the hot, salty, crunchy *edamame* (\$3.50), a generous serving of steamed soybeans in the pod that pop easily onto the tongue and are as addictive as potato chips. And we rated the *yakitori* (\$4 for two large skewers) good though not great: two kabobs of pan-seared chicken thigh pieces served in somewhat nondescript sesame-dotted gravy pooled in a lettuce leaf.

Izmi's tasteful, understated decor — splashes of color from parasols, fans, framed artwork and potted bamboo — sets a pleasant tone. The owners have transformed a dull drywall-and-linoleum retail space into a serene Japanese retreat with light woods, bamboo, glass-topped and linen-covered tables and rattan chairs.

Our attentive team of servers worked together to make sure we had everything we needed, including booster seats and immediate snacks for the children. Dishes were delivered and plates were cleared swiftly. Clearly catering to locals, the staff seemed happy to accommodate off-the-menu requests. We felt welcome and cozy, warmed with the glow of a good meal.

Dinner for two including two appetizers, one bowl of rice, two à la carte nigiri sushi, one special roll, one glass of wine and one beer was \$54.36 before tip.



720 St. Michael's Drive, Suite I, 424-1311

Lunch 11:30 a.m.-2 p.m. Monday-Friday

Dinner 5:30-9:30 p.m. Monday-Thursday

5:30 p.m.-10 p.m. Friday

5-9:30 p.m. Saturday

Happy hour 5:30-6:30 p.m. Wednesday

Beer & wine

Handicapped-accessible

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