

Aoyama Japanese Steakhouse: How to drink at a sushi bar



By Dan Morey
Contributing writer

May 20, 2010 12:17 AM, Erie Times-News

Drinking at sushi bars can be a lot of fun.

When I lived in L.A., I used to go to a place called Sushi on Sunset in Hollywood. I knew an itamae (sushi chef) who worked nights, and I liked to make him suffer.

In Japan, it's traditional to offer the itamae a drink if you're enjoying his sushi. Not to accept would be considered rude on the itamae's part.

After sitting at my friend's bar for a few hours, these offerings would start to have a cumulative effect. He never lost any fingers (he was highly trained in the ancient art of drunken chopping), but impromptu warblings of Japanese pop songs were not unusual.

People love to hang out at sushi bars in L.A., and a lot of celebrities hit Sushi on Sunset during their rounds. I still have an inscribed business card the adult film star and producer Cumisha Amado gave me. I'd like to tell you what she wrote, but since this is a family newspaper, you'll have to use your imagination.

While you're not likely to meet anyone famous (or even Japanese) in Aoyama Japanese Steakhouse and Lounge at the Millcreek Mall, it's still one of the more stylish options for sushi in Erie.

The overall décor resembles an Edo period tea hut with the usual lattice frame windows and doors, but the lounge is more contemporary Asian and features a sleek oval bar backed with mirrors and neon. It's a cool place for cocktails, though it closes too early (11 p.m. on weekends) to draw a party crowd.

You can eat in the lounge, the fine-dining area or even one of the hibachi rooms if you happen to enjoy sudden bursts of flame and people throwing food at you.

I like to sit at the sushi bar in the back. The wait staff gets your drinks and presents you with a menu sheet. You simply check off the sushi you'd like to order, hand the sheet to your chef, kick back and watch the magic. Preparing sushi is an art, and it's fascinating to watch an experienced chef create.

The last time I stopped in, my chef was Cao Caler, a three-year Aoyama veteran. He makes a mean spicy tuna roll and his Kani (crab stick) asparagus was so good I felt compelled to offer him a glass of Sapporo beer.

Unfortunately (or maybe fortunately), the chefs aren't allowed to drink at Aoyama, so he couldn't accept. It didn't stop him from having a good time behind the bar, however. He was congenial and talkative, but not intrusive -- the ideal itamae, in other words.

Aoyama was packed that evening. The lounge bar was lined with casual drinkers, the dining

room was at capacity, and all of the hibachi rooms were full. Yet, surprisingly, we were the only ones at the sushi bar.

In most establishments, these are the most coveted seats. The next time you're at Aoyama, give the sushi bar a try. Cao and company won't disappoint.