

EALING, LONDON

Sushi Hiro

What's it like? Basic. This brightly lit sushi bar sits opposite the tube in unglam Ealing Common. It has a few tables for diners (or those waiting for takeaways), and seats at the counter in view of the briskly busy sushi chefs.

And the food? Good enough to justify the restaurant's reputation, despite other shortcomings (if the waitresses served with the same urgency as they press you to order, it would be an improvement). Sushi Hiro wins points for freshness, delicate flavours and unusual ingredients: 'surf cram' may be a typo - it's surf clam - but 'geoduck', another clam, is not. Sashimi and nigiri glisten dewily and maki are rolled to a practised firmness. There's no wine, only beer, plum wine and a good, smooth sake, and no pud, though inari (rice wrapped in a thin sheet of fried beancurd) is sweet.

Best bit The spotted sardine nigiri is succulently subtle and it's a bonus to find clams in the miso.

The bottom line The real deal for sushi; go elsewhere for atmosphere.

Liz Edwards

13/20 £20

Tel 020 8896 3175

SMITHFIELD, LONDON

Saki

What's it like? A contemporary basement restaurant with adjacent bar, near the historic Smithfield market. In the dining room, a sculptural Zen garden takes centre stage, surrounded by long, narrow tables particularly suited for those dining alone. The mood is relaxed and welcoming.

And the food? It's Japanese, but not as you might know it. Alongside sushi and sashimi, there are less familiar options such as sliced octopus and mizuna salad. The omakase ('as chef likes it') six-course menu comes with suggested wine and sake pairings, and works as a guided tour of the diverse dishes on offer. It starts with the delicate yellowtail tuna carpaccio but, from grilled king prawns and scallops with fig tempura to a hoba-leaf-wrapped grilled rib eye, every dish is impressive.

Best bit The clay-pot-steamed seafood and vegetables in dashi stock are beautifully presented and the sake cocktails are an unexpected delight.

The bottom line A must-visit restaurant for those wishing to enjoy a high-quality modern Japanese meal.

Daniel Biasatti

18/20 £40

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HARLESTON, NORFOLK

Momiji

Everything about this place is a mix of English and Japanese - ownership, decor and food. Co-owner Charlotte met the chef, Taka Nakamoto, in Japan, married him and returned to Norfolk to launch a Japanese restaurant. Its rather homely English tea-room appearance is modified by Japanese artefacts and wall hangings.

Apparently, most of the local population found the original, fully authentic approach too challenging, and the cooking style has been amended, with mixed results. There is no sashimi or sushi on the standard menu (sushi weeks are held every so often), everything is served with salad, and among the side-dish options are sautéed potatoes.

For those used to Japanese cuisine, there's a lack of the usual precision and purity of taste, texture and presentation. We found our sautéed scallops with mushrooms a little overcooked, although among the more traditional dishes, which are well-prepared, we did enjoy a mixed prawn and vegetable tempura accompanied by excellent miso soup.

Momiji serves Japanese-style food at an unusually good price and Charlotte is friendly, enthusiastic and very willing to explain the menu. This is a brave effort to introduce something different to Harleston's restaurant options and it is pleasing to hear that she is slowly converting some regulars into enthusiasts for the more classic Japanese cuisine that is served during the special sushi weeks. For others it offers an interesting alternative neighbourhood restaurant.

John Peirce

14/20 £20

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momiji-japanese-restaurant.co.uk

